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# Academic resilience: narratives of high-achieving Black female middle school adolescents

Courtne Thomas

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**ACADEMIC RESILIENCE: NARRATIVES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING BLACK  
FEMALE MIDDLE SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS**

by  
Courtne Thomas

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
March 12, 2013

Dissertation Chair: Carol Thompson, Ph. D.

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## **Dedication**

In honor of my mother's continued guidance  
and to the memory of my beloved grandmother.

## **Acknowledgments**

I thank my mother, Noble Thomas for her unconditional love and compassion. She has been my greatest supporter. I appreciated the home cooked meals delivered because she knew I was not taking time to eat regularly during the dissertation process. I further thank her for the words of encouragement, affirmation, and the daily emailed Bible verses that were truly invaluable on the difficult days. I am witness to immeasurable blessings of the power of prayer from family on my behalf, and my grandmother and mother's foundational teaching about Jesus Christ. Rev. Dr. Allyn Waller, says it best, "There is something ontological about the saving grace of God." My mom inspires me; and though I did not initially encourage her to pursue a Master of Divinity degree, I now realize the direction of one's purpose may change and one's call ignited at any age. I can affirmatively say the seeds of faith and service were instilled in me from an early age and with assuredness, approach each day with the desire to live life on purpose.

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sharing of her stories of work experiences always brought a smile to my face. Though I could not attend all of the events she invited me to, I am appreciative of the invitations.

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Finally, to God I give all the glory, my bridge in troubled waters. With every blessing and favor I’ve been bestowed, I promise to serve and live a purpose driven life. I believe as the text states, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.” 1 Peter 4:10 ESV.

## **Abstract**

Courtne Thomas  
ACADEMIC RESILIENCE: NARRATIVES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING BLACK  
FEMALE MIDDLE SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS  
2013

Carol Thompson, Ph.D.  
Doctorate in Educational Leadership

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the academic experiences of four grade 6, high-achieving Black females in an urban middle school. Using the interpretive lenses of Feminism, Critical Race Theory, Critical Race Feminism, Intersectionality and Identity Formation, roles and identities were explored with word choice and language analysis. Habits and factors contributing to the participants' success revealed their beliefs about academic achievement.

Through the use of narrative inquiry, data were collected from semi-structured in-depth individual interviews, observations and researcher field notes, personal autobiographical narratives, archival document reviews and artifacts.

Findings of this study revealed that participants exhibited critical roles in their academic success and demonstrated strong academic identities. All four participants described challenges they faced and what contributed to their academic success despite those challenges. The participants acknowledged both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contribute to their success. Some intrinsic factors include self-respect, motivation and vision while extrinsic factors are positive parental influences, caring educators, friends and community members. Though the four participants acknowledge their race and gender, more emphasis is placed on their academic identity.



Implications for black male and female learners, classroom teachers, school administrators and policy makers are provided, along with suggestions for future research are also shared.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Broad Issue**

It is no revelation that students of color who live in urban areas face many social, material, and academic challenges. The research indicates that dilapidated learning environments, aesthetically unpleasant teaching space, and ill-equipped classrooms contribute to student failure (Greene & Anyon, 2010; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2011). Scholars argue low teacher expectations, irrelevant curriculum, lack of support systems (Conchas, 2001; Conchas & Clark, 2002; Conchas & Vigil, 2010; Gandara, 2005) and dysfunctional family backgrounds are all variables and contributing factors that may intensify the problem (Trueba & Bartolome, 2000). However some urban youth are beating the odds. It could be because of the impact of school processes (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Conchas & Clark, 2002; Gándara, 2010; Mehan, Hubbard, & Dathow, 2010; Noguera, 2008) or the impact of relationships within schools among peers and teachers (Conchas, 2001; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2011), but the ambiguity remains as the causes are not well documented in empirical research.

Much of the research has focused predominately on underachieving students and on boys, largely overlooking the high-achievers and females. There has been increased attention given to the failure of African American males in recent years (Davis, 2003; Osborne, 1999; Salomone, 2005). When African American students are studied, males and females are often combined into one homogeneous group without regard to gender (Conlin, 2003; Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008; Taylor, 2009). Although some studies have examined the experiences of high-achieving African American students (Corbett et



al., 2008; Cunningham & Swanson, 2009; Rose, 2008; Winters, 2007), not much scholarship has been conducted with urban African American females as the focus (Winters, 2007; Wissman, 2007; 2011. Specifically, there is a shortage of literature that provides a disaggregated analysis of high achieving African American females' experiences at the middle school level.

### **Purpose Statement**

I aim to investigate the academic experiences of four grade 6, high-achieving Black females in an urban middle school. The strategy of inquiry used in the investigation is a qualitative narrative inquiry approach. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) define narrative inquiry as “the study of experience as story, which is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience” (p. 477). Narrative inquiry is the best method for this study because it captures students' lives using their voices about their own lived experiences. It encapsulates their understandings and perceptions of their lives and cultural backgrounds as well as their family and community experiences. Ultimately, the study will become a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) combining views from the participants' lives with a narrative account of the researcher's life. Using the collaborative narrative as a tool, I seek to highlight the experiences of four academically successful African American females, identify possible factors contributing to their academic success, and compare and contrast their experiences with my own experience as an academically resilient Black female student. This narrative aims to investigate the academic experiences of this underrepresented group speaking to the deficiencies in the existing research. It also seeks to provide a unique contribution to the scholarly literature that will potentially enhance practice and inform educational policy.

Unfortunately, there is a wealth of literature examining African American students from a deficit model (Davis, 2003; Graham, 1999; Oakes, 1985; Osborne, 1999; Pollard, 1993; Salomone, 2005). Earlier work and recent emphasis by educational researchers have delineated the social and educational pathology of Black males as an epidemic (Pollard, 1993; Salomone, 2005). While there is also some literature about high-achieving African American males (Baldwin, 1987; Berry, 2002; Bonner, 2000; Conchas, 2006), there is very little literature about Black females, especially high achievers. There is much to be learned from the educational experiences of these young women.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study is fourfold: first, to give voice to four academically successful, Black female students, a perspective that is largely absent from the current literature; second, to identify barriers to success and possible approaches and coping strategies to overcoming those barriers; third, to identify habits, causes, and processes that are factors in their successes; and finally, to investigate whether the identified strategies are replicable. This could be useful to educational leaders in systems with similar student populations.

This study will examine the experiences of four African American females who are achieving academic success. Fiedler and Kareev (2006) claim that using a small sample of information as opposed to a large one can, in certain specific situations, lead to greater accuracy. Specifically, they have argued that the propensity of small samples to provide more extreme evidence is sufficient to create an accuracy advantage in situations of high caution and uncertainty. Fiedler and Kareev further assert “the enhanced confidence of small sample choices is consistent with the fact that small samples often

provide a clear-cut picture of evidence” (p. 899). I chose four females as the sample group because they provided in-depth narratives about their lived experiences. Using a larger sample group may have also illuminated their lived experiences, but perhaps decreased the accuracy because of the amount of data gathered as a result of the population sampling. However, the close examination of a smaller sample allowed me to focus on the females with a sharper lens, providing a clear-cut picture of evidence. All four females have similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, the study creates a portrait of the K-6 experiences of four academically successful Black female students at a northeastern, urban school district. The demographic in this community has a student population where over 70 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The analysis describes each student’s experiences from her earliest schooling occurrences through her current middle school experience. In the study, the participants were asked to explain the challenges they faced and the approaches and strategies used in overcoming those challenges.

The conclusions drawn from this study can hopefully be used by school districts in the formulation of strategies aimed towards the development of the approaches and attitudes that correlate with academic success and ambition. These strategies might also be useful to parents, families, and community members as a reference to better understand these young women’s experiences and identify positive actions to better assist other young women academically.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) How do four high-achieving African American females in the 6th grade describe their academic experiences?

- 2) How do four 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American females engage in the learning process in a gender separate classroom setting?
- 3) How do these 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American females describe contributors to their academic success?
- 4) In what ways are the experiences of these learners as African American females similar or different than those of the researcher?

### **Definition of Terms**

The specialized vocabularies for my study are:

- a. high-achieving
- b. academic resilience
- c. structural barriers
- d. single sex classroom/single gender learning space
- e. homogeneous grouping or ability grouping
- f. verve
- g. ethic of care

Freeman (1999) uses the designation high-achieving rather than gifted in her qualitative longitudinal study. She claims, “for most people the label gifted implies something innate and sets people apart” (p. 17). In contrast, she asserts high-achieving implies “an attainable goal for a broader range of individuals who work hard” (p. 17). I agree with this assertion. For the purposes of this study, high-achieving students are those identified as honor students and/or having a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or better in all academic coursework.

Wang (1994) define academic resilience as the “heightened likelihood of success in school and in other life accomplishments, despite environmental adversities, brought about by early traits, conditions and experiences” (p. 217). However it is conceptualized, it always refers to the life story of an individual who has been “successful despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding” (Wang, 1994, p. 217).

According to Ogbu (1983), structural barriers dominate school-based decisions. These barriers include unequal and inadequate educational opportunities, “mis”-education and racism, lack of resources, and teacher-student mismatch of cultural congruence (DuBois, 1938; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner, 2008).

Sax (2005) defines a single gender classroom or single gender learning space as classroom groupings of students of the same sex within a coeducational setting.

According to Kulik (1992), homogeneous grouping is:

The separation of same-grade school children into groups or classes that differ markedly in school aptitude. School personnel usually separate children into ability groups on the basis of test scores and school records. Ability grouping plays a key role in a number of school programs: separate classes in elementary schools for children of high, middle, and low aptitude. (p. 11)

There are nine dimensions of African American culture Boykin (1983) defines as verve. The dimensions are spirituality, harmony, movement, affect, individual expressionism, communalism, social time, perspective, and oral tradition. These components find their roots in West Africa and demonstrate how these nine dimensions impact black student achievement.

There are many feminist scholars (Beck, 1994; Marshall, 1995; Noddings, 1992; Sernak, 1998; Shapiro, Ginsberg, & Brown, 2003) who advocate the use of the

ethic of care. Noddings (1992), who developed a new educational hierarchy, places “care” at the top. She asserts, “Caring is the very bedrock of all successful education and...contemporary schooling can be revitalized in its light” (p. 27). In terms of the curriculum, Martin (1993) placed emphasis on the three Cs of caring, concern, and connection. Martin claimed education is an “integration of reason and emotion, self and other” (p. 144). Beck (1994) contends, “caring—as a foundational ethic—addresses concerns and needs as expressed by many persons; that it, in a sense, transcends ideological boundaries” (p. 3). When an ethic of care is used, educational leaders can become what Barth (1990) called “head learners” (p. 513). Shapiro and Stefkovich (2009) assert:

What Barth meant by that term was the making of outstanding leaders and learners who wish to listen to others when facing the need to make important moral decisions. The preparation of these individuals, then, must more heavily focus on the knowledge of cultures and of diversity, with a special emphasis on learning how to listen, observe, and respond to others. (p. 18)

Shapiro, Sewell, DuCette, and Myrick (1997), in their study of inner-city youth, identified three different kinds of caring: attention and support, discipline, and staying on them. These scholars believe the ethic of care is central in education. The ethic of care is important because it provides an ethical paradigm for educational leaders “who are often asked to make moral decisions” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2009, p. 17).

### **Conceptual Framework**

I am convinced that listening to students’ self-stories has the potential to yield useful information. What would be the most skillful framework to use to organize and view the gathered data? I took my cue from the participants in the study themselves. Being young, African American, working-class females, put them at the very intersection

where race, class, and gender meet. In developing my conceptual framework, I used Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) Critical Race Theory, Crenshaw's works on intersectionality (1995) and Critical Race Feminism (1989), bell hooks' (1984) work with feminist theory, and Norton's (2000) identity formation hypothesis as lenses through which to view the issues of race, social class, and gender, and how these forces affect student achievement. One of my aims in this study was to explore how the concepts of race and achievement are related, perceived, and acted upon by the participants in the study.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was introduced to the field of education by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995). The theory posits that race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The five principles of CRT in education are as follows. First, that race and racism often intersect with and are reinforced by other forms of subordination. Second, race and racism are a permanent and central part of how U.S. society functions. In the United States, racism is part of the historical experience of African Americans, Whites, and other groups of color. It includes personal interactions as well as institutional practices. Third, CRT challenges dominant ideologies such as color-blindness and meritocracy in education. By focusing on the racialized experiences of its participants, a CRT research project provides a counter-argument to the political and economic ideas of a fair and meritocratic society. Fourth, CRT in education has a commitment to social justice and empowerment of people of color and other subordinate groups. Researchers aim to instill power and knowledge in oppressed groups as well as those who are the oppressors by providing insight into the experiences of subordinated groups. Fifth, CRT in education has a focus on the lived

experiences of people of color through storytelling, narratives, and family histories.

These stories are essential to understanding the experiences of oppressed groups in their own words.

Feminist theory emphasizes the central role gender plays in society and is dedicated to abolishing gender inequality (hooks, 1984). For the purposes of this study, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1995) was applied. Intersectionality raises the issue of understanding the lives of women that are not only shaped by gender alone, but by other elements such as racism, classism, ageism, and heterosexism.

Critical race feminism (CRF) adds to CRT and feminism by placing women of color at the center of the analysis. CRF confronts the notion of the essential woman (the White middle class) by exploring the lives of those facing discrimination on the basis of their race, gender, and class, revealing how all of these factors interact within a system of racist oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Duncan, 1991).

According to Berry (2010), "CRF is supportive of and concerned with theory and practice" (p. 25).

Berry (2010) further claims:

CRF also acknowledges the importance of storytelling. Students' stories, including their stories of school, are important to know in the context of their development as teachers because these stories, these experiences, may influence what they learn and how they learn it as well as what they choose to teach and how they choose to teach as emerging teachers. Making their stories important to the teaching and learning experience also centers, rather than marginalizes, their personhood. CRF advocates for such centering. (p. 25)

CRF encourages the acknowledgement of and acceptance of multi-dimensionality of women and girls of color from a raced, classed, and gendered perspective.



Norton (2000) contends that a learner may be a highly motivated language learner, but the individual may have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community. This in turn may be racist, sexist, elitist, or homophobic. Consequently, while motivation can be seen as a psychological construct, investment is framed within a sociological framework. This sociological framework seeks to make an important connection between a learner's yearning and commitment to form identity.

The philosophical worldview of advocacy/participation and the narrative strategy of inquiry are elements of the conceptual framework. The advocacy/participatory worldview is appropriate for the project under study because it integrates the theoretical perspectives with the philosophical assumptions that will construct a portrait of the issues being examined, the people studied, and the changes that are needed (Creswell, 2009). By seeing the world through this lens, I can see more of the educational challenges of others and advocate for change. Therefore my background is relevant as I share many of the same social challenges as the sample group.

There has always been an increased emphasis on social justice in my family-contributions for the greater good and change initiatives for marginalized populations. Being raised by a single mother in the D.C. metropolitan area, I vividly recall my mom participating in advocacy efforts for marginalized groups and community initiatives for the purposes of change. She was especially adamant about participating if the issue pertained to social justice or the like mostly affecting populations who experience social inequalities.

As a child raised during the 1980s, what Christians call "The Word" or the Bible, was a treasured tool for me. While I grew up in a solidly middle class neighborhood in

the suburbs of Maryland, the head of the household was my mom, a single mother. The Bible provided direction and an outlet for me, a child of color who had an absent father. While my siblings were positively influential, the significant age gap between my sister, brother, and I limited their impact. For that reason, my mother's influence was further intensified. As a former educator and proud graduate of a historically black college or university (HBCU), there was a pronounced emphasis on education, which was noticeably unceasing. Doing well in school was not an option but rather a requirement. Upon graduating high school, where I engaged in many school programs targeting high-achieving students, I went on to college.

I attended North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NCA&T), an HBCU in Greensboro, North Carolina. I graduated in 2001 and briefly worked at UBS Paine Webber. Upon corporate downsizing in 2003, I was laid-off. After receiving a pink slip, I realized I was not professionally fulfilled while in this position. I then took the required Praxis courses for elementary and middle school teaching and passed. Shortly thereafter, I enrolled in an alternate route program and began teaching at a charter school in Newark, New Jersey. This experience grounded my role as an educational leader and change agent. In 2005, I applied to the educational leadership master's program at Fairleigh Dickinson University. I was accepted to the program and graduated in 2007. As I knew I had a desire to continue my pursuit of a terminal degree, I applied to Rowan University and in 2009 was accepted. I am now in the final stages of the dissertation process and plan to graduate in May 2013.

As my spiritual foundation was laid as a youth servant in the church, these values and beliefs shaped my moral compass. As a result of this upbringing, my moral impetus

has sustained its charge as I am now an African American woman. As an educational leader, I am more attuned to social injustices. These social inequalities have become pronounced as I observe the inequities and power imbalances in the educational system and global society at large. This study is of particular interest to me because I am an African American woman who has always been high-achieving. I would like to know if there are similarities in terms of the drivers of my success that align with the participants' values. These values have made a marked impact on my research interests and shaped my role and worldview as a global citizen, educational leader, and social justice advocate. These reasons are in part why I chose narrative as the qualitative methodology.

The narrative strategy of inquiry helps me to construct a picture that takes shape as the researcher collects and examines the parts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Specifically, the chosen method and worldview is suitable because it enables me to collaborate with the participants rather than conduct research on them (Creswell, 2009). CRT is part of the conceptual framework because it allows me to look critically at race relations in the school setting under study, examine interactions, and find the racial component in them that can help move the racial equality cause forward. Feminism informs this study because it provides a lens to examine the role gender plays for the participants in their academic success. It is also an important element to address one of the specific inquiries regarding the participants' experiences in single gender learning spaces. The combination of the advocacy/participatory worldview, narrative strategy of inquiry, CRT, and feminism are the conceptual frameworks that essentially emancipate the participants of this study through the illumination of their stories.

## **Methodology**

The overall process used in this study is that of qualitative research of which the narrative inquiry approach is a subset. Creswell (2007) reports five approaches to conducting qualitative research: narrative, phenomenological, ethnographic, case study, and grounded theory. In order to better understand the five qualitative approaches, a brief explanation about qualitative research is helpful. Stake (1995) contends qualitative research is holistic, empirical, interpretive, and empathetic. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994):

Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter...qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use of and collection of a variety of empirical materials...that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives. (p. 2)

I used a narrative strategy of inquiry during data collection and analysis employing an inductive approach drawing on grounded theory (Glaser, 1978). Grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is a method in which the researcher collects data and conducts analysis at the same time. Grounded theory is a systematic qualitative research approach emphasizing the generation of middle range theory from data at a substantive or formal level (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Glaser (1978), the main goal of grounded theory is to discover “the theoretical reflections and summarizations of the patterned, systematic uniformity flows of social life which people go through, and which can be conceptually captured and further understood through the construction of basic social process theories” (p. 100). Grounded theory is relevant to the narrative approach because it provides a backdrop of the academic and social experiences that were ultimately encapsulated in the participants' narrative stories.

Narrative inquirers support a way of looking at research that aligns with an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation (Creswell, 2009). Bruner (2002) maintains that narrative “...gives shape to things in the real world and often bestows on them a title to reality” (p. 8). Similarly Ellis and Bochner (1992) assert, “words are all we have to narrate our lives” (p. 87). Narrative inquiry, therefore, is the collection of stories retold by the researcher about participants’ lived experiences. Narrative inquiry affords the opportunity to reexamine the relationship between the observer and observed (Krieger, 1991; Richardson, 1992). According to Clandinin (2007):

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world in which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (p. 37-38)

There are four themes in the turn toward narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2007). The same author uses the term *turn* “strategically to emphasize the movement from one way of thinking to another and highlight the fact that such changes can occur rapidly or slowly, depending on the experience of the researchers and their experiences when doing research” (Clandinin, 2007, p. 7). In the first narrative turn, Clandinin contends (2007):

No change in direction is more important than the change in an understanding of the relationship of the researcher to the researched. In the move toward narrative inquiry, the turn is characterized as a movement away from a position of objectivity defined on interpretation and the understanding of meaning. (p. 9)

In this turn, narrative inquirers recognize that the researcher and the researched are in relationship with one another and that both of the participants will learn and change during the project.

In the second turn, the turn is from number to word data (Clandinin, 2007). The turn from numbers to words as data is not a general rejection of numbers, but a recognition that in translating experience to numeric codes researchers lose the nuances of experience and relationship in a particular setting that are of interest to those examining human experience (Clandinin, 2007, p. 15). Generally researchers in the second turn toward narrative inquiry begin to question the power of numbers.

In the third turn, researchers turn toward a focus on the particular. This turn signals the researcher's understanding of the "value of a particular experience, in a particular setting, involving particular people" (Clandinin, 2007, p. 21). In narrative turn four, there is a "turn from one way of knowing the world to an understanding that there are multiple ways of knowing and understanding human experience" (Clandinin, 2007, p. 25).

Richardson (1992) reminds us that narrative inquiry can provide ways of investigating and writing research that push beyond the traditional conventions of academic writing in the social sciences. The study creates a portrait of the K-6 experiences of four academically successful African American female students at a northeastern, urban middle school serving students eligible for free or reduced lunch. Data collection tools include personal documents, semi-structured in depth interviews, observations, official documents, researcher produced photographs, and artifacts. For the purposes of inclusion, I wrote an autobiographical narrative to capture my K-6

educational experiences. The analysis chronicles each student's experience from her earliest schooling occurrences through her current middle school experience to describe the challenges she faced and what contributed to her academic success despite those challenges.

### **Site of Study**

The study took place in a northeastern, public, urban middle school in the U.S. The school has a student population of approximately 490 6<sup>th</sup> grade children, of whom more than 70 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch. The student population is 98 percent African American/Black and Afro-Caribbean, one percent Latino and one percent White. One distinguishing component about the middle school is the single gender classroom format. Girls and boys are completely separated, never mixing socially or academically with the opposite sex. As a matter of fact, males and females are taught in different areas of the school in small learning communities. This gender separation also includes the lunch period, as boys eat in one cafeteria and girls in another. My interest about high-achieving 6<sup>th</sup> grade urban Black females engaged in the single gender learning process was prompted by my experiences as a single gender teacher in a single grade school in my current work place. In the 2005-2006 school year, district leaders decided to reorganize the Hart complex, which includes the building in which I am employed. Prior to this point, the Hart complex was comprised of three buildings for students in grades six to eight, where each building (A, B, and C) had approximately 475 students in each grade. In the 2005-2006 school year this was changed. Upon the implementation of the change, building A would serve children in grade 7. Building B would serve children in

the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and building C would attend to students in grade 8. Since the change, buildings A, B, and C have operated with the standing grade.

In the 2007-2008 school year, the school administrator where I work approached me about his idea to implement a pilot program of two single gender classes. There would be one class of all girls and another of boys. His impetus for program implementation was to measure whether student growth improved as a result of the learning format and likewise to determine if these settings were more beneficial to students in terms of socialization and social mobility than co-educational classes. Teacher observation was the instrument used for the pilot program research inquiry. During the initiative I took copious notes, as did the other pilot program teacher participant, about the classroom observations. Over the course of a year I periodically debriefed with the school administrator about the findings. The pilot study showed social pressures were less pronounced. The data also identified social interactions between classroom peers was more collegial and less aggressive as a result of the removal of the opposite sex, particularly amongst females. Since that time the school has operated with the single gender classroom model. I decided to use my current work place as the research site because I wanted to see if this learning format had a significant impact on the academic achievement for the student sample, considered high-achieving. The single gender context was new for the research participants. These girls arrived at the middle school as incoming 6th graders and this was their first year in a single gender learning environment. The findings demonstrate how the single gender aspect fares in terms of the participants' academic success as evidenced in their narratives. The single gender context



was critical as the females shared their experiences about the setting, illuminating whether or not it had a bearing on their success.

Students from this study were selected using the snowball sampling technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007) snowball sampling is getting referrals from subjects to other people that are considered by the researcher as potential participants for the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In addition to the snowball sampling technique, participants also had to meet the criteria based on the definition of high-achieving.

### **Significance of the Research**

A study of high achieving African American adolescent females in single gender learning spaces is important for several reasons. Knowing that the context is imperative to the transferability of the findings, these data will be particularly useful to teachers in single gender learning environments. It will be especially valuable to teachers in these settings who teach students of the same race, class, and gender as the research participants. First, these students' counterstories—alternatives to the dominant narrative—can be used by teachers in similar contexts to enhance their pedagogical practices in the classroom. Critical race counterstory works to not only make visible the ways in which race and racism are embedded in our institutional and social systems, but to also integrate literacy that makes such a reality possible (Delgado-Bernal, 1998; Gutierrez, 2008). In this context, these counterstories are valuable to teachers. These counterstories will potentially allow teacher leaders to support the lived experiences of socially marginalized students and engage in culturally responsive teaching practices that better meet their diverse needs.

This research is further significant because it can help educational leaders in similar contexts evaluate strategies that can assist with the improvement of the educational program in a school community. This can be accomplished as educators use this information as a resource to understand the multiple positions of individuals and groups of individuals that are socially and politically marginalized. This research will also help classroom teachers modify and adjust their instructional practices to meet the diverse needs of these students. Teachers can use the findings and recommendations of this study to enhance their educational program when teaching low socioeconomic African American females in a single gender learning environment. In this way my findings are transferable as they can be used by teacher leaders with a similar demographic in a similar context. These stories will also provide reference points for support measures including community programs, extra-curricular involvement, and advocacy initiatives that assist with the education of the whole child. This will then resonate with educators and potentially drive them toward the improvement of practice.

While these data are highly valuable to teachers, they are equally useful to other educational leaders with higher responsibility. These findings can be used in my urban district and other districts with similar student demographics and contexts. They will provide evidence about the usefulness or insignificance of single gender learning environments as well as outcomes. These data can also be used in philanthropy, as they can serve as reference points for future study about low-socioeconomic status Black females.

This research is needed because little is written about the academic success of African American females. According to a study of the American Association of

University Women (AAUW, 1992) gender differences in educational achievement vary by race/ethnicity and family income level. For example, females often have outperformed boys within each racial/ethnic group on the National Assessment of Educational Progress reading test. However, when analyzed by race/ethnicity, this gender gap is found to be most consistent among White students, and less so among African American students. This research is needed because it can be used as a baseline, describing these young women's successful journeys that may be helpful as a resource to other educators that teach a similar demographic.

The academic challenges of African American female students must be framed in the context of historical and structural oppression that have created many of the potential barriers to academic success for these students (Memmi, 1974). Therefore, these questions are worth studying, because in addition to academic resilience, there are other factors contributing to these students' academic success that have helped them overcome such institutional and societal barriers, ultimately defying the odds. In addition to academic resilience, these students' success may have also been affected by their participation in single gender learning spaces. Overall, these questions are worth studying because the forthcoming work will contribute to the existing literature about this underrepresented student population.

Girls continue to experience challenges in multiple educational and social outcomes. African American females experience obstacles across the educational pipeline that are grounded in historical events and that result in their marginalization. However, despite these barriers to academic success, there are African American females that are victorious, defying the odds, and continuing along the academic resilient path toward

success. This research matters because their stories are important to potentially improve practice, adding to the existing scholarly literature and may inform educational policy, specifically urban school reform policies.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations to my study. One limitation is the small sample size. The participants for this study are four African American middle school females from the same urban, northeastern middle school. Because of the small sample size, there may be a clear-cut picture of evidence about the participants' lived academic experiences showing why and how they are high-achieving as well as academically resilient. In turn these findings can be used by educators working with a similar demographic in a similar context which draws upon transferability. In contrast, the small sample will not provide me with the unequivocal evidence across the sample group that may result because of a larger sample.

During the course of the study, I conducted observations, engaged in in-depth interviews, and collected artifacts and student records as measures to triangulate the data and increase credibility and validity of the results. However, limitations remain because I was unable to study the phenomenon from several standpoints by virtue of the sample size. Another limitation is reasoning by analogy (Denaes, 2012). Analogical reasoning seeks to identify specific sets of similar and dissimilar characteristics, in search of some unique combination of characteristics that can then be used to define distinctive properties of each set. In this study, the data were analyzed to determine the similarities of the educational experiences of the participants.

A third limitation is the assumption on the part of the researcher that all the participants are equally articulate and perceptive (Creswell, 2009), and able to share their experiences in an eloquent way. However, I am unsure about the aspects of articulation and perception. My uncertainty about story articulation and perception is a limitation because it is something that is beyond my control. A fourth limitation of this study is being somewhat of an outsider who is unfamiliar with these students and their abilities. Though I am an educator in the same school community as the participants, they are not familiar with me and the like is true on my behalf. Another limitation is the sample group. Because of my own race, gender, and experiences, I chose four high achieving African American females as the participants for this project. For this reason, it is a limitation because these are factors I can change, but chose not to because of personal reasons. A final limitation refers to the single gender and single race characteristic. When discussing single gender and single race, the focal point is not always African Americans. For this reason, it is a limitation.

### **Conclusion**

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is an understanding of narrative as both phenomena under study and method of study. The notion of story is common to every society. However, it is the stories themselves that differ widely. Narrative inquiry is valuable in this way as it adds depth, shape, and range to the interpretation of experiences. The interpretation of these stories may then be analyzed with a more unbiased lens. This research then has the potential to be an effective resource and tool to elicit change.

The plan of this research is to give voice to a small sample of four Black female students whose perspective is absent from the current literature on Black female students

in U.S. schools. The study examines the lived experiences of four Black females from similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds who experience academic success at the middle school level despite the societal disadvantages they may have faced. The literature review in Chapter II offers further discussion about Black students, including Black males and females in U.S. schools at the middle school level and high school level in urban schools. The literature review also provides further details about race, gender, and education in U.S. Finally, the literature review provides discussion about African American males, and more so about Black females, which is limited from a critical race theory lens. The objective of Chapter II is to highlight the existing gap in the literature about academically resilient Black adolescent females. Chapter III will underscore my course of action or methodology in studying four high-achieving Black females in grade 6. Specifically, Chapter III will pinpoint my instrumentation tools to best capture the participants' lived experiences about this phenomenon.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this study is to examine the academic experiences of four high-achieving middle school girls with the aim of identifying some of the conditions and factors of their success and with the hope of applying some of the insight and understanding gained from the study to a broader audience. This study also seeks to give voice to some members of a group that have been largely marginalized from the standpoint of scholarly literature. Additionally, I tackle the issue of academic achievement and resilience from the vantage point of successful strategies and approaches, as opposed to the all too familiar and depressing focus on deficiency and pathology. The participating students are four African American females who are currently in grade 6 in an urban middle school. Over 70% of students are eligible for a free or reduced cost lunch.

The theoretical framework that undergirds this study is composed of insights and analysis drawn from scholarship such as feminism (hooks, 1984), critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), critical race feminism (Crenshaw, 1989), intersectionality (Collins, 1990, 1998, 2000; Crenshaw, 1995), and identity formation theory (Norton, 2000). Additionally, literature about high-achieving students will be examined. Literature about high-achieving students is significant as the sample group consist of participants who demonstrate academic resilience as evidenced by their high-achievement. Literature about linguistic analysis is also offered for the purpose of providing a framework of the participants' tone, intonation and word choice. This data

may suggest how the students in the sample group may think about themselves and what they perceive success to be.

The above conceptual framework is the most useful point of view with which to examine the research inquiry because the participants are from working class African American families. Feminism (hooks, 1984) is relevant because the participants are four females and are subject to the historical gender stereotypes and expectations that have traditionally tended to devalue their voices and experiences. Critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) serves as a tool of analysis and explanation for the many ways that race permeates life for people of color. In critical race feminism (Crenshaw, 1995), feminism and critical race theory converge. Racism and feminism do not exist in a vacuum as independent entities, but rather inform and interact with one another. Intersectionality (Collins, 1990, 1998, 2000; Crenshaw, 1995) brings together the viewpoints of critical race theory and critical race feminism while also introducing social class as a category of analysis. Norton's (2000) identity formation theory frames the participants' yearning to form identity with motivation and investment at the center.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is a shortage of scholarly literature on academically successful, urban African American females (Allan, 2006; Archer-Banks., 1987; Dishion & Véronneau, 2011; Leder, 1987; Russell, 2007; Wissman, 2007). Early research focused on the academic failures of Black students (Conlin, 2003; Corbett et al., 2008; Taylor, 2009), while other studies have been concerned with the plight of academically unsuccessful African American males (Davis, 2003; Osborne, 1999; Salomone, 2005). Although there has been some literature published about high-



achieving African American males (Baldwin, 1987; Berry, 2002; Bonner, 2000; Conchas, 2006), there is considerably less about African American females.

In this chapter I explore the literature underpinning this narrative inquiry study. Literature regarding females and more specifically African American females in U.S. urban middle schools will be discussed first, since academic resilience is central to the project. The educational experiences of Black girls, boys, men, and women in U.S. schools from a raced perspective will be examined next. In the following section, there will be discussion about race and gender in education in U.S. schools, particularly the different experiences of female and male learners at the secondary level. After that, literature concerning the relationship between race, gender, and class will be explored. In the identity formation section, an exploration of the literature will focus on the developmental undertaking for Black females. Following identity formation, a section is devoted to high-achieving students of color. In the linguistics section of the literature review, I offer a bit more foundation about linguistics identifying why it is important to data analysis. Finally, in the last section I will summarize the literature review.

## **Gender**

Early on in the movement, feminist epistemologies were centered on equity for White women and girls; consequently, minority women were often overlooked. hooks (1984) added to this discourse about the feminist approach. hooks (1984) defines feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression. Some of the issues that she explores are the goals of the feminist movement, with special attention to the respective roles of Black women and men in the movement and their relationship to feminist pedagogy. In terms of feminist pedagogy, hooks asserts that feminist teachers acknowledge how their

roles as teachers provide them with power over students in the classroom. She advances the idea that rather than resisting this power, feminist teachers can use it to enrich the learning process, potentially causing Black females to know their power in the feminist classroom. One of the distinct features hooks uses to study women's issues is what modern day feminists call intersectionality. hooks uses intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) theory to analyze how race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect contributing to gender oppression, roles, and stereotypes. Feminism is important to my study because it is a useful lens through which to examine how the high-achieving females in my study are resilient despite the challenges of sexist oppression and social inequity.

In this section, literature regarding females and more specifically African American females in U.S. schools will be discussed as academic resilience is important to the study. The argument is that gender plays a distinct role for Black females in urban schools as it impacts their social interactions and behaviors with other students and educators. I underscore some of the gender differences between girls and boys, particularly those that exist between Black males and Black females. The gender emphasis is significant for Black females, as not only race, class and sexuality are factors that could impede their academic success, but gender as an intersecting element in tandem with the others could derail their success.

### **Friendship**

Friendship may have a significant influence on the academic success of high-achieving Black females in middle school because those exposed to positive peer influences seem to benefit. Dishion and Véronneau (2011) investigated the influence of friends' characteristics on change in academic achievement from grade 6 to grade 8. They

found that high-achieving middle school girls seemed to benefit from having high-achieving friends. However, the data suggest that low-achieving girls did not benefit from having high-achieving friends. While these data indicate that students with academically engaged friends may achieve to levels higher than their lower performing peers, they do not incorporate the element and significance intervention programs could have for high-achieving females or their low-achieving peers. Pagano and Hirsch (2007) found adolescent Black females experience less conflict in friendship with other Black females, but heightened conflict in romance with boys. In contrast, Dishion and Véronneau (2011) make the case that high-achieving middle school females seem to benefit from having high-achieving friends. Friendships for Black females with other Black females could drive their academic success because love and respect are at the center. These findings accentuate the relation of race and gender rather than race or gender.

### **Intervention Programs**

Keyes, Kusimo, and Carter (1998) examined how a science and mathematics intervention program for middle school females, the “Voices” program, affected African American females and their families. Effects of the program on academic achievement and participation and persistence in school were also studied. The Voices program was implemented in one urban and one rural county in West Virginia. Of the original 73 participants, 33 were African American. In the first program year, the girls met once a month during the school year for workshops. In years 2 and 3, the girls attended workshops and worked with mentors who had careers in science, mathematics, and technology. In the final year, the students met regularly with school sponsors and were involved in designing and completing community service projects. The study results

show that programs like “Voices” can make a very positive difference for Black females and their families in rural areas, but experiences in the urban site challenged program developers to think creatively about designing interventions that could provide sustained engagement for Black females and their families. Some of the challenges included student attendance issues, school incidents of fighting and low-performance on assessments. While Russell’s work (2007) about mentoring programs proves to be impactful for high-achieving Black females, Keyes and colleagues’ (1998) earlier work shows that there was an existing demand to address the needs of urban Black females. Furthermore, that study revealed that “Voices” was an effective support program for Black females in a rural area. In contrast, Gentle-Genitty (2009) proved that four best practice programs were more effective for low-income African American students transitioning from middle school to high school in urban school settings. These findings suggest there is separation in terms of academic supports between Black females in rural areas to their peers in urban settings.

### **Single Gender Classroom**

Though research shows that supports such as intervention programs are effective for Black females, the single-gender classroom format may be more contributory to their success because of fewer distractions. Friend (2006) examined same-gender grouping of eighth grade science classes in a public middle school setting. The author’s hypotheses were (a) male and female students enrolled in same-gender science classes demonstrated more and positive science academic achievement than their peers enrolled in mixed gender classes and (b) same-gender grouping of students has a positive effect on classroom climate. Results of gender grouping in Friend’s study concluded that same

gender grouping did imply significant differences in science academic achievement, and same-gender classes did create a more positive classroom climate. This study demonstrates that the division of gender does have an impact on science academic achievement and classroom climate. However, the study did not distinguish the demographic of the student body, race/ethnicity of the staff or socioeconomic class of the participants. Because of the limitations, the claim is not supported with reasons or evidence that could have relevance to the proposed sample of four high-achieving Black females, which might have been useful in terms of their high status of academic attainment.

While Friend's (2006, 2007) research indicates the single-gender classroom format may be a contributing factor to the success of high-achieving Black females, Rujumba's (2010) claim about single gender classrooms and schools provides more substantive evidence supporting the assertion. According to Rujumba (2010), the single-gender model is effective because assigning students of one sex to a classroom fosters a better learning environment by eliminating social pressures that can affect academic performance. This is precisely the basis for what ought to be done rather than what is done for disadvantaged urban youths, as I will argue, particularly for Black adolescent females, regarding educational policy and instructional practices. Rujumba also posits that single gender schools can raise self-esteem and improve aptitude, especially among historically disadvantaged student groups. Along with Rujumba's theory, hypothesizing that the single gender model eliminates social pressures, he also posits that it improves self-esteem. Perhaps this could be a factor contributing to academic achievement among

adolescent African American females experiencing the gender separate classroom and school model.

### **Race and Gender Differences**

Differentiated instruction is a critical component in the single gender classroom because it taps into gender differences among boys and girls. Ferrara and Ferrara (2005) conducted research at a northeastern middle school uncovering a few elements about differentiated instruction in single gender classrooms. Based on the findings, a teacher from the study reported that female classes, regardless of the mode of instruction – traditional or constructivist model – adapted better. As a result of their adaptation, girls' classes moved at a much quicker pace and attained a much higher overall class average than the boys' class. Another finding from the study indicated that boys in single-gender classrooms reported they liked to do three quick activities rather than long involved projects. These findings are evidence that young females acclimate better to varied instructional practices. On the other hand, boys do not seem to adapt well to differentiated instructional methods. This could very well be a correlation to gender differences between boys and girls.

While there are some shared race and gender components that Black females have with middle school Black males, there are some distinct race and gender differences. Adams (2010) conducted a case study to better understand the different realities, experiences, and use of self-esteem between Black and White adolescent females. She tested two popular empirically supported explanations for Black high self-esteem: contingency of self-esteem theory and the locus of control model. Self-esteem was explored as a bi-dimensional construct consisting of self-worth and self-deprecation. The

author provides the reader with an examination which helps to better understand why Black females possess higher self-esteem than any other racial or ethnic adolescent group.

Adams found that adolescent Black females had higher self-esteem than any other racial or ethnic group despite factors associated with their support systems. Yet, Grieser et al. identify disparities in perceived physical activity support and enjoyment across race that raises questions about why these differences exist and how to best address disparities within interventions. Nonetheless, there is a disconnection between Adam's work highlighting adolescent Black girls' high self-esteem to Grieser and colleagues, which examined their perceived significantly lower physical activity enjoyment and teacher support for physical activity. What is missing in the literature are those factors in connection with adolescent Black females' high self-esteem and variables associated with their significantly lower perceived physical activity enjoyment and teacher support for physical activity than their White or Hispanic counterparts. These could very well be factors associated with socioeconomic status, which supports the motive to study urban high-achieving Black females.

In the above section, I argued that gender is a major factor contributing to the academic success of Black females. Black females have an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and resources possessed and utilized by them and other students of color to survive and resist oppression. In the participants' case, this would be gendered, raced, and classed oppression. The next section will point out how race is an important factor to the dominant narrative, but not a hindrance for high-achieving Black females.

### **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

Based on the existing literature, not many research-practitioners are interested in studying Black females. When Black females are studied, they are homogeneously clustered with boys advancing the idea of marginalization amongst this group as evidenced in the works below of Carter, Hawkins, and Natesan (2008), Berry (2005), and Gentle-Genitty (2009). Even though the majority of the research available about African Americans concentrates on boys and men, many of the resources accessible to boys and men may be helpful and applicable to urban Black females. Critical race theory developed by Ladson- Billings and Tate (1995) contends that race continues to be significant in the United States and hence, in U.S. school systems for understanding school inequity. CRT, in the context of my study, is used as an analytical tool to assess the social inequity faced by high-achieving urban African American females.

In the following section, I make the argument that race, racism, and their intersectionalities with other forms of subordination are a permanent and central part of defining and explaining how U.S. society functions. I build the case that structural barriers have a bearing on Black students, particularly Black females; yet, high-achieving Black females do not allow these causes to define them. In accordance with CRT, one of the many factors that could influence student achievement is *verve*. Boykin (1983) defined *verve* as the nine dimensions of African American culture that find their roots in West Africa. These dimensions are spirituality, harmony, movement, affect, individual expressionism, communalism, social time, perspective, and oral tradition. I chose *verve* as a contributing factor to student achievement because it acknowledges the different learning styles that may have a significant implication in culture.



**Verve.** Taking verve into account when examining the academic experiences of African American students acknowledges that optimal learning styles can vary and may be a function attributed to culture. Recognizing that verve is culturally important in the lives of these students may assist educators in devising ways of delivering instruction that are optimized for them. Similarly, verve can have positive psychological, social, and emotional effects on urban high-achieving Black females. Carter and colleagues (2008) examined the relationship between verve and the academic achievement levels of selected African American middle-school students in reading and mathematics in an urban setting. This study revealed that the 47 African American female students showed more verve than the 60 African American male students. These data also show that adolescent males are more active than their female counterparts. Additionally, the data uncovered that African American males with high verve levels, particularly in middle school, are likely to be perceived as having behavior problems, being inattentive, and sometimes even being a threat. This perception about African American middle school males then has a correlation with specific strands of verve, including movement and individual expressionism. Finally, the study found there was no statistically significant difference in the standardized reading scores (i.e., Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills-TAKS) between students with high verve and students with low verve, after controlling for difference in mathematics scores. However, verve did have an adverse impact on academic achievement in the direct regression between verve and the TAKS scores. Students with higher verve levels scored lower on the TAKS Mathematics and Reading tests than students with lower verve levels. Higher levels of verve had a greater negative impact on mathematics than on reading. This study suggests that verve among

African American students, specifically middle school males, may have some relation with their academic achievement. However, these results may be influenced by teacher perceptions of African American males in particular, and so they might not be generalizable to African American females. This is why it is important in the context of my study to have the four high-achieving African American females narrate their own story using their voices. This may then reveal the social inequity they experienced because of their race, but in spite of this inequity they continue to academically achieve.

**Pedagogy.** Even though *verve* does not seem to have a significant negative impact on the academic achievement of Black females as much as it does for Black males, classroom practices could because of the link between teacher effectiveness and student academic performance. Kunjufu (2001) argues classroom practices need to be re-evaluated regarding Black males' experiences in educational systems, particularly at such critical stages as kindergarten, fourth, and ninth grades. Kunjufu stresses the importance of reading and algebra as key components to students' success in their academic lives, but also in their lives as citizens and adults. According to Kunjufu, illiteracy rather than race and income is the single greatest predictor of crime, poverty, and school failure. Yet the evidence shows (Austin, 1995; Borland & Wright, 2001; Chauhan & Repucci, 2009; Collins, 1998; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2007; Townsend, Thomas, & Neilands, 2010) that race, gender, and socioeconomic status all relate to the invisibility, absence, and exclusion of adolescent Black females in the educational literature. Kunjufu makes a strong argument about illiteracy as a major predictor of crime, poverty, and school failure. However, previous research and more current literature argue that race, gender, and socioeconomic status are all contributing factors that could hinder the

academic achievement of high-achieving urban Black females. In short, Kunjufu champions culturally responsive pedagogy while Evans-Winters (2005) recognizes the academic success urban Black females have attained. These findings underscore shared connections of culturally responsive pedagogy and academic achievement. In fact, Hanley and Noblit (2009) claim “pedagogy could be used to teach and develop a new racial identity of achievement” (p. 76).

While Kunjufu (2001) found that classroom practices do not seem to gravely impact high-achieving urban Black females as much as they do Black males, specific class practices like pedagogy, teacher-student relations, and psychological development might. Jeffers (2010) asserts pedagogy, teacher-student relations, and psychological development are interrelating themes and significant influences of Black males’ educational success or demise. Jeffers examined the early educational experiences of six young African American males (ages 18-25) who attended urban schools in San Diego, California. All six men were incarcerated for at least one year before participating in a pre-release program. The participants were part of a pre-release program in San Diego, California, which was selected based on its reputation for preparing recently incarcerated African American males for assimilation into urban communities. The participants were selected because their academic experiences are similar to many young African American males who attend urban schools. Jeffers (2010) found that early academic experiences of African American men profoundly impact their social, cultural, and psychological development as well as life choices that can lead to incarceration. The themes in the narrative identified that African American males generally have more positive academic experiences in elementary school versus middle or high school. In addition, pedagogy

(teaching the purpose of education), teacher-student relations (teacher expectations and student perceptions), and psychological development (African American male identity development) are also strong influences. In fact, all of the themes interweave and overlap at times explaining the opportunities and obstacles encountered in each stage of the participants' educational experiences (elementary, middle, and high school). This focus on males is helpful because there might be similarities in terms of academic experiences that speak to the opportunities and obstacles met by urban high-achieving Black females.

Although Kunjufu (2001) offers old evidence about contributing factors to African American males' educational success or failure, Jeffers (2010) offers new evidence to support his claim about the academic success or failure of African American males. Both arguments are central to the potential success or demise of African American males, but may also have a connection to the academic success or failure of African American females as well. This is because as identified, these Black men had many positive academic experiences during elementary school, but the experience changed for the worse upon entering middle and high school, causing them to derail their academic achievement resulting in their incarceration. These positive experiences have relevance to high-achieving urban Black females as they continue to exhibit characteristics of success including motivation, perseverance, and drive to achieve beyond elementary school.

### **Identifying Gifted and Underrepresented Students**

Characteristics of success are essential for Black females as there are many problems in the U.S. educational system. One problem in American school systems is how to identify gifted and talented students from underrepresented groups. The identification of gifted and talented students from these populations should be

acknowledged because the data could reveal critical policies, procedures, and instructional practices that continue to marginalize minority youth and especially high-achieving Black females. Children that are underrepresented in programs for the gifted (minorities, children from low socioeconomic status environments, students with limited English speaking ability) is a problem that Borland and Wright (2001) argue, is a complex issue. Borland and Wright explore the interrelated factors that influence the process: definitions of giftedness, the use of one-shot paper-and-pencil assessments, the biases in policies and procedures, and the lack of coordination of curriculum with identification and placement procedures. The solutions proposed are centered on increased advocacy for underrepresented students and much needed attention to current research. This issue (Dauter & Fuller, 2011; Simonsen, Eber, & Black, 2012) clearly uncovers a gap in the literature because it highlights the marginalization Black females encounter due to the educational infrastructure. However, despite these structural barriers some Black females are still academically thriving. As a reminder, CRT in education challenges dominant ideologies (color-blindness, race-neutrality, equal opportunity, and meritocracy in education) that camouflage the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society. This issue of exclusion from gifted and talented programs faced by high-achieving Black females speaks directly to the racial subordination, class, and gender oppression urban Black females face in the school system as evidenced in the literature (Borland & Wright, 2001, Dauter & Fuller, 2011, Simonsen et al., 2012).

### **Family, Community, and School Support**

In addition to characteristics of success that help urban Black females overcome structural barriers, some Black females often rely on the support of family, the community, and their school in their quest toward academic success. Evans-Winters (2005) conducted an ethnography study that followed a group of students from their middle school to high school years. The researcher found that the most resilient young women were those that received support from their families, community, and school. As compared to Black males, the support from family, community, and school seemed to have less of a major influence on their academic achievement.

### **Self-Empowerment**

In addition to support systems (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010), self-empowerment may have significant influence on the academic outcomes of Black males and females. Upon the realization of abilities and acceptance of imperfections, one can begin developing the confidence, respect, and love of self that is needed to succeed. Berry (2005) investigated the limitations that Black male and female students encounter and the compensating factors these students experience working within a phenomenological framework. Phenomenological methodology in sociology pertains to “research that is concerned with understanding the point of view of the subjects” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 274). This methodology is an appropriate model for my study because I am concerned with the subjects’ points of view as the participants reveal their academic experiences, describing what they think are some of the causes of their academic success and comparing and contrasting their self-reported academic experience with mine.

### **Risk Factors**

While scholars (Berry, 2005; Dishion & Véronneau, 2011; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010) underscore the many positive forces at work for urban Black females, there are forces that could interfere with their success. The unique influence of neighborhood effects may be fairly minimal for urban Black females because of the cultural characteristics of the neighborhood. Neighborhood disadvantage and exposure to violence are risk factors and potential barriers for African American children including Black females (Chauhan & Repucci, 2009). We know that for boys, a mother's antisocial behavior can be detrimental as Bank et al. (1993) found. Bank and colleagues (1993) proved that the effects of the contextual variables Socioeconomic Disadvantage (SED) and Maternal Antisocial Qualities (MAQ) on Antisocial Behavior Problems (ABP) in boys would be mediated through their disrupting effect on parenting practices. Bank et al.'s findings indicated that with older boys, mothers with antisocial qualities placed their sons at risk for antisocial behavior problems because of disrupted parenting practices. In the context of maternal antisocial qualities, socioeconomic disadvantage had no impact on parenting or antisocial behavior problem constructs. This is enlightening to the framework of economics and critical race theory because it is assumed that the variables associated with socioeconomic disadvantage (SED) and race would have a significant impact on single mothers' parenting skills and children's antisocial qualities; however, it does not. In the Black community, single parent lead households are far too common. One would think that single parenting and socioeconomic disadvantage could interfere with the academic success of urban Black females causing them to display anti-social behavior; however, it does not. This causes me to believe that neighborhood effects may not be as significant as our assumptions suggest.

## **Teacher Perception**

Perhaps neighborhood effects may not be a major factor for urban Black females, but teacher perception has much to do with the marginalization of Black males. The same could be true for urban Black females. Duncan (2002) studied the academic and social lives of black male students at City High School (CHS), an integrated urban magnet academy located in the Midwest U.S. Upon conducting a focus group interview with participants, Aaron (a student) recounted an experience that illustrated a specific violation. He indicated that teachers often fail to provide students with appropriate and honest feedback about their work.

Duncan (2002) argues “the violation of the assumption of truthfulness severely compromises the ability of black male students to take full advantage of the resources available to them at CHS” (p. 10). The same could be true for a sample group of adolescent African American females. This was noted in Morris’s work (2007) at Matthews Middle School. Morris’s research shows that race and class shape perceptions of femininity for Black females. Remembering that CRT in education places race and racism in both a historical and contemporary context, these findings suggest that race and class have and continue to impact perceptions of femininity for Black females, which also affect their experience of schooling. This perception about Black males and Black females shares a common thread, race. Whereas Black males were not provided with truthful feedback as a result of teacher perception, Black females are marginalized where not only race, but gender devalues them. This argument speaks principally to racist oppression, but also to sexist oppression.

## **Intervention and Prevention Programs**



Intervention and prevention programs are effective for urban youth because they are educated about the signs of violent behavior. This claim is supported with current research (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002); Grant, Battle, Murphy, & Heggoy, 1991; Kelly, 2010; Long & Sanderson, 2001). Gentle-Genitty (2009) provides a discussion on a best practice program for low-income African American students transitioning from middle school to high school in urban school settings. The main research question was "Of the programs touted as best practice, is there one that shows promise to produce positive middle school transition outcomes for low-income African American students?" Using specific exclusion criteria, the author chose four programs as best practice, including School Transitional Environmental Program (STEP), Skills Opportunity and Recognition, Positive Action through Holistic Education, and Fast Track. These four programs were further evaluated with an 8-point inclusion criteria. The results suggested that STEP was the best practice program of those examined for working with low-income African American students transitioning from middle school to high school. STEP addressed all five domains of interest, actively involving teachers, parents, peers, the individual, and changes in the school community. The program is designed to build a sense of community, increase school connectedness, increase social networks and family involvement, increase the sense of responsibility for learning and decision making, and train teachers to be able to meet these demands. STEP was the only program that was described as working largely with low-income students, primarily African American students. The program was designed to be culturally sensitive and included problem-solving, cognitive, and self-esteem development. However, the study did not provide a disaggregate analysis about best practices for African American females in contrast with

African American males. In other words, this study homogeneously grouped African American males and females together without regard to gender that could have illuminated some distinct gender differences among them. This lack of disaggregate analysis proves that a closer examination about urban Black females is needed because they continue to be ignored in the literature and silenced because of the cluster grouping with Black males. My study will provide a voice for a small sample of urban Black females as they narrate their stories about academic resilience thereby contributing to the literature about them.

### **Friendships and Romantic Relationships**

While cluster grouping is all too common among African American students, same sex friendships and romantic relationships among Black females and Black males may have equal significance because of the cultural and racial ties shared. Pagano and Hirsch (2007) examined the friendships and romantic relationships of Black and White adolescents. They found White females reported significantly higher levels of self-disclosure in their friendship ties in comparison to romantic relationship, whereas White males reported nearly equivalent levels. In comparison to White adolescents, Black adolescent females and males had similar levels of self-disclosure in their romantic relationships as their same sex friendships. With regard to negative elements of relationships, females reported more hurtful conflict in romance than friendship, whereas males reported an opposite pattern. Results underscore race and gender influences on youths' interpersonal skills within peer and romantic relationships. This is particularly relative as a factor contributing to the academic attainment of Black females. It is also of particular interest to Black middle school female students as having an impact on their

academic success. Whereas Dishion and Véronneau (2011) found high-achieving females seemed to benefit from having high-achieving friends, Pagano and Hirsch (2007) suggest that in addition to friendships, romantic relationships are trustworthy assertions in the discussion about high-achieving Black females.

In accordance with the epistemological assumptions of CRT, I argued that the lived experiences of students of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education. In the next section, there will be discussion about race and gender in education in U.S. schools, placing an emphasis on the experiences of female learners of color.

### **Critical Race Feminism (CRF)**

Critical race feminism (CRF) is the intersection of critical race theory and feminism placing women of color at the center. CRF confronts the notion of the essential woman (the White middle class woman), explores the lives of those facing discrimination on the basis of their race, gender, and class, and reveals how all of these factors interact within a system of racist oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Duncan, 1991, 2005). CRF seeks to explore and celebrate the differences and diversity within women of color. CRT places a context on the role racism has played in the shaping of school and schooling practices, and CRF places a context on the role race and gender have played in the shaping of school and schooling practices for Black females. In this section, I analyze the literature making the case that Black females' race and gender play a fundamental role in their academic achievement.

### **Academic Achievement**

Urban Black females are resilient. Evans-Winters (2005) recognizes the academic success urban Black females have attained. In more recent research, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) note that many Black females are successful because of the support of family. Yet, if this support system is not in place, it becomes a struggle impacting this student population's academic success. While the research discussed above shows that friendship (Dishion & Véronneau, 2011) and the support of family (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010) contribute to the academic achievement of high-achieving Black females, this group undergoes continued marginalization as they are not tracked for gifted and talented (Borland & Wright, 2001) programs because of the many factors that affect their involvement in such programs. As a result, they are overlooked as potential participants because there is difficulty identifying them in the first place. Research on gifted and talented is one helpful lens to look at academic opportunity because it can show how bright right-brained learners engage in the learning process with other high-achievers.

While Black females may be overlooked as participants in gifted and talented programs, this issue may be less important than their construct of academic success because of their inherent determination. Rollock (2007) explored how staff and pupils at an inner city secondary school construct academic success. Employing a Bourdieuan framework, she argued that while established discussions on femininity serve to increase Black females' place in the context of school discourses on academic success, those on ethnicity act to downgrade their rightful place. This circumstance then both lessens their opportunities for high academic success and leaves them invisible in the argument about Black achievement. Findings from the staff interviews revealed an almost complete focus on Black male pupils with Black females filling an invisible or absent presence in staff

discourses of both academic success and failure (Apple, 1999). Rollock's work (2007) moves away from Collins's (1990) emphasis on critical race theory (CRT) embracing a more critical race feminist framework. This move toward critical race feminism in discourse about Black achievement has shifted the central focus some toward Black females. In spite of this, Black females are still overlooked in academic research. To this end, feminism, critical race feminism (CRF), and intersectionality are viable frameworks to explore the gap in the literature addressing the invisibility of Black females in research.

There is an apparent need not only to study Black females, but a demand for Black women to conduct research about other Black females. Austin (1995) identifies a need for more minority female scholars in the field of education and other related areas, to directly confront the social and educational needs of minority females of color. Austin claims that because feminist epistemologies tend to focus on the success of White women and girls, and raced-based epistemologies tend to be concerned with the academic failure of Black males; as a result, Black females are ignored. This author shows what is missing in empirical research and literature not only about high achieving African American females, but high achieving African American males as well. Although Austin's work focuses on the marginalization of poor and minority women, particularly Black women, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) show the relevance of her comments to the educational experiences and schooling processes of not only Black women, but Black females as well. Critical race feminism impacts Black females because it upholds that the experiences of females of color considerably differ from males of color and White females.

Evans-Winters (2005) notes that in addition to Austin's (1995) suggestions, other female scholars of color have documented the unique challenges young Black females encounter in many urban schools due to their raced, classed, and gendered status. Evans-Winters' work shows what is not covered in the literature taking Austin's research further, identifying a relevance to Black females. This is important because it illustrates the need for female scholars to assist Black females with their social and educational needs. Austin encourages a call to action of legal scholars to directly address the social and legal policies that affect minority women overall, but Evans-Winters attempts to address problems in our school systems, including policies that affect Black females. Austin's and Evans-Winters' works are convincing because they both highlight the important factors of race and gender among those who are often underrepresented. Both works support the premise about the marginalization of Black females.

### **Black Females Defending Themselves**

Urban Black females will defend themselves against many forms of marginalization, oppression, and injustice. O'Connor's (1997) qualitative study found that academically resilient Black females are socialized to have a strong sense of racial identification and commitment to fighting against race, class, and gender injustices at school, in the community, and in society overall. While O'Connor found that Black females take a stand against social injustices, Neville, Poulin, and Pugh-Lilly (2001) showed that the absence of support systems causes Black females to defend and protect themselves. On the one hand, Black females advocate fairness and equity while other Black females feel powerless and thus act out. Consequently, both studies reveal a desire for Black females to advocate their best interests upholding their sense of value and

place. O'Connor's study is important as she used a qualitative approach which is common among practitioners of color. It is further significant because it was conducted by a Black woman for young Black women. There is a need for more analysis by and for minority women, particularly Black women for Black females that give attention to the power of structural forces and their influence on the schooling experiences of Black adolescents without devaluing young women's wisdom and resilience. Evans-Winters' (2005) study provides a theoretical framework about previously conducted research from a CRT and feminist lens. From these theories evolved critical race feminism (CRF), combining the theories. For the purposes of this project, CRF will be used as a theoretical framework to investigate Black females and women of color that are often underrepresented and marginalized in research.

The above section underscored how Black females are systemically marginalized from a race and gender perspective. The literature findings also revealed not only are race and gender significant to the academic experiences of Black females, but race, gender, and class join together as elements of their academic story. The following section places an emphasis on the variables of race, gender, and class for the sample under study.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality highlights combinations or intersections of important modes of social advantage and disadvantage. Collins (1990, 1998, 2000) notes intersectional theory frames a complex view of social inequality and reality. Generally, educational policies and programs attempting to target marginalized students are fixed on demographic variables of race, gender, and class. Intersectionality argues that causal biased conditions and norms perpetuate inequities integrating variables of race, gender, and class, but also

include ability and religion. In this section, I make the case that intersectionality is a useful analytical tool for my study as the demographic variables of race, gender, class, ability, and religion overlap, challenging the notion that gender, class, race, ability or religion separately contribute to a female's destiny (Dishion & Véronneau, 2011; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2007; Neville et al., 2001).

**Femininity.** Morris's (2007) research advances theories of intersectionality by showing not just how race, gender, and class shape perceptions of femininity for Black females, but how they integrate and interact with one another in shaping femininity for Black females. The encouragement of more traditionally feminine behavior could ultimately limit the academic potential for Black females. Morris found that most African American females in her observation at Matthews Middle School did not hesitate to speak up in classrooms, nor hesitate to stand up to boys physically. The author argues that such an attitude and style within classrooms is not surprising when considering the historical experiences of most African American women, who have long struggled against race and gender oppression in ways that differ greatly from White women. She supports this claim with Fordham's (1993) research. In the case of Black females at Matthews Middle School, race and class impacted perceptions of femininity, which also impacted their experience of schooling. Overall, Morris found that Black females who exhibited all the trappings for them might have appeared to be good students in their behavior, but the gender-specific qualities associated with a "well-behaved" student are not always the qualities associated with academic and occupational excellence. Morris' conclusions are convincing because they offer a continuum perspective of stereotypical behavior that is parallel with stereotypical modern day images of Jezebel (Townsend et



al., 2010). The literature is compelling as both works are supported by fairly recent scientific findings (Collins, 1998; Morris, 2007). The stereotypical behaviors and images identified by the authors identify two distinct challenges, offering a historical context that could potentially serve as barriers to the success of Black females. This then offers justification to further study this group to pinpoint what helps these females succeed despite the challenges.

**Black females' exclusion in research.** Intersectionality helps us understand how feminism as a much broader way of looking at things, takes the emphasis off of the White middle class woman of privilege placing the importance on all women who experience raced, gendered, and classed oppression. This is why intersectionality is a lens through which to analyze the literature, but also useful as a theoretical framework about high-achieving Black females, because Black females have experienced shared oppression. Black females cannot be endlessly denied their turn in science education research. Despite critics' views such as Weaver-Hightower (2003) on the issue and the argument made for ignoring the Black female's turn in educational research, Black females remain overlooked in empirical research. As Mirza (1992) stated, "...in nearly 40 years of sociological studies of race, Black girls have been neglected" (p. 213). While Collins (1990) stakes the claim of intersectional theory framing a complex view of social inequality and reality, Mirza (1992) asserts that four decades of research shows the exclusion in science educational research of Black females. These two stances are in close relationship with one another underscoring the invisibility of Black females. The first identifies how class, race, and gender intersect, placing a construct among social unfairness and Black females' reality and the second source shows the long standing

history of marginalization. This then has a connection concerning why Black females are excluded and invisible in educational research, which may be rooted in structural barriers and political maneuvering. These two notions then align with Weaver-Hightower (2003), because they make strong arguments about ignoring and excluding Black females in educational research. Essentially, all three works recognize the intersection of class, race, and gender of Black females.

### **Lower-Poverty Neighborhoods and Life Chances**

While Bank et al. (1993) assert socioeconomic disadvantage and single parenting are not risk factors for urban Black males and potentially urban Black females, there is much literature to the contrary, recognizing these are factors affecting student success (Carpenter & Ramirez, 2007; Clayton, 2011; Desimone & Long, 2010; Hernandez, 2011; Kelly, 2010; Peguero, 2011). Black females face specific threats, not only because of their race, but their gender as well. These threats include harassment, pressure for early sexual initiation, persistent intimate partner violence, and high risk of sexual assault (Leventhal, Popkin, & Weissman, 2010). Leventhal et al. (2010) used a mixed-methods approach from the Three-City Study of Moving to Opportunity (MTO) to examine how moving to lower-poverty neighborhoods may have influenced adolescent girls' life chances. They found MTO females experienced a major decrease in what the authors term the 'female fear.' Bank et al.'s (1993) work shows that urban Black males living in single parent households in neighborhoods of socioeconomic disadvantage did not display anti-social behavior, but Leventhal et al. (2010) offer current research that proves neighborhood effects do influence adolescent girl's life chances. Though the article suggests Black men rather than younger males commit the violence against Black

females, there is a gap. Although these two samples share the same racial demographic, the findings show that gender is a significant factor for the academic achievement of urban Black females that may not be true for Black males.

### **Identity Formation and Personality Characteristics**

Norton's (2000) identity formation theory is fixed on the idea that there is a yearning for individuals to form identity with motivation and investment at the center. The basis of identity formation considers the ways in which students relate to one another, to classroom practices, to the teacher and to society. Norton (2000) states:

I use the term identity to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how a person understands possibilities for the future. (p. 5)

In this section, I make the claim that identity formation is helpful as an analytic tool for this study as it will give me insight about a child's multiple identity, including how she relates to the world and her dreams for the future.

This construct of self is central to those students who are considered gifted and talented, as personality traits are important for gifted and talented students in terms of their identity formation. Tao and Zuo (2001) examined the significance of personality characteristics to identity formation, using a sample of gifted and talented students. The results suggested that positive traits such as perseverance, purposiveness, desire to excel, and self-confidence are supportive to a successful identity formation. While Borland and Wright's (2001) work examined the complexity identifying gifted and talented students from underrepresented groups, Tao and Zuo (2001) suggest personality traits are important for gifted and talented students once they are acknowledged and placed in such programs. Borland and Wright make a strong argument about identifying gifted and

talented students; thus, gifted and talented students must be recognized and streamed for gifted and talented programs in order for their unique personality traits to be revealed in orientation with their identity formation. If this identification by educators of gifted and talented students does not occur, it could then impede their identity formation as they are excluded from opportunities that could foster and encourage investment.

Black students' formation of Black identity is central to the narrative of exceptionally achieving Black females. Lewis, Mueller, O'Connor, Rivas-Drake, and Rosenberg (2011) examined three high-achieving Black females in a predominantly White high school. The results indicated Black students' constructs of Black identity affect how Black youth strategize for academic excellence. While identity formation is significant for high-achieving Black females, the employment of positive personality traits (Tao & Zuo, 2001) could be a useful and likely strategy for the attainment of their academic success. Personal character traits are the attitudes one has toward particular activities. Positive personal character traits lead to achievement of goals and success. It could be argued that most of these traits are established through the guidance from parents, while others are gained from social interactions with peers.

### **Gender Diversity on School Achievement**

“Hard-edged” behavior is encouraged by African American mothers to their African American daughters. Fordham (1993) explores the impact of gender diversity on school achievement. She used data obtained from an ethnographic study of academic success in an urban high school. This analysis examines how the normalized definition of femaleness – White middle-class womanhood – juxtaposed with a two-tiered dominating patriarchy, propels African-American females to resist consuming images that assert their

“nothingness.” Patricia Williams, a participant in the study who is an African American woman and Harvard Law School graduate, described the seemingly contradictory strategies her mother encouraged her to use in her academy. Patricia notes:

My mother was constantly asking me not to look to her as a role model. She was devaluing that part of herself that was not Harvard and refocusing my vision to that of herself that was hard-edged, proficient and Western. (Fordham, 1993, p. 4)

Fordham argues that the participant who was an African American Harvard Law graduate was encouraged to be hard-edged and proficient because of her mother’s influence. The encouragement and constant exposure to hard-edged and proficient behavior then links to the construct of identity that is taught, assumed, and encouraged by Black women to Black girls. This construct of identity then is in relation to this study’s conceptual framework as elements of individuality, race, class, and gender intersect. While Fordham claims hard-edged behavior is encouraged by African American mothers to their African American daughters, Jones (2010) recognizes a distinctive set of standards existing in the Black community associating complexion between lighter and darker Black females and their implicit behavior. These findings illuminate the interconnections between race, gender, and identity. This is because Black females reject the images of White womanhood and in their search for identity some urban Black females focus on academics.

### **Importance of Images.**

Images are central to the discussion for urban Black females’ identity formation, because it is undeniably related to their impression of self. Hall and Du Gay (1996) assert that the examination of identity should start with dynamics between “how we have been represented and how that bears on how we represent ourselves” (p. 4).

Accordingly, identification and representation interlock and are important to how Black females understand and construct the world and their place in it. Collins (1998), as cited in Townsend, Thomas, Neilands and Jackson (2010), asserts three distinct images for Black females that include Jezebel, mammy, and Sapphire. According to Collins (1998) as cited in Townsend and colleagues (2010) “Jezebel is overtly sexual and often depicted as a mulatto woman with light skin and long hair” (p. 2). Mitchell and Herring (1998), as cited in Townsend and colleagues (2010), note Jezebel as “seductive, manipulative and unable to control her sexual drives” (p. 2). In contrast to the highly sexual Jezebel image is the asexual mammy – an obese, dark-skinned woman – who often worked in the master’s house (Mitchell & Herring, 1998).

This evidence shows that the modern Jezebel image having highly sexual connotations may be a major factor impacting how African American females view themselves because of raced and gendered variables. Race, class, and gender collide, and have become known as intersectionality as noted above. Intersectionality and the modern day Jezebel ideal may then have implications on African American females’ academic progress. Morris (2007) found that Black females who exhibited all the trappings for them might have appeared as good students in their behavior. However, because of the gender-specific qualities associated with a “well-behaved” student, they were not always the qualities associated with academic and occupational excellence. In contrast to Morris’ work, Collins (2000) places an increased emphasis on images rather than femininity. Both works have a correlation with an individual’s self-concept further linking sex-role identification and sex-role orientation.

### **Influence of Eurocentric Ideals and Black Females’ Identity**

There is also a problem of identities constructed around Eurocentric ideals for adolescent Black females. Sutherland (2005) provides a window on the meaning-making of six 16-year-old Black females as they studied *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1993) in their high school English class. Sutherland conducted a qualitative study examining how intersections of race and gender might matter to Black female adolescents in complex ways, illustrating their connection to the text through the images depicted. She found two predominant themes that connected participants' life stories. In their talk about the novel, participants illustrated how a) a Eurocentric view of beauty acts as a boundary in Black women's lives, and b) others' assumptions about who they are and how they will and should behave. For example, based on a scene from the novel, one student identified the issue of skin shade discrimination of African Americans. Sutherland's findings indicated that the participants in this observational setting, as well as those which followed in individual and focus group interviews, underscored that skin hue does not define beauty. One of the participants under study represented a self-repeatedly bruised but resilient spirit through self-talk about how she should think of herself. This knowledge about self is supported with West's (1993) race claim, but clearly has an association with identity formation. West (1993) arguing about race claims:

That one aspect of the condition of race in America is the relative lack of power for Blacks to represent themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings, and thereby to contest the bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by White supremacist ideologies. (p. 17)

The findings of Sutherland (2005) and West (1993) suggest that the use of power in connection with representing oneself as complex is important for Black females' identity formation. The findings in Sutherland's work indicate that despite this power and the aspect of society's idea of beauty, identity formation for adolescent Black females is

minimally affected. Sutherland's work offers new evidence that makes for a stronger, more current argument.

### **High-Achieving Students of Color**

The literature about high-achieving Latina students' (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2008) interested in attending college suggest that school resources are critical to their achievement as well as the navigation of their college preparation process. Other literature (Bergin & Cooks, 2000) about high-achieving students of color underscores the benefits of competition with an emphasis placed on competing for grades rather than a focus on skill mastery. Whether it is school resources or competing for grades, urban high-achieving students are resilient. This resiliency may be caused by verve dimensions (Boykin, 1983), parents, caring teachers or individual influences that separates them from others who share similar race, gender, class and contextual factors.

In this section, I make the argument that high-achieving students may use the many different academic tools they have in their tool box. In addition, I make the claim that perhaps they may rely more heavily on these tools than their peers for the purpose of attaining success.

Geisler and colleagues (2009) conducted a single-case research design study examining the effects of self-counting and student use of synonym lists on the length and quality of writing of five (four female and one male) high-achieving urban African American first graders. They found that all five students demonstrated improved writing outcomes. The results of this study support the use of differentiated interventions for high-achieving students in order to better increase the likelihood that they will achieve in writing at a level aligned with their abilities. This study may have practical implications



to the sample group concerning why the participants' as high-achieving sixth grade female students continue to succeed. Perhaps it is a result of the effective use of teacher pedagogical practices they received during their elementary education.

Cunningham et al. (2009) examined the relations of future expectations to academic outcomes in a sample of 129 African American high-achieving adolescents of which 92 were female participants. The findings indicated that academic future expectations accounted for more variance in relation to academic outcomes than general future expectations. The results further suggest that the association of academic future expectations to grade point average decreases in the presence of negative friends. Findings from this study are relevant to my research as external factors including parents and teachers may be influential in terms of the participants' academic future expectations. This study is also important because of the increased emphasis on the role of friends in relation to academic achievement for the sample group.

**Monetary incentives in support of academic achievement for students of color.** Spencer et al. (2005) conducted a randomized field trial evaluating a bottom-up approach in which high-achieving students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds from poor families are given monetary incentives to maintain their academic standing. The evaluation was designed to explore the role of monetary incentives as an instrument for promoting resiliency in the face of poverty-related challenge. The researchers found that monetary incentives are effective in promoting academic success to different degrees and for various reasons depending on students' perception of the meaning of the incentive in relation to their emergent identity. These findings have implications for this study as incentives could serve as a motivating factor for the high-achieving sample group.

## Linguistics

Using people's talk in empirical research as data has become more common (Hanks, 1990; Levinson, 1981, 1988; Psathas, 1992; Schegloff, 1984; Wortham, 1992) since Goffman (1979) introduced "footing" to describe participants' interactional positions in an encounter. Goffman (1979) asserts that the relative footing of participants in a conversation is a "participation framework" of the interaction at that very moment. To explain how footing gets established, Goffman (1979) claims that systematic verbal and nonverbal cues and markers indicate the relative footing of participants in a conversation. Since Goffman's (1979) insights, Levinson (1988) and Hanks (1990) have extended this research suggesting that a particular type of linguistic form often provides cues about participation frameworks. This linguistic form is known as temporal deictics or deictics (Levinson, 1988; Hanks, 1990). Deictics are forms like *we, this, here and now*. These deictics or shifters help to organize the interaction occurring in a narrated event. Personal pronouns also play a significant role for interactional organization (Wortham, 1992). From an interactional perspective, personal pronouns including *I, me, my, he, she, it, you, we, us, our, they, and them* will be taken into account for the purpose of signaling footing (Levinson, 1988) about a specific event. Verbal and non-verbal cues including abrupt breaks, rising intonation, falling intonation, and pauses will be analyzed identifying an interactional move (Wortham & Locher, 1994). Tone as well as formal and informal registers (Wortham, 1992) will be explored recognizing how the participants express themselves and whether their language is more colloquial in style or academic. This is a useful tool that may reveal how participants occupy shifting positions.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from the research discussed above that Black female students have fallen into a gap in the literature about the educational experiences of Black students in the United States. The gap in research points to a lack of sufficient understanding of the race-gendered experiences of Black females. As compared to Black male students or White female students, their stories have gone unheard. In the following chapter, I identify the methodology of the project.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

This study examines the lived experiences of four African American females from similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds who experience academic success at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level despite the societal disadvantages they may have faced. The study describes the experiences of four academically successful African American female students in a northeastern, public, urban middle school by examining the academic experiences of high-achieving 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American females. I argue that a narrative strategy of inquiry is the best method to address the following questions.

- 1) How do four high-achieving African American females in the 6th grade describe their academic experiences?
- 2) How do four 6th grade African American females engage in the learning process in a gender separate classroom setting?
- 3) How do four 6th grade African American females describe contributors to their academic success?
- 4) In what ways are the experiences of these learners as African American females similar or different than those of the researcher?

#### **Rationale and Assumptions of Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is defined as a “methodological approach for understanding people’s representations of the world and their actions in it through the stories they tell” (Gomez, 1997, p. 35). I chose to employ the qualitative method of narrative inquiry

because it is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This information is then often “retold and written by the researcher into the research texts of tomorrow” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 66). In the end, the narrative combines views from the participant’s life with those of the researcher’s life in a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In a narrative, the story and the voice of the researcher and the researched are at the center of the work. I am interested in comparing the academic experiences of high-achieving 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American females with my academic experiences as a high-achieving African American woman to potentially uncover similarities, differences, and pedagogical practices that may assist other students, especially low-performing African American and Latina females.

According to Hankins (1998) we travel through time in our memories, shifting our thoughts and visualizations backwards, expanding out our life stories, enabling multiple possible resonances that may connect our storied worlds to others. Connecting through thoughts, visualizations, and words with others can cause our relationships with one another to evolve, creating a possibility to discover what is unknown, what is different, and what connects others to us and us to others (Hankins, 1998). This connection through thoughts with others may contribute to a more complete understanding of the challenges and triumphs experienced by this student sample that may be generalizable to a broader group. Specifically, the study creates a portrait of the K-6 experiences of four academically successful African American female secondary students at a northeastern, urban middle school serving over 70% of students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The analysis chronicles each student’s experience,

from their earliest schooling occurrences through their current middle school experience, to describe the challenges they faced and what contributes to their academic success despite these challenges.

Narrative inquiry was my chosen methodology because I value meaning in storytelling. People communicate through stories. Storytelling extends across cultures, connecting us to others with each one of us having a unique story to share about our lives. Thus, narrative inquiry was my chosen methodology because I had a window into the lives of others that revealed how their lives are constructed and “reconstructed in representing that life as a story” (Clandinin, 2007, p. 224). Chase (2005) asserts that narrative inquiry is a type of qualitative method focused on reflective meaning making. Chase outlines five lenses through which narrative inquiry is approached. Chase writes that narrative researchers:

- a) Regard narrative as a form of discourse
- b) View narrative as a way of doing something
- c) View stories as “enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances” (p. 657).
- d) View narrative stories as “socially situated interactive performances” (p. 657).
- e) Understand “themselves as narrators as they develop interpretations and find ways in which to present or publish their ideas about the narratives they studied” (p. 657).

Chase’s (2005) framing of narrative inquiry provided me with a foundation for my research project, but also provided me with an opportunity to further explore this evolving field of research.

According to Fenstermacher (1994), narrative researchers embrace their self-images as having foundational criteria that allow true beliefs to become formal data. I aim to turn my true beliefs into knowledge while embracing a personal understanding of the experiences of the researched with my own experiences. My charge in conducting this research project is to contribute to the literature about high-achieving African American females. As a social justice change agent, my hope is that these data will be used to inform practice concerning the educational outcomes of this student population that have been and continue to be oppressed and systematically marginalized. My aim is to have a valued and objective relationship between myself and the researched.

Narrative inquiry was the chosen method because I understand the value of discussion that cannot be captured in “sterile discourse” known as numbers (Clandinin, 2007, p. 17). Personal stories add richness to social scientific work, which is another reason why narrative inquiry is the method of choice. Numbers do not serve as a replacement for words. However, “stories invite participants into the research” (Clandinin, 2007, p. 19). Kirk and Miller (1985) claim research-practitioners who desire opportunities to produce trustworthiness of their findings may shift toward narrative inquiry methodology as the research findings are represented in the words of the participants and in ways that embody the experience of the researcher and the researched. This is an aim of my study. I am interested to know about the academic experiences of the participants and draw comparisons to my story as an African American woman. According to Arendt (1958) and Kerby (1991), narrative practitioners have to be willing to place themselves in the context of the story in order to deconstruct it and interpret it. To this point, we accept ourselves as storied beings (Ketelle, 2004). Narrative inquiry

calls on researchers to reveal either a personal story (Behar, 1996) or the reconstructed stories of others (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). I do both in my project, which highlights the sharing of the participants' personal stories as well as the sharing of my personal story. This approach can be deeply personal. However, the stories are also shaped by more social, cultural, and historical contexts with which they are created, understood, and shared. As such, narratives have the power to define boundaries based on class, race, and gender.

Narrative inquiry is part of the broader research collection of qualitative study. Qualitative research is holistic, empirical, interpretive, and empathetic (Stake, 1995). The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures. Qualitative designs show diverse perspectives (a) social justice thinking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005); (b) ideological perspectives (Lather, 1991); (c) philosophical stances (Schwandt, 2000); and (d) systematic procedural guidelines (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data are typically collected in the participant's setting (Creswell, 2009). During data analysis, information inductively builds from particulars to general themes, and the researcher makes interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2009). Inductive methods of reasoning and data analysis help to build patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up by organizing data into increasingly more abstract units of information (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010).

In keeping with the qualitative approach, the research design of the study is rooted in a participatory/advocacy worldview. According to Creswell (2009), an advocacy/participatory worldview holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined in politics and a political agenda. Creswell (2009) notes:



This position arose during the 1980s and 1990s from individuals who felt that the post-positivist assumptions impose structural laws and theories that did not fit marginalized individuals in our society or issues of social justice that needed to be addressed. (p. 9)

The project under study contains an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life (Echols, 1989). The participatory/advocacy worldview focuses on the needs of groups and individuals in our society that may be marginalized or disenfranchised (Creswell, 2009). To this end, one of the theoretical frameworks of the participatory/advocacy worldview is racialized discourses (Ladson-Billings, 2000a). Racialized discourses raise "important questions about the control and production of knowledge, particularly about people and communities of color" (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 79).

Another theoretical framework is feminism (hooks, 1984; Sadovnik & Semel, 2002; Tong, 1989). Feminism has considerably evolved over the years and generally seeks to "end sexist oppression" (hooks, 1984, p. 26). Scholars view feminism as "women's diverse situations and the institutions that frame those situations" (Olesen, 2000, p. 23). The third theoretical framework is critical race feminism. In critical race feminism (Crenshaw, 1995), feminism and critical race theory converge informing and interacting with one another.

Intersectionality is another lens of analysis. Intersectionality (Collins, 1990, 1998, 2000; Crenshaw, 1995) brings together the viewpoints of critical race theory and critical race feminism while also introducing social class as a category of analysis. Finally, there is identity formation. Norton's (2000) identity formation theory frames the participants yearning to form identity with motivation and investment at the center. For the purposes

of this study, race, class, and gender are viewed within the wider context of social relations and the important relations of power are seen as complex and contradictory, productive as well as oppressive (de Lauretis, 1986; Nicholson, 1990). Power in the researched-researcher relationship is a recurring theme. This power is dominant in conversational investigations resulting in stories. Consequently, the power play acknowledged in narrative inquiry has an impact on the “varied relationships to the act of conversation itself” and the variations are noted in the analyses (Clandinin, 2007, p. 159). To this point, I am concerned with understanding these participants’ stories in a collaborative narrative with my story, not positioning the story from my point of view.

### **Research Design**

Creswell (2007) reports five approaches to conducting qualitative research: narrative, phenomenological, ethnographic, case study, and grounded theory. I use a narrative strategy of inquiry employing an inductive approach drawing on grounded theory (Glaser, 1978). Grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is a method in which the researcher collects data and conducts analysis at the same time. According to Glaser (1978), the main goal of grounded theory is to discover “the theoretical reflections and summarizations of the patterned, systematic uniformity flows of social life which people go through, and which can be conceptually captured and further understood through the construction of basic social process theories” (p. 100). Grounded theory is relevant to the narrative approach because it provides a backdrop of the academic and social experiences that are ultimately encapsulated in the participants’ narrative stories. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) identify qualitative research as descriptive. They also note qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively. Bogdan and

Biklen (2007) note, “The data collected take the form of words or pictures rather than numbers” (p. 5). The inductive qualitative research approach seeks to construct a picture that takes shape as the researcher collects and examines the parts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As such, the direction a qualitative researcher travels comes after they have been collecting the data, and after time has been spent with the subjects (Bal, 1997). The inductive approach is appropriate for this project because the analysis emerges during data collection rather than structuring a study around a hypothesis or narrow questions (Bogdan & Biklen). This study is appropriate for qualitative research design because the aim of the study is to capture the perspectives of the participants accurately through an inductive approach and collection of descriptive data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Grounded theory provides a systematic approach for building useful theories by applying analytic tools to organize raw data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The grounded theory approach goes beyond description to understand and/or explain a concept; it is used to develop a theory to “help explain practice or provide a framework for further research” (Creswell, 2007, p. 63). A key characteristic is that the theory development is generated in data from participants that experienced the process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It identifies a core social psychological process based on context-dependent observations using constant comparative methods (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). All of the collected data are contextual in that all of the participants share commonalities of the attending institution, the single gender classroom format, and high-achieving status. The data collected help to reveal the process of their educational experiences, which are ultimately retold in their narratives. This approach fits my study because it provides an

opportunity for the participants to share their stories based on the data they have conveyed with the researcher.

Triangulation is encouraged in qualitative research. Merriam (1998) defines triangulation as the process of using “multiple sources of data or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings” (p. 204). Triangulation compares information to determine corroboration; essentially, it is a process of qualitative cross-validation (Wiersma, 2000). Triangulation yields a more accurate and valid estimate of a result when each method of measurement actually converges on the same answer (Mark & Shotland, 1987). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), when triangulation was looped into qualitative research it carried the old meaning of the verification of facts. However, it also picked up another meaning. Triangulation came to mean that multiple data sources were better than a single source. This is because multiple data sources lead to a fuller understanding of the phenomena under study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). According to Glesne (2006), there are three dominant data gathering techniques in qualitative inquiry: participant observation, interviewing, and document collection. I chose these qualitative inquiry techniques because they are likely to (1) elicit data needed to gain understanding of the phenomenon in question, (2) contribute different perspectives on the issue, and (3) make effective use of time available for data collection (Glesne, 2006, p. 36). For the purposes of yielding a more accurate and valid estimate of the findings, data for this research project were triangulated using in-depth interviews, observations, and official documents. Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of the research design matrix.

Questions	Data Collection Instruments
How do four high-achieving African American females in the 6th grade describe their academic experiences?	In-depth interviews, classroom observations of research participants engaging in the learning process (how they interact with the teacher and other students, their habits and behaviors, questions that arise for me to get at the participants' experiences; the subjects' feelings), personal document including a requested autobiographical narrative of the participants academic experiences, artifacts, official documents which includes an analysis of the students' cumulative folders
How do some 6th grade African American females engage in the learning process in a gender separate classroom setting?	Interviews, classroom observations of research participants engaged in the learning process (how they interact with the teacher and other students, their habits and behaviors, what questions arise for me to get at the participants' experiences; the subjects' feelings), photos, tape recordings
How do these 6th grade African American females describe contributors to their academic success?	In-depth interviews, classroom observations of research participants engaged in the learning process (how they interact with the teacher and other students, their habits and behaviors), autobiographical narratives
In what ways are the experiences of these learners similar or different than those of the researcher?	In-depth interviews, classroom observations, autobiographical narrative, official documents including students' cumulative folders

*Figure 1.* Research Design Matrix

## **Population Sampling**

It was essential that students in the study experience the phenomenon as urban African American high-achieving grade 6 females in the educational infrastructure (Creswell, 2009). The four Black females in this study are individuals who self-identify as African American. The findings point out how the four African American adolescent females in this study are resilient, proving how factors of race, class, and gender affect their education and career opportunities (O'Connor, 1997). Nonetheless, these girls remain high-achieving and optimistic about their life chances (O'Connor, 1997).

Students from this study were selected by using the snowball sampling technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), snowball sampling is getting referrals from subjects to other people that are considered by the researcher as potential participants under study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In order to ensure accuracy of the data – confirmability, dependability, transferability, and credibility – I identified the purposefully selected site and the individuals for the proposed study (Creswell, 2009). Creswell notes (2009), the design behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will be helpful to the researcher to better understand the problem and the research question. In order to ensure participants met the selection criteria, and upon referral from guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators using the snowball sampling technique, students self-reported.

The following criteria were met by the participants:

- a) Self-identify as African American/Black (O'Connor, 1997)
- b) Have been solely educated at schools in the U.S.

- c) Attained proficiency or advanced proficiency on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK)
- d) Have an overall GPA of 3.0 or better
- e) Take upper level math and/or language arts classes
- f) Actively participate in extra-curricular activities and/or community initiatives
- g) Engage in the learning process in a single gender class

These criteria are important to better understand and have a deeper knowledge about the contributors and barriers to student success that impact these 6<sup>th</sup> grade girls.

### **Context**

The study took place in a northeastern, public, urban middle school in the U.S. The school consists of about 490 6<sup>th</sup> grade students of whom more than 70% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The student population is 98% African American/Black and Afro-Caribbean, 1% Latino, and 1% White. One distinguishing component about the middle school is the single gender classroom format. Girls and boys are completely separated, never mixing socially or academically with the opposite sex. As a matter of fact, males and females are taught in different areas of the school in small learning communities. This gender separation also includes the lunch period as boys eat in one cafeteria and girls in another. The single gender component has operated with this format for about four years. The single gender context is new for the research participants. These girls arrived at the middle school as incoming 6<sup>th</sup> graders and this is their first year in a single gender learning environment. How single gender factors into the participants' stories remains to be seen. The single gender context is critical, as the girls will share

their experiences about the setting, illuminating whether or not it has a bearing on their success.

In the middle school, there are approximately 60 staff members. The staff consists of 30 female teachers and 20 male teachers, of which 38 are Black, 16 White, two Latino, and one Asian.

### **Instrumentation**

Data collection tools include personal documents, semi-structured in depth interviews, observations, official documents, researcher produced photographs, and artifacts. While observing the subjects under study in single gender classes, I took photographs of them. The photos were taken to capture how these girls engage in the learning process, but also to encapsulate if their academic commitment is bolstered as a result of their interactions with other girls, particularly high-achievers. I also requested the subjects to submit photographs of themselves as elementary students found in yearbooks and school albums. The primary purpose of collecting photos served to address whether the research participants always had a similar view of academic achievement. Finally, for the purposes of inclusion I also wrote an autobiographical narrative to capture my educational experiences.

**Personal documents.** According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), the criterion for calling written information personal documents is that it is self-revealing of a person's view of experiences (Allport, 1942). The purpose of collecting such information is to "obtain detailed evidence as to how social situations appear to actors in them and what meanings various factors have for participants" (Angell, 1945, p. 178). Bogdan and Biklen indicate that researchers occasionally ask people to write for them or get others to



help them produce such materials (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). To this end, I requested the participants write an autobiographical account of their educational experiences from their earliest memories through their current 6th grade experiences for the purpose of telling their story. This provided me with a baseline about how to proceed with the following instruments and data analysis. I also wrote an autobiographical account of my educational experiences to capture my story during this time as well. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) reveal an autobiography is written for the purpose of telling the person's story as they experience it, which then parallels with the role a key informant would play for a researcher. The writer's purpose in producing this document is "scientific interest" on behalf of the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 136). Denzin (1989) suggests published autobiographies provide a readily available source of data for the discerning qualitative researcher.

**Semi-structured in-depth interviews.** Semi-structured in depth interviews were used in this study. Semi-structured interviews are interviews in which the same wide-ranging questions or topics are posed to each of the subjects involved (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In depth interviews are designed to get a full understanding of the subjects way of thinking and are normally long, lasting over an hour or more (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). They are less structured than a typical interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Lastly, in depth interviews often involve more than one session with the same subject (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The researcher conducted three semi-structured in-depth interviews with each of the four participants, audio-taping the interview and transcribing it. In addition to the audio-taping, I took notes in the event that the recording equipment failed (Creswell, 2009). There were three interviews for each participant centered on the research

questions, the subject's backgrounds, single gender experiences, and barriers. In the first section of the interview, there are 11 items. Section two contains nine items, and the third section contains six items. The interviews were face-to-face, one-on-one, in person interviews (Creswell, 2009). According to Whyte (1984), a hefty deal of interviewing involves building relationships, getting to know each other, and putting the subject at ease. The interviews were used to gather descriptive data in the participants' own words so that I could expand insight on how the participants interpret some element of the world (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). According to Atkinson (as cited in Clandinin, 2007):

The life story interview is designed to help the storyteller, the listener, the reader, and the scholar to understand better how life stories serve the four functions of bringing us more into accord with ourselves (psychological), others (sociological), the mystery of life (spiritual), and the universe around us (philosophical). (p. 225)

Weiss (1995) adds to the life story interview discussion addressing the interview relationship between the researcher and the participants. Weiss (1995) claims "the interview relationship is a research partnership between the interviewer and the respondent" (p. 4). Weiss asserts "sometimes interviewers present themselves as the means by which the respondent can tell his story" (p. 4). Weiss (1995) advances six rules for managing an interview. Weiss states, "The first rule of interviewing is that if the respondent has something to say, the respondent must be able to say it" (p. 78). Weiss notes, "it is easy to intrude in an interview" (p. 78). In order to ensure the respondent does not develop an "irrelevant topic at great length," the interviewer should redirect them back to the topic in the spirit of collaboration (Weiss, 1995, p. 78). This is an appropriate measure to manage an interview. The second rule is talking about one's self as an interviewer. Weiss (1995) argues, "The interview is about the respondent, not the

interviewer” (p. 79). To avoid talking too much about yourself, Weiss asserts, “the interviewer should only do as much self-reporting as is consistent with the interview situation” (p. 79). In order to further manage an interview, Weiss (1995) suggests monitoring the information the respondent is providing. Weiss claims interviewers should come to the interview with an idea of what they want to learn about. An interviewer’s ability to judge “what else might contribute to the study’s report should make it possible to recognize what material not anticipated in the guide could be useful for the study” (Weiss, 1995, p. 79). Therefore, as the interviewer listens attentively, she should be considering what material is useful to “illuminate experience” (Weiss, 1995, p. 79). The fourth rule to manage an interview is adequacy of the respondent’s account. The interviewer should be able to capture an image about the important things that were said and the “major figures present on the scene” (Weiss, 1995, p. 80). The fifth rule of managing an interview is managing transitions. “Transitions to new topics require respondents to stop and think, to relocate themselves; they may be necessary, but they tend to be unsettling” (Weiss, 1995, p. 80). Good interview questions are seamless, including transitions that fit well with what the respondent is saying. Other times, redirection will be necessary. The use of transitions will warn the respondent “that a question requiring reorientation is about to be made” (Weiss, 1995, p. 80). The final rule of managing an interview is evidence of a well-established partnership between the respondent and the interviewer. These interviewing management strategies are helpful, because if I approach them in this way, I am more likely to get good descriptive data and generate more abstract ideas about how to think about my topic (Bogdan & Biklen,

2007). This in turn deepens and enriches my understanding about the participants' experiences.

I used an interview protocol for asking questions and recording answers during the interview (Creswell, 2009). An audiotape was used to record information. However, I also took notes in the event that the recording equipment failed (Creswell, 2009). These notes reflected information about the document as well as key ideas in the documents (Creswell, 2009).

**Observations.** Qualitative observations enable the researcher to take field notes on the behavior and activities of subjects at the research site (Creswell, 2009). These field notes serve to address the research questions through a written account of what I see, hear, experience, and think in a data collection session (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2009). Observations enable the researcher to have a first-hand account with participants (Creswell, 2009). As I observe, the first-hand account provides me with an onlooker lens about how these students engage in the learning process with other girls. Observations especially provoke thought on the part of the researcher. Certain questions arose as I reflected in the field: What is this student's motivation? Do these students remain focused when other students are off task? How do these girls manage distractions? What are these students' thinking about their teachers' instructional practices? Do they think the teachers manage their classes well or not? These are the types of questions I wanted to have a clear understanding about when observing the girls. Another advantage to observation is that it allows the researcher to record information as it occurs (Creswell, 2009). I examined the subjects as a complete observer in which the researcher observes without participating (Creswell, 2009). As I had the first-hand

account, I then recorded these important data sequentially as they occurred. This method was my attempt to ensure accuracy. I conducted 20 observations total, specifically five for each participant. There are two sections for this apparatus. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2001) assert that a good ethnographer learns to remember dialogue and actions from the observation. These scholars also contend that writers can explicate the voices of the participants in the texts they write (Emerson et al., 2001). I used these strategies to generate rich, highly-detailed data about the participants' behaviors.

I used an observational protocol and a video recorder to record data. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative researchers often engage in multiple observations during the course of a qualitative study and use an observational protocol. Creswell further suggests the observational protocol may be:

A single page with a dividing line down the middle to separate descriptive notes (portraits of the participants, a reconstruction of dialogue, a description of the physical setting, accounts of particular events or activities) from reflective notes (the researcher's personal thoughts, such as speculation, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions, and prejudices. (Creswell, 2009, p. 181-182)

**Official documents.** I also collected official documents, specifically student records. These documents include New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge scores, portfolio documents, and evaluations from assessment folders. This information presents perspectives on the child (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Contrasting a student's records with her autobiographical account and interviews can be telling as well as another measure of triangulation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

**Researcher-produced photographs.** One of the most common uses of the camera is in combination with participant observation (English, 1988; Preskill, 1995; Walker, 1993). The camera was used in the context of this study to remember and study

detail that may have been forgotten or overlooked if not available (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I took pictures during observations for the aforementioned purpose. There are two sections for this apparatus as it is in conjunction with the participant observation sessions.

**Artifacts.** I used artifacts, which are photos in which others have taken of the subject (Dowdell & Golden, 1989). These photos consist of pictures in school yearbooks, albums, and personal photos. The primary purpose of collecting photos served to address two specific research inquiries, which are how the participants construct meaning and how they engage in the learning process in single gender educational settings.

### **Data Management**

Multiple data sources were used to investigate the experiences of high achieving African American sixth grade females participating in single gender learning spaces. The results of the data collection may contribute to enhance practice and inform educational policy.

Narrative inquiry, a qualitative research method, is the framework for this study because it highlights “the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). The use of narrative inquiry allows participants and the researcher to construct meaning about their educational experiences and combine them in a collaborative narrative (Creswell, 2009). The small sample size allows opportunities for detailed accounts and personal discussion. Participants engaged in member-checking of the interview transcription as a form of validity check (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

In order to avoid data saturation, I closely analyzed the data for the purposes of accuracy rather than reaching a point where information became redundant (Bogdan &

Biklen, 2007). Data saturation is a point in the data collection process where the information becomes redundant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As noted by Bogdan and Biklen, a typical dissertation study may include 700 to 1,500 pages of field notes or interview transcripts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Upon conducting interviews, and for the purposes of completing analysis, I tried to be flexible.

Upon gathering and sorting the data into analytical files of the actual study, I developed a coding scheme (Glesne, 2006). Naming and locating my data into coding schemes is another measure to manage the data (Glesne, 2006). The coding schemes were logged in a codebook as a means of methodological organization (Glesne, 2006). These coding schemes ultimately became themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2006). According to Creswell (2009) a qualitative codebook is useful to sort and arrange information (Creswell, 2009).

Glesne (2006) notes, by the end of data collection, a researcher should expect to feel overwhelmed by the quantity of information that has amassed (Glesne, 2006). Glesne (2006) also identifies that by the very nature of qualitative research, an investigator will gather more data than she originally expected (Glesne, 2006). My overall plan to manage information was to approach it with methodical organization (Glesne, 2006). In order to manage the volume of information, I wrote memos to self, made analytical files, and developed preliminary coding schemes prior to both the pilot study and actual research project (Glesne, 2006). This way the sheer volume was less intimidating and easier to manage as a result (Glesne, 2006).

## **Data Analysis**

This study required the need to access data about African American high achieving females participating in single gender learning spaces. Data collection tools included semi-structured in depth interviews, observations, personal documents, official documents, researcher produced photographs, and found photos. Triangulation was employed to relate the data sources to offset the threats of validity (Berg, 1995).

In grounded theory, everything is data. Not only observations or interviews are considered data, but anything that helps the researcher generate concepts for the emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Open coding, also known as substantive coding, is conceptualizing on the first level of abstraction (Glaser, 1978). Written data from field notes or transcripts are conceptualized line by line. In the beginning of a study everything is coded in order to find out about the problem and how it is being resolved. The coding is often done in the margin of the field notes (Glaser, 1978). Selective coding is done after having found the core variable or what is thought to be the core, the tentative core. The core explains the behavior of the participants in resolving their main concern. The tentative core is never wrong. Essentially, it just fits with the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical codes integrate the theory by merging the fractured concepts that work together in a theory explaining the main concern of the participants. Theoretical coding means that the researcher applies a theoretical model to the data. It is important that this model is not forced beforehand, but has emerged during the comparative process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

A pilot study is a measure taken to avoid saturation during the actual study, and serves as preparation for the actual study as well. A pilot study is constructive for testing



several aspects of the proposed research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Such a study prepared me for gathering data, testing my observation and interview techniques, and further informing me about the topic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I conducted two pilot studies. The first pilot study was a requirement for the qualitative course as a doctoral student in the Rowan University Educational Leadership program. The second pilot study took place from February 2011 through April 2011 as I received a National Education Association Learning and Leadership Grant to study two single gender schools; one single gender male school in the southwest and a single gender female school in the northwest.

Data were drawn from the literature review and from interviews, observations, photos, and documents. Upon interview transcription, the typing of fieldnotes, and sorting and arranging the data, I read through the data and reflected on its overall meaning (Creswell, 2009). The data sources were analyzed searching for emergent themes. According to Toma (2006) “themes are abstract constructs that link not only expressions found in text but also expressions found in images, sounds and objects” (p. 271). Toma (2006) further identifies that themes come from an inductive approach to data and from the investigators prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon known as a priori themes (Toma, 2006). Miles and Huberman (1994) view the generation of hypotheses and drawing of conclusions as a "strengthening process" over time. So as I position myself as an educational researcher, I can show how I have worked methodically toward understanding my values and offered adequate evidence grounding my project as trustworthy scholarship.

For the purposes of this study, a priori themes emerged from the phenomenon being studied, definitions about academically resilient African Americans found in the literature, and my values (Toma, 2006). This is called theoretical sensitivity (Toma, 2006). In order to further identify a priori themes, I relied on Tesch's eight coding steps, providing useful guidance during the coding process (Creswell, 2009). Beyond identifying a priori themes, I applied several of the "scrutiny techniques" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 88). Scrutiny techniques are things to look for during the coding process (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). I used three of these techniques: repetition, subthemes, and similarities and differences. Strauss (1992) suggests looking for themes through repetition. This involves searching for words and phrases that repeat across the data sources. For my project, I searched for repetitious words and phrases during interviews and documents. I also discovered repetitious words and phrases during observation. This strategy is used to reveal meaning. Patton (1990) identifies exploring the data for subthemes or categories that link to the subject's construct of the world and meaning. Similarly, Bogdan and Biklen (1982) (as cited in Ryan & Bernard, 2003) note, "What does this remind me of?" (p. 91). These strategies as a collective improved my ability to identify and categorize themes during the onset of the coding process.

Ryan and Bernard (2003) identify "processing techniques" (p. 94). Processing techniques refer to the sorting of the information. I used the key words in context (KWIC) strategy as indicators of emergent themes and categories. Ryan and Weisner (1996) note:

Word lists and the KWIC technique draw on a simple observation: If you want to understand what people are talking about, look closely at the words they use. To generate word lists, researchers first identify all the unique

words in a text and then count the number of times each occurs. Computer programs perform this task effortlessly. (as cited in Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 96)

Creswell (2009) suggests that thoughtful consideration be placed on how the description and themes will be presented in the qualitative narrative. Creswell (2009) further contends the inclusion of a narrative passage be included in the product. I used a narrative passage to convey the findings of the analysis. Upon careful consideration of the organization of the narrative write-up, prior thought was given to the presence of negative and discrepant information (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009) notes, “Because real life is composed of different perspectives that do not always coalesce, discussing contrary information adds to the credibility of an account” (p. 192). This served as another form of validity check and trustworthiness of the data.

My write-up includes a detailed descriptive portrait (Creswell, 2009). More specifically, I used three of the suggested writing strategies identified by Creswell (2009). The three writing strategies are: intertwining quotations with my interpretations, using quotes varying in length, and using “I” and “we” in the collaborative narrative (Creswell, 2009).

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, Miles and Huberman (1994) note researchers work to become intimate with the participants. This means that the inquirer must gain the trust of the participants and ensure the accuracy of the data, also referred to as trustworthiness. In order to achieve trustworthiness, which is how others construct meaning, Toma (2006) proposes researchers approach qualitative study with a “completely objective relationship between researcher and participants” (p. 269). To ensure rigor in qualitative research, Toma (2006) identifies a parallel set of standards that fit different assumptions and

approaches related to qualitative traditions. The set of standards are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Toma, 2006). Credibility is established if participants agree with the constructions and interpretations of the researcher. This is known as truth value (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The researcher for this project attempted to establish credibility by ensuring the data be presented in its truest form. Therefore, the researcher kept a field log journal documenting assumptions and biases as a measure to attain credibility. Another measure to achieve credibility is member checking with participants as they analyze the data for accuracy, which serves as another technique of verification. Verification refers to a description of the time in the field, closeness with the participants, and thick description (Toma, 2005). In conjunction with verification, the researcher developed an ongoing audit trail. An audit trail is a logged collection of decisions the researcher makes throughout the data collection process (Toma, 2006). Third, I wrote a narrative account describing my middle school educational experiences for the purpose of sharing my story and including it as part of the collaborative narrative. To this end, the narrative account dually served as another measure of reflective journaling. Finally, peer debriefing was used as a measure to ensure trustworthiness. Creswell (2009) notes “This process involves locating a person who reviews and asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher” (p. 192). Peer debriefing enriches the validity to an account (Creswell, 2009). My peer debriefer is a professional colleague who is also a doctoral candidate.

Transferability is when the data are applicable to another setting or group (Toma, 2005). Accuracy is necessary for transferability, but does not constitute transferability, as

data are only transferable if the contextual circumstances are similar. Since there is little variability among the research participant group as they are the same age, gender, socioeconomic status, grade, and school, it is likely transferability is limited. Despite the limitations of the single gender context, there may be some transferability to like contexts – middle school African American females in single gender settings. Marshall and Rossman (1999) indicate the triangulation of data sources contribute to transferability. I triangulated interviews, observations, personal, and official documents as well as artifacts to accomplish transferability (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Lastly, as a measure of ensuring accuracy of the data, the researcher checked transcripts to ensure they did not contain obvious mistakes during transcription (Creswell, 2009). These practices during data analysis helped to illuminate the stories of the participants, which is the goal of the research project.

Dependability involves accommodating changes in the environment studied and in the research design itself (Toma, 2006). This occurs as the understanding of the researcher becomes more refined over the course of the data collection. This has a connection to similarities because of the interconnectedness of the researcher's experiences to that of the participants' linking to the research design (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). It also has a connection with flexibility because of the researcher's need to modify and adjust the approach in the field.

The last standard is confirmability. Confirmability is the concept that data can be confirmed by someone other than the researcher (Toma, 2006). Essentially, there is a continuum between bias and subjectivity that is embedded in the relationship between the researcher and participants (Toma, 2006). In order to achieve confirmability, the

researcher engages in member checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report to the participants, taking specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether they are accurate (Creswell, 2009). To achieve confirmability, I inductively analyzed data, comparing sets of data with other sets to see whether they were in different categories, and then compared categories with each other and with other instances (Toma, 2006). Within these standards are sub-standards that guide a qualitative researcher towards advancing trustworthiness and authenticity as goodness or quality criteria (Lincoln, 1995). The sub-standards are fairness, ontological and educational authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity (Toma, 2006). Fairness is balancing and including perspectives and voices of those studied (Toma, 2006). Ontological and educational authenticity and catalytic authenticity is raised awareness (Toma, 2006). Finally, catalytic authenticity and tactical authenticity is encouraged action among participants in the research and involvement of the research in training others to act (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Trustworthiness is attained as the researcher balances and includes the perspectives and voices of the participants (Toma, 2006). This truth telling is encouraged because it includes the “emotion inherent in a caring relationship...without removing it from the realm of respectable research” (Carter, 2005, p. 232). This is precisely the aim of my project. My objective is to illuminate these young women’s stories while engaging in ethical practice as a research-practitioner.

### **Researcher Bias**

Bias is a potential form of error. It speaks to invalid measurement, lack of reliability, and epistemological assumptions. In this context, bias in relationship with identity is relevant as the

researcher once was an adolescent, high achieving African American female. To this point, data could be collected, interpreted, and presented in such a way that favors results that are in line with the researcher's prejudgments, assumptions, values, and beliefs. This attunement of identity to ensure trustworthiness is important because it has a direct correlation with a false conclusion. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1993) concluded, "default identities often erase or obscure the power relations of race (p. 129). During data collection analysis, I "interrogated" my own assumptions to avoid reverting to a default identity (Leland & Harste, 2005, p. 65). Without this knowing and application, the outcome could terribly affect my data in terms of trustworthiness in turn placing the story from my point of view rather than the participants' perspective. Habermas (1981) further grounds this point, noting that conversational partners should concern themselves with understanding each other's stories rather than trying to position the story from their point of view.

From a relational view of researcher-researched interaction, I "embrace[d] a relational understanding of the roles and interactions of the researcher and the researched" (Clandinin, 2007, p. 15). Building relationships with the participants from this theoretical lens allowed me to bring my history and worldview, but still allowed me to stand in a position of objectivity. As a result of this objectivity, what I came to understand is generalizable. As I engaged in an objective role as a researcher, I distanced myself from the relationship with the researched using strategies such as member-checks, triangulation, and audit trails to assure trustworthiness and accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1984). I not only understand that there is a relationship between the participants, but also who I am and what is being researched. In this relational understanding, I recognize the importance of truly distancing myself from my knowing

and understanding to act with integrity and demonstrate trustworthiness, virtuosity, and rigor in my scholarship (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

### **Role of the Researcher**

This study is of particular interest to me because I am an African American woman who has always been high-achieving. I would like to know if there are similarities in terms of the drivers of my success that align with the participants' values. I was raised in a solidly middle class neighborhood in the D.C. Metropolitan area by a single mother. My father has never played a role in my life, much less a significant one. For this reason, I firmly believe my siblings offset his absence with their love, influence, and encouragement. While my siblings were positively influential, the significant age gap between my sister, brother, and I limited their impact. Consequently, my mother's influence was further intensified. My mother is a former educator and proud graduate of a historically black college or university. There was always a pronounced emphasis on education that was unceasing. Doing well in school was not an option but rather a requirement. As a product of a single mother and an absent father, I faced many of the same challenges as the research participants. While I was of a different socioeconomic bracket than the females under study, I was an African American child in a household led by a single mother and an absent father. The similarities of my story in contrast to the research participants may be parallel as we share backstory elements – race, gender, absent parent – but despite these odds we academically thrive. This success framework is important while uncovering barriers because it serves to reveal what causes these females to succeed that may align to my motivation for success. In this way, there may



similarities and differences that may be insightful to educators with other similar demographic populations.

Glesne (2006) identifies several roles that qualitative researchers easily assume: exploiter, reformer, advocate, and friend. An intervener or reformer attempts to correct what they judge to be wrong (Glesne, 2006). Within the framework of assumed qualitative researcher roles, an advocate “champions a cause” (Glesne, 2006, p. 136). The two researcher roles of advocate and reformer complement the project under study because there is an interconnection with educational and gender equity that further links to the purpose of the project. The researcher’s role in the context of this project is unique because I once was an African American, academically resilient, sixth grade girl. Therefore, because of my gender, race, and educational experiences, I find myself primarily functioning between these two roles.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, the methodology used in attaining information relevant to the academic success of African American 6<sup>th</sup> grade students in an urban middle school in the U.S. was discussed. In order to tell the counterstories of these young women, a clear understanding about their home life, contributors, and barriers to success is necessary. The manner in which data are collected, the theories best suited for the study, and the type of study best suited for this research project was used to examine how best to serve 6<sup>th</sup> grade African American females. As a result, a narrative strategy of inquiry was conducted because it provided the opportunity to obtain qualitative results from a sample that will further be explored and discussed in depth in chapter four.

## Chapter IV

### Findings

In this chapter I present the findings from this study about four high-achieving grade six Black females. To begin, I was surprised to find that the method of examination that I used for this study, that of narrative inquiry had encompassed the entire project. Narrative inquiry is grounded in the telling of stories or storytelling. Using this qualitative methodology, there is a turn from the general to particular experiences, a particular setting about particular people.

In this introduction I offer a reminder of the background and methodology before moving on to a discussion of the findings. I begin with brief descriptions of the four participants using pseudonyms. Following this material I explain in detail about the data analysis. I then discuss the language and cognitive data. I address the students' perceptions of their teachers, and the emergent themes with continued use of pseudonyms for the participants and the educators they mention. I then address the informants' language use and word choice before making the connection to roles and identity.

#### The Participants

**Anya Wynn.** Anya is ranked in the top three of her 6<sup>th</sup> grade class as measured by her grade point average and state proficiency examination results and lives with her mother, father, and four other siblings. She is the youngest of five and the only girl. There are two sets of twin boys in her family, one set which are 16 and the other which are 17. Her father and mother are from Haiti. Though her parents are Haitian, Anya was born in the northeastern U.S. Her mother has some college education while her father is not college educated. Anya calls home a modest apartment in a three-story brick building on

a main street in the urban city where she lives in a low-poverty neighborhood. She is considered by her teachers and friends as helpful, quiet, and humble. Additionally, Anya has maintained a 4.0 grade point average throughout her K-6 academic career.

**Aaliyah Mire.** Aaliyah is ranked in the top 10 of her class. She is also raised by her mother and father, who are both college educated. Her mother was born and raised in Jamaica and has a career in healthcare. Her father is African American and works in the telecommunications field. She has a 19 year old brother who is enrolled in a four year university. Her family has lived in the community for over 20 years. Aaliyah's teachers and friends describe her as funny, fun, talkative, and unpredictable. She enjoys swimming, gymnastics, ballet and currently plays the drums. Aaliyah would ultimately like to attend an Ivy League University.

**Asia Wright.** Asia is ranked in the top five of her 6<sup>th</sup> grade class. Like Anya and Aaliyah, Asia lives with her mother, father, and brother. Neither of her parents is college educated. Her brother is one year older and attends an adjoining school in the same middle school complex. Her parents are in the process of applying Asia to a top ranked boarding school in the U.S. She would like to attend college and pursue a career in math.

**Arden Fair.** Arden is also ranked in the top 10 of her 6th grade class. Similar to Anya, Aaliyah, and Asia, Arden lives with her mother, father, and young adult brother. Both of her parents are from Ghana and neither is college educated. Her mother is a nurse and her father is a customer service representative for a local business. She was raised in Chicago until she reached kindergarten. Arden has plans to attend college and would like to pursue a career in medicine.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Using the narrative inquiry approach, data were gathered through: (a) personal autobiographical narratives, (b) three semi-structured in-depth interviews for each participant, (c) five classroom observations for each participant which were transcribed to field notes, (d) official document review, (e) researcher produced photographs taken by the researcher during observations, and (f) artifacts. The two primary data collection procedures were interviews and observations. I conducted three interviews with each participant. The first interview was typically the longest ranging from about 45 minutes to more than an hour. The second interview was approximately 30 to 40 minutes, while the third was generally no more than 25 minutes. I also observed the participants in their single gender classroom setting. This consisted of five observations for each participant. Each observation was approximately 15 to 40 minutes for each participant. All four of the participants were in the same home-base and thus had the same schedule. During observations, I observed the girls in various classes.

During the coding process, I explored the data in search of patterns and subthemes that revealed meaning. These data then illuminated the categories and emergent themes. I am presenting my findings for the participants by theme because I am comparing and contrasting the attitudes, approaches, and strategies employed by each of the students with one another and as a participant observer with myself. Additionally, part of the purpose of this study is to find points that are held in common with one another with the aim of finding where these different experiences intersect.

The findings of the narrative inquiry study are organized into three main categories. The three categories are school environment, home life, and the perspective on self. Within these categories, the data revealed nine overarching themes (see Table 1).

Table 1.

*Categories and Supporting Themes*

School Environment	Home Life	Perspective on Self
1) Ethic of Care and Caring Educators	1) Sources of Academic Success: Parents, Extended Family and Community Members	1) Self-Respecting Children
2) Student-Centered Instruction: Project Based Learning and Experiential Learning		2) Academic Self-Efficacy 3) Motivation 4) Academic Vision
3) Active Engagement		
4) Friendship: A Sweet Learning Responsibility		

Three themes linked to the school environment include: (a) The Ethic of Care and Caring Educators, (b) Student-Centered Instruction: Project Based Learning and Experiential Learning, and (c) Active Engagement. The Ethic of Care and Caring Educators theme represents an ethical framework of care that is central in education. This theme was one of the most dominant. Student-Centered Instruction: Project Based Learning and Experiential Learning theme illustrates the importance of focusing on the needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles of students as well as emphasizes the need to engage student voice in the learning process. The Active Engagement theme describes

the students' classroom participation and their involvement in the school community as key stakeholders in their success.

In terms of the students' home life, the following one theme emerged from the data, which was Sources of Academic Success: Parents, Extended Family, and Community Members. The Sources of Academic Success: Parents, Extended Family, and Community Members theme argues for the important role parents play in their child's academic achievement. In addition, the findings highlight the benefit of having extended family members and community members as support for students' academic achievement.

Of the three categories, the Perspective on Self was one of the most dominant. I believe this was one of the most dominant categories because of the questions I asked the participants. Related to the Perspective on Self, the data revealed four emergent themes including: (a) Self-Respecting Children, (b) Academic Self-Efficacy, (c) Motivation, and (d) Academic Vision. In terms of the themes in this category, self-respecting children and self-efficacy were the leading themes, followed up with motivation and academic vision. The Self-Respecting Children theme illustrates how the four participants maintain self-respect, which thereby contributes to their skills to learn and ultimately impacts their academic success. The Academic Self-Efficacy theme refers to the participants' perception of their ability to engage and successfully complete academic tasks. The Motivation theme refers to how the participants demonstrate drive, which ultimately has a significant impact on their academic success. Finally, Academic Vision denotes the participants' ability to set their path.

I analyzed responses in all categories for language use and shifts including the use of verbal and non-verbal cues, word choice, temporal deictics, tone, as well as participants' roles and identity. With concern for verbal cues, emphasis is placed on abrupt breaks, rising intonation, falling intonation, and pauses during the individual in-depth interviews. In the discussion about language use and shifts, there is special attention given to the following personal pronouns including: *I, me, my, he, she, it, you, we, us, our, they, and them*. These personal pronouns are verbal markers that anchor the participants' positions in an encounter and create interactional organization in particular contexts. With regard to word choice and tone I draw attention to the words students use to describe their experiences as well as how they express themselves. With a turn toward temporal deictics, I include narrative accounts about my experiences connecting the speech pattern of the participants. I acknowledge we both reference particular events using words such as *this, that, here, there, now, and then* providing an organizational structure for a narrated event. During the discussion about linguistic shifts, there is analysis provided about participants' uses of a formal register versus an informal register. Much like a student would speak to a teacher whom they respect or are comfortable with, is considered a formal register. An informal register refers to a vernacular that is more colloquial in style. In the discussion about roles and identity, analysis is placed on the positions the participants assume in their academic success as well as the characteristics they exhibit as grade 6 high-achieving Black females.

The participants for this study demonstrate positive teacher perceptions and attitudes. The participants' attitudes toward their current and previous teachers indicate the teachers' positive impact which in turn affected their academic achievement. This

favorable impression was especially evident in the themes of Ethic of Care and Caring Educators and Student-Centered Instruction: Project Based Learning and Experiential Learning. The Ethic of Care and Caring Educators theme revealed students expressing time and time again the different and many ways their teachers show concern for their achievement and emotional well-being. In the Student-Centered Instruction: Project Based Learning and Experiential Learning theme, students reported an overlap of care, which resulted in the teaching methodology of the students in their care. Because of the teachers' attitudes, behaviors, and role of authority, the participants' impressions of their teachers were favorable and thus were mutual to the teachers' professionalism and commitment to the profession. The participants' perceptions of teachers are important because they provide a reference point in terms of students' work habits and behavior, response to the teacher's role of authority and an overall baseline regarding how they perform.

The data used in this chapter include indicators of the data type. For example, an individual in-depth interview is represented as (III). Other abbreviations include (PAN) which signifies data collected from personal autobiographical narratives and (FN) which denotes transcribed field notes retrieved from observations. Official documents were used to determine the participants' eligibility to take part in the study while photos and other artifacts were used as supplemental data. When looking at how the participants' speech yielded clues to their views of themselves, their school, and their teachers, I looked at the narrated events. For example, participants' use of pronouns can be helpful in understanding their position with regard to the event; "I" can indicate that the participant plays a central role. The term "like" is a linguistic switch or code switch. It is evident



because of a participant's language shifter "like," that she has changed from a formal register to an informal register, potentially demonstrating more comfort and ease with the researcher. I present the findings organized by theme.

### **School Environment**

**Ethic of care and caring educators.** Ethic of Care and Caring Educators was one of the dominant themes manifested across the data sources. All four of the participants spoke in detail about how teachers, past and current, assist them in the learning process. One student referred to her favorite teacher and how that teacher triggered her love of reading. The other students described how teachers engaged them in project based learning, offering tremendous support during their learning experiences. The data sources show that these adolescents' teachers created classroom environments that feel warm but also encourage students to behave in socially responsible ways where the emphasis was on learning.

The Ethic of Care in juxtaposition with Caring Educators was a dominant theme as evidenced in the data. As the research participants' narratives began to unfold, all four of the young girls revealed a commonality of care and their perceptions about how a teacher demonstrates care for their academic success and overall well-being. These viewpoints are highlighted in the narrative passages that follow and they also provide an instructive backdrop in terms of how essential the ethic of care truly is in education. The following brief excerpts from individual participant narratives illuminate this pattern across the data sources.

In the first interview Anya states:

Anya: I think I remember one time when I didn't understand something she would tell me about it and then she would tell me a story to help me figure it out. I don't

remember the story but it was related to it. She would use other subjects to help you in math. Like Social Studies sometimes she would tell you a little history, but then it's mathematical at the same time. (III)

In the above passage, the participant uses "I" referring to herself as the central figure. In the illustration, she speaks in past tense with terms like "I didn't" and "she would." These language shifts illustrate the kinds of interactionally relevant cues that provide a footing (Goffman, 1979) noting that the student places herself at the center of the teachers' caring.

In her personal autobiographical narrative, Anya says:

At school, some people noticed I was bright and they would tell my mother. She has previously attempted to have me removed from Pre-K and kindergarten, but the now retired principal did not help me until I approached her assistant about a year later, who is currently the principal of that school. Thanks to this wonderful person, I was tested for two weeks in Ms. Ada's first grade GT class before the transition took place on November 1, 2006. I remember my kindergarten teacher Ms. Azra received a call from the office during class. When she hang up, she said, Anya, tomorrow you are going to be in first grade in Ms. Ada's class. (PAN)

In the above excerpt, the participant is clearly grateful about the educator who went to great lengths to have her tested out of kindergarten and into first grade. It is obvious the participant believes a caring educator like the one she described, is persistent. While the participant expressed her gratitude about the caring educator, the data also highlighted a specific characteristic of this student, which is confidence when she stated, "At school, some people noticed I was bright and they would tell my mother." It is also important to note Anya's already existing sense of self, which other people "notice" and "realize" as evidenced in the passages above. In addition, the participant uses very formal speech as she discusses her academic career. In the passage above, there is the use of transitional words, more sophisticated vocabulary and the temporal deictic "now" which provides interactional significance of the event.

While Anya expresses her idea about a caring educator as one who is persistent, she also speaks about being more technologically advanced. She explains it this way:

Anya: The teachers are good, but sometimes they may forget things. They may have been here for a long time and that causes them to forget a lot of things because they are getting older. I think teachers should be around middle aged or younger than middle aged because they'll understand that kids like us learn in a specific way like technology and all of the internet. (III)

Here Anya is saying she is more technologically advanced and the teacher's limited skill sets do not maximize her learning. This has much to do with the teacher's age and lack of technological knowledge. It is also important to acknowledge that this caretaking is mutual. The students also take care of their teachers. In the next two passages, Aaliyah explains that a caring teacher demonstrates flexibility.

CT: Tell me a little more about a teacher that stands out for you.

Aaliyah: Well Ms. Archer because Ms. Archer and Ms. Aster because if we do good, then they'll reward us, and if we need help they'll help us. And if we need to go back and fix something, then they'll let us go back and fix it. (III)

Aaliyah further mentions:

Ms. Avis helps me because if I don't know about anything in science, I can go up to her and ask her. Then she'll show me where in the book it is and explain it. Then she'll point it out and tell us to write it down in our notes. (III)

Aaliyah expresses in the above excerpt that her teacher provided guided practice; a demonstration of care. Both Anya and Aaliyah took a lead role in their academic program as they sought assistance from their teachers. The ethic of care was evident from the teacher as an effect of the positions they assume as students in their academic success. It is important to draw the distinction of care Aaliyah highlights in the above example and the one that follows. In the passage above, Aaliyah discussed care seen in the

academic modeling whereas in the following excerpt, Aaliyah speaks about care in personal relations.

Aaliyah then says:

She was helpful and in class she was fun. Then if we had any personal problems at home, she would call it heart to heart conversations. (III)

In the above passage, Aaliyah characterizes a caring teacher as one who listens, is helpful, emotionally available and whose concern goes beyond school boundaries to the home, as she asserted the teacher would extend support if students were experiencing issues at home.

While one may not think a student would couple discipline as a demonstration of care, Aaliyah spoke candidly about discipline in relation to the ethic of care during two different interviews. This passage about discipline is important because it illuminates how the student perceives discipline in tandem with care. Below, Aaliyah illustrated how her teacher discussed and implemented effective classroom management practices. She says:

Aaliyah: In fourth grade, that's the grade that I had my favorite teacher and she wouldn't like yell at us. She would have some students that she would yell at because they were misbehaving. So then she would make them go and sit at the round table and do their work, instead of having to sit with everybody else. Whenever she told the student that was misbehaving to go to the office and they didn't want to go, she would call the security guard. They would have to go because they wouldn't go and they were misbehaving and messing with other students. (III)

While discipline may be viewed by some students' as a teacher's method of exercising authority and power wielding, Aaliyah saw discipline as a sign of caring. Aaliyah and Asia share this belief whereas the other two participants did not mention discipline. Asia, on the other hand, asserts that a caring teacher is one who is helpful but also makes learning enjoyable.

Asia: I had Ms. Adams as my teacher in kindergarten and Ms. Ali as the teacher's assistant. They made me like school. They helped me enjoy learning. They did that by complimenting me and making things fun especially cleaning up. Whenever I would make a mistake they would say accidents happen. (PAN)

Asia stated, "They made me like school." The word "made" is an interesting word choice as the participant places increased emphasis on the teachers' diligence in relation to her academic success. The personal pronoun "they" is uttered four times referring to her former teacher and the teacher's assistant as she uncovers the interactional position of her role.

In the following example, Asia narrates the teacher's public disapproval of other students' behavior excluding the misbehaving students from the larger well-behaved group. The participant uses language shifters such as "them" and "you" to distinguish misbehaving students from well-behaved students. In this way, Asia creates interactional organization about a particular context. There is also a demonstration of care, as the teacher did not want the group of students who want to learn to be influenced or distracted by the other group.

Asia: Maybe one time when some of the kids were acting up because it was mixed genders so some of the boys were acting up. She was talking about how you shouldn't act like them when they were out of the class. She was talking about how you shouldn't act like them and that they just want attention and they want people to laugh at them so just pay them no mind. (III)

Whereas Asia expressed her teacher showed care by separating misbehaving students from well-behaved students, in the passage below, Arden describes a memory about her mentor and teacher who demonstrated the ethic of care by being helpful as well. The role of teacher as mentor is a continuing one and is important as teacher mentors provide guidance, motivation, emotional support, and role modeling for students.

She states:

Arden: Ms. Anar was my mentor. Well, Ms. Anar, because like um she knew I loved reading. So sometimes she would like bring me old books that her daughter used to read. Ms. Aja because um she used to help me and my mom with umm...like my mom, before she was at her nursing job, she was at another job and like the time was different. So she couldn't pick me up at the bus stop. So like Ms. Aja would like wait for me like an hour before my mom could come pick me up. (III)

When Arden expresses how her teacher and mentor exhibited care she does so with the use of patterns of an informal register. Pronouns such as “I,” “she,” “her,” “my,” and “me” are used identifying the three persons in the account which are the participant, her mother, and her former teacher. The student also employed an informal register with “um” and “like.” On the one hand, Arden is describing an out-of-school, informal event that does not warrant academic speech. On the other hand, this speech could signify a growing familiarity with the researcher during the interview process or it could be how the participant normally speaks. Like Arden, I have a memory about a former teacher who was helpful much in the same way. I was raised by my mother, a college graduate in a single parent home in a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C. My childhood was comfortable and I experienced all that a safe home environment, family, friends, church, family, and good schools could offer. However, because my mother was a single parent, she worked long hours and made the daily commute to work, rarely mentioning the awful traffic. Sometimes she would be a little late picking me up from school because of these reasons. As a result, I vividly remember my kindergarten teacher Mrs. Hernandez waiting with me on several occasions until my mom showed up. These events are important to acknowledge because both of our teachers extended themselves displaying the ethic of care waiting with us. This demonstration of care was outside of their job description and yet the teachers did it anyway.

The caring that encompasses mentoring and protection of the learning spaces extends to the participants' academic performance. In the following excerpt, Arden illustrates a memory about her third grade teacher who displayed care by way of her rigorous and challenging curriculum. Arden explains:

Third grade was a little harder in the math but nevertheless I kept my grades an A. By now I had a lot of trophies which came from my teacher Ms. Aja. My grades were fine but now I could say math was my favorite and explain why. (PAN)

All four participants articulated an increased emphasis on the ethic of care in concurrence with caring educators throughout their narratives. The data reveal this theme, indicating that these students build upon their success because of caring educators. It is clear as evidenced in the data, participants are provided with opportunities to maintain appropriate relationships with other children and adults, enhance their well-being, and provide them with the opportunity to learn, practice, and demonstrate new behaviors and patterns of healthy interaction.

**Student-centered instruction: Project based learning and experiential learning.** The ethic of care has a direct relation to student-centered instruction. In a student-centered classroom, students are fully engaged in the learning process and teachers customize instructional content to specific learning needs. Participants' perspectives on student-centered instruction were voiced as they spoke about their academic experiences. Project Based Learning and Experiential Learning are inquiry based, discovery oriented, and student-centered instructional methods that address students' needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles. In all, the participants revealed their gendered and cultural academic experiences linking student-centered instruction as an overarching theme with intersecting elements of project based learning and

experiential learning. In the following passages, one of the participants explained how she engaged in student-centered instruction. When I said, “You mentioned Ms. Ada stands out for you. Tell me a little more about why she stands out for you,” Anya responded, “Ms. Ada, she was the first teacher to introduce me to public speaking because we performed a play about the movie *Happy Feet*. She recorded every show that I was part of, and she gave me a CD” (III).

In the above excerpt, Anya shared an experience in which her teacher implemented student-centered instruction. It is important to note in this example the participant’s teacher recorded every one of her shows and then provided her with a CD “gift” of her shows. By doing this caring act, her teacher placed a mirror on Anya potentially causing her to recognize her talent and ability. Aaliyah explains later about one of her teachers providing her with a “gift” as well.

Anya also talked about an assignment in which the class was directed to create a project for Invention Convention. (Invention Convention is a district cross content initiative through which elementary students collaboratively create a project connecting science, technology, engineering, and math concepts).

Anya: We had to create something new and make sure it wasn’t actually created in the real world. I created an edible crayon. My first idea, until I figured out that it was actually invented by using a website that the teacher told us. I can’t remember it but it ended with a .gov. We had a large packet to do that walked us through the steps. In the beginning we wrote down a bunch of ideas and started combining things. There were different ways to create your invention. One way was by combination or solve a problem in life or something like that. And then we had to draw out our plan of the idea, and then we had to create it. Wait before we created it we had to search to see if it’s already invented and then we did the real idea. Then if we were chosen as the best we had to create a poster board. (III)

This participant again highlights the characteristic of student-centered instruction, illustrating how she was encouraged to direct her own learning, but also underscoring



how the learning experience was cooperative and collaborative. In the following two passages, Aaliyah describes how her teacher bridged cultural differences through effective interaction.

Aaliyah: In third grade, my third grade teacher, she was Irish so on St. Patrick's Day she brought in like an Irish cake and it was really good. She shared it with the whole class. She would teach us about how the Irish would...(student pauses) like a dance step they did on St. Patrick's day and we would wear green things to school. The room would be decorated in green. (III)

In the above example, the participant used two verbal cues including rising intonation and pausing. As she described the "cake being really good" her voice level slightly elevated indicating her delight as she recalled the event. When the participant paused, this was a signal to the researcher she had to stop and reflect to accurately capture the experience and its meaning. Another important pattern was the participant receiving cake as a kind of "gift." This cultural exchange between the participant and her former teacher is meaningful in terms of analysis because conversation as a method in narrative inquiry is critically important.

In another interview the same student discusses an experiential learning event.

She says:

Aaliyah: In fifth grade we had our graduation and our school play that was about bullying. Then my legal studies teacher, she made us go to the juvenile detention center because some students they were like bullying other students. So then we had to stay there for that day and we learned about what they did there. I was a little scared because like in the lunchroom, well we didn't go in the lunchroom, but they had an upstairs lunchroom. Then we saw some kids coming to the door, but the door was locked, but it was still kind of scary. They said in the juvenile detention center when there is a fight that they can't break it up until another security guard comes because they don't want anybody else to jump in. (III)

In the above example, the participant describes a learning experience that draws upon culturally mediated instruction. This tenet incorporates and integrates diverse ways

of knowing and understanding information. While the teacher recognized a bullying issue in the classroom, she used a student-centered technique to potentially decrease the number of occurrences of unacceptable behavior from students by engaging them in a field trip. However, there is another argument to this finding. This kind of trip contains an implied threat because of fear-based motivation. The teacher suggests if students behave badly, the outcome could be negative.

Similarly, Asia told of a project based learning experience when students took responsibility for their own learning and engaged in active learning. For a social studies project, Asia and her classmates were asked to complete two assignments as culminating activities to the Ming Dynasty period of the Imperial Era in Chinese history.

Asia: We had to pick two projects to do and I picked making a kite and decorating a vase. We had to decorate the kite and it had to be like Yen and Yang, it had to be opposites. Well it didn't really have the Yen and Yang symbol, but it was opposite of colors. We had to pick two of maybe four. You had to color a vase but she [the teacher] said to think outside of the box, so me and my dad actually decorated the vase. (III)

In the above example, the data revealed the teacher was specific in what she expected the students to know and be able to do upon project completion. In this way, the teacher communicated high expectations, which has a correlation to student-centered instruction. High expectations also have a connection to family involvement. As evidenced in the following category, when families are involved in a child's education, they earn higher grades, perform better on tests, attend school regularly, and demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviors about learning. Similar to Asia, I recall a project based learning experience. My first grade teacher, Mrs. Allen, was a well-dressed, articulate middle-aged African American woman. In early January of my first grade year, I remember Mrs. Allen informing our ethnically diverse class of first graders that we

were going to act out a play for Black History Month. While I do not remember my role in the play, nor the text that supported the play, which I was required to read, I do remember the experience. I remember my excitement as well as the excitement of my classmates on the day of the play. I remember the props and my costume, which were both time period appropriate. It is the richness of this experience as a project based learning activity that was so meaningful. Here I use a formal register as I discuss the event, whereas Asia used more of an informal register. As a lens is turned on language, it is important to illuminate the individuality and sophistication of my speech. This is the linguistic style of a person who feels accomplished.

In the following example, I observed Asia as she continued to work on her project. It was evident as the data revealed that a standard of high expectations had been communicated.

Field Note Observation (FN): Students were engaged including Asia in the project based learning (PBL) activity about the Chinese Dynasty. There was an elderly, veteran teacher leading the class. Students appeared to be highly engaged, excited and motivated to complete and showcase their project product deliverable as this was the overarching motivation. Asia interacted with a few of the girls in her class, but mainly she worked collaboratively with a few of the same girls she normally worked with. During this 30 minute observation, Asia and her classmates engaged in the PBL activity with the freedom and creative juices appearing to be flowing unrestrained through them. They worked well independently and collaboratively in a setting that was uninhibited in creativity.

The above excerpt illuminates this particular teacher has created an environment where there is mutual respect and believes in students' capabilities to successfully complete the task. Below, Arden discusses how much of her fifth grade was focused on student-centered instruction.

Arden: Fifth grade was my best math year. My teacher was the best. He did different types of math and science experiments. My mom was more concerned about fundraisers

this year. Also my reading teacher was amazing because she had different selections of books to read. My math fair project went to the state. Also this year in Quest we did robotics. (PAN)

In the passage above, Arden uses the personal pronouns “my” and “he” as well as the shifter “this” for the purpose of interactional organization. It is also important to note the participant uses the term “different” to signal that variety is important in terms of her achievement and overall learning outcome.

As these data indicate, student-centered instruction was a key theme cutting across all of the narrative accounts. This emergent theme lies beneath the participants’ responses with a concentration on how they build their success.

**Active engagement.** In order to have students commit to active engagement they must realize that educators care and are focused on their needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles. The participants revealed the school is in fact a caring place as evidenced in educators instructional methods, academic modeling, and cross content collaboration. Based primarily on the observations, but also evident in the autobiographical narratives and interviews, all four participants actively engage in the learning process. There was speech evidence and physical movement in the classroom as the four girls were immersed in math, science, social studies, and language arts lessons. The data also showed they had high participation in academic programs such as the after-school and Saturday program, as well as extracurricular programs. These data further shed insight acknowledging there is real power in lesson plan and unit design, but that there is also power in the learning design territory. In terms of learning design, there was observable evidence in managerial competence and evidence of one or more of the teaching and learning modalities

including project-based learning, peer tutoring, technology-aided teaching, and cooperative learning, as well as data that supports the role comfort plays in active engagement.

The following excerpts highlight the participants' active engagement while underscoring their role as teacher helpers and the importance of the classroom learning design in relation to active engagement. For example, Asia noticed that there were “motivational posters like posters in Mr. Alex’s room. Yeah there was a rug in the back and a Smart Board and two boards in the front” (III). As noted earlier in the chapter, the students occasionally stepped in to help teachers with technology. Anya explained she was more technologically advanced than the teacher who was not so knowledgeable about technology, explaining how it was still ultimately used in the classroom as technology-aided instruction.

The passage below illustrates the technological resources Anya had in her previous grade, which had an effect on her engagement. However, the excerpt also highlights the teacher’s instructional style as a challenge. Noting that “fifth grade was way better than” fourth grade, Anya remarks on the effect of the availability of technology on both the students and the teacher:

Anya: The school had I-pods for the classroom. We had brand new laptops for the classroom. We had a Smart Board. We had one I-pad for each fifth grade classroom. And we had a Smart Board and my table, it was four of us, we all knew a lot about technology. So we helped the teacher because she was more old-fashioned. The teacher was still kind of use to writing on a chalkboard sometimes. (III)

In her narrative account above, Anya describes the many technology resources in use during her fifth grade year. The participant also reveals the teacher’s teaching style as a challenge, indicating that she and her classmates assisted the teacher with technology-

aided instruction to enrich the learning experience. While this challenge existed, the participant found a solution to the problem, which was assisting her teacher. This initiative reveals Anya's leadership role and the characteristics she possesses that cause her to be academically successful. Based on the data, I further believe the participant felt empowered by helping her teacher in this way. There is mutual caring illustrated in this example.

Whereas Anya said her former teacher was more "old-fashioned," Arden illuminates that one of her current teachers infuses technology into her academic program.

Arden: We have a Smart Board and computers and stuff like that. Um yeah, like the Smart Board, we do work on it and the teachers allow us to like write on it. That makes learning easier. Ms. Anisa, she used the Smart Board and we could answer questions and write on the Smart Board. (III)

Both students showed an awareness of the space in which they learned, and Arden links the space to issues of learning.

In the excerpt above, Arden describes how she and her other classmates used technology for skill development, which as she said, makes the learning process more comfortable. Anya also uses an informal register with words such as "um yeah," and "like" to describe the occurrences in the classroom. In the passage below, Anya describes the significance of comfort in tandem with the learning design territory in one of her previous classrooms, noting its couch and teddy bears that students could:

lay down on and get comfortable with when we had silent reading. So we all had fun laying down on pillows. And she had a little, not real fireplace, but it looked more like a fireplace. It was comfortable. The room always stayed a little warm and in the summer it got too hot so we opened the windows. (III)

This illustration revealed the teacher's care, which caused her to create a comfortable classroom environment. As a result, students were actively engaged. It is important to note Anya's flexibility and ability to thrive in two very different kinds of spaces.

The above data clearly uncover the teacher's creation of a comfortable and effective classroom environment where learning is the focus causing Anya to actively engage in the learning process. The following passage illustrates how the same student engaged in learning beyond the classroom as evidenced in her disciplined practice.

Anya: Since fifth graders were the only students allowed to become president of the student body, I became a presidential candidate for student council. I won overwhelmingly and I was actively involved in school activities as well as in the district's events. (PAN)

Here Anya expresses her involvement and achievement in the district spelling bee. However, she also articulates her victory as an elected officer and ultimate servant leadership as student council president. While the meaning is important, the language use in this excerpt is most significant. The participant used the personal pronoun "I" five times in the passage informing the listener about her belief in herself. Her language use provided the researcher with clarity and insight about the interactional dynamic and significance of the event as the participant placed herself as the most important part in the reference. She also used the temporal deictic "that" when she referenced "that school," framing the context as one of her former learning institutions. In addition, the participant said, "I knew it was my last year in that school to shine." Drawing attention to the term "shine," it is clear the student has a self-concept of success and subscribes to success. Moreover, Anya made use of the term "overwhelmingly" when she said "I won overwhelmingly." This revealed the participant rejects failure. Overall, as evidenced in

the passage above, Anya spoke about her active involvement in school activities while using very adult language.

Anya and I actively engage in the learning process because our values are congruent with our actions. We actually do what we say we are going to do. As such, we share a similar sixth grade experience. In the sixth grade, I auditioned for the school choir. Ms. Nicholson was the chorus teacher. I remember her because she was olive in skin-tone and always wore bright pink or red lipstick and a raven colored curly wig. Nonetheless, I auditioned and became a choir member. There were about 20-25 members in the group. The choir ultimately became the pride of the elementary school and over the Christmas holiday of that year, we were invited to sing at the Kennedy Center in D.C. My active engagement in school activities reveals that this was also a contributing factor in my academic success.

As evidenced in the data, high motivation and active engagement in learning have a relation to student success. The findings show that because the participants' teachers demonstrate the ethic of care, this thereby influences student motivation. Because of this reason, the participants actively engage in the learning process.

**Friendship: A sweet responsibility.** Friendship was another overarching theme. The data revealed that friendship was in the form of an outstretched hand, strong encouragement, and a spiritual inspiration that comes from discovering that another person truly believes in you. The findings illustrate the four participants banded together with other high-achieving middle school females, thereby having an impact on one another's academic achievement. The students assisted their classmates and friends in attaining skill proficiency. Thus the participants not only deeply engaged in their own



academic success by taking full ownership of learning activities while displaying high levels of energy, they also deeply engaged with their classmates and friends to ensure their achievement as well. The meaning of “we” is emphasized in the findings and underscores the critical role of mentor the participants assume in their friends’ success.

The participants gained conceptual knowledge as a result of interactions with their classmates. For example, Anya noted that they had “helped [her] with some technological things” when on a class robotics project in fifth grade. My field notes below indicate the important leadership role these students play in the classroom.

Anya and her classmate continued to work on the board and another student came up to offer assistance. Anya and her classmate engaged in small talk until another student came up to Anya asking for help. The student showed Anya the question she was having trouble with and Anya went on to explain and clarify in a few short seconds. After this quick explanation, the student who needed clarity and guidance nodded her head and then sat down. Anya and the other helper completed the task and the bell rang shortly thereafter. (FN)

The above data illustrate the role of the participant and how she both is helped by and serves as an informal mentor to other students. The child who asked for assistance knew there was a high probability the participant could bring clarity to her about the concept. Thus Anya was asked and shortly thereafter the other student gained understanding. This brings the participant’s leadership role to the forefront because it reveals how she functions in a central classroom role. In the passage that follows, Aaliyah, expresses how her circle of high-achieving friends encourages one another to complete tasks.

Aaliyah: Yes because we’re always helping each other out if we have any problems or anything. If somebody doesn’t want to do their homework, we can help them and tell them, well you should do your homework, if you don’t that’s going to affect your grades. (III)

We share the belief that friends should help one another. Tesi and Rebecca, my high-achieving friends in the third, fourth, and fifth grades encouraged me to complete assignments as well as assisted me when I needed help. In the following description, the participant describes how another one of her high-achieving friends encourages her to refocus.

Asia: If I'm in the group with Alarice and all she's doing is working and then I get distracted and go off to doing something else. She would be like, "Asia, come on we have to do this work before tomorrow." (III)

Arden echoed the same sentiment about helping her friend Alena for the 25 Book Campaign. The 25 Book Campaign is a reading program with an aim of encouraging students to read at least 25 books during a school year.

Arden: After I did 100 [books for the 25 Book Campaign] and I still did some more, I would help her [Alena]. If I had any extra response sheets I would give it to her. I would help her summarize the story better. (III)

Arden said she "helped" her friend achieve the goal of reading 25 books. The use of the term "help" is an indication of the participant's role and commitment to her friend. This is important because it is a testament to the participant's character as well as the value she places on friendship.

The above data suggest friendship has a significant influence on the academic success of high-achieving Black middle school females because of their exposure to positive peer influences. This finding was supported by the literature. These friendships seem to benefit the participants, causing them to deeply engage or re-engage as one participant expressed in the learning process. In all, the four participants positively demonstrated deep active engagement in the learning process, which transcends grades and achievement scores. Each of the participants revealed how they encourage, support,

and assist their friends to achieve academic success as illustrated in the language use and word choice. Not only do they use personal pronouns for the purpose of interactional organization, but the word "help" is a running thread through many of their narratives. This finding suggests that the participants not only help themselves by engaging in the learning process for the purposes of achievement, but they do the same for their classmates and friends so they will accomplish their goals as well. The data also reveal a variety of instructional practices employed, emphasizing lesson and unit plan designs that illuminate the importance of student-centered instruction. Likewise, the data uncover the importance of the learning design territory, which ultimately impacts students' construction of knowledge and thereby active engagement.

## **Home Life**

**Sources of academic success: Parents, extended family and community members.** All four participants described parents being sources of academic success. This theme was dominant and primarily evident in the in-depth interviews and it was also clear in the autobiographical narratives. All four provided in-depth explanations about parental involvement in their academic journey, drawing connections to their parents' own educational experiences and academic dreams; some of which have yet to materialize. As a result of their parents valuing education, these students spoke candidly about their goals to pursue higher education and career interests. Additionally, all four participants had parents who were highly involved in their academic program. One student's mother was instrumental in her advancing through a grade as she was tested out to grade one. Other accounts revealed parents involved in homework practice, cultural activity involvement, and academic program participation. What is interesting is that all

of the four participants revealed they lived in a two-parent household where both parents are active in their academic life. The following excerpt encapsulates this key theme, beginning with data drawn from a personal autobiographical narrative and continues with data obtained from the interviews. Here Anya explains the influence of family background and expectations.

Anya: In life, there are many goals that I have yet to accomplish. I have a lot of dreams. One of which is to pursue an education in the field of mathematics. My parents have always taught me that getting an education is the first priority to a better future. (PAN)

Anya describes her parents instilling the value of education and thereby is a source of motivation. Like Anya, my mother consistently instilled in me the value of education. The importance of education was a seed planted early on in my formative years. Between the ages of 7 and 13, I distinctly recall sitting in the kitchen on Saturday afternoons while my mother washed and pressed my hair. She engaged me in discussions about college and career interests, state universities as well as Ivy League colleges, encouraging me to continue to do well in school. It was understood I would attend college, and knowing this, I realized my academic performance was critical to my attainment of this goal. We are similar in this way. Though my grades were evidence of my effort put forth on respective assignments, I was quite talkative as an elementary student. I would often receive a comment on my report card that indicated this. For the purposes of minimizing academic distraction, my mom would build relationships with the teachers to assist me with goal attainment, adherence to classroom policies, and my personal development. The following excerpts illuminate high parental involvement in their child's academic program. The data also reveal important discussions parents have had with their children about the value of education. This in turn results in their parents

serving as transmitters of academic success. The following excerpt further illustrates the participant's mother's active role, specifically her role in advancing Anya through kindergarten to the first grade.

Anya: Yeah I went to pre-k. I attended kindergarten but my mom wanted me to skip because I knew a lot more than I should have known. So they had to test me and do many things. They made me read a bunch of books and do a lot of math and social studies. And then at the eighth period of every day, I was sitting with first graders to do math and reading. But in November 1st I was just placed there. (III)

Here Anya recognized the important role her mother played in her advancement to the first grade, acknowledging the process of testing out of kindergarten as well as the short period of time she spent there. The passages below uncover high parental involvement among the other three participants as evidenced during the interviews. There are several examples of this theme provided below for each participant, as was the case for Anya. For example, Aaliyah mentioned that her parents "always ask me if I have homework and if I do then I have to finish it within an hour and then they check it" (III). She further states how her parents discuss college with her.

Aaliyah: Well because my parents are always talking about those because they say they are big colleges [Ivy League Universities] and they have the best education. (III)

Aaliyah described her parents' involvement devoting time to practice skills, process skills, and for the purpose of knowledge application. In the following excerpts, Asia describes her parents' contribution to her learning as well as their communicated standard of academic success.

Asia: Like they [her parents] would read a book to us [brother and participant] and then we would try to figure out what the sentence meant and what it was saying. Like we would try to read it. Yes. Or like sometimes they would let us read it and we would. (III)

In the above passage Asia exercises many personal pronouns including “they,” “us,” “we,” and “it.” These pronouns are verbal cues informing the listener that she was a party in the reference along with her brother, mother, and father. In this context the participant is clear to uncover her interactional position or role as well as her parents’ involvement, which underscores how she builds success. She also describes an incident where her father expressed disappointment because of her brother’s report card grades.

Asia: When I got all A’s this quarter; my brother’s report card came at the same time. My brother had all B’s, and he [her father] kind of got mad at Avery. He had B’s for a while and Avery was kind of trying to bring it up, like bring his grade up, but my dad was still mad. She [her mother] knew that he could do better; she knew he was really trying. I think she had a different perspective. (III)

Here Asia explains a time that clearly had an influence on her. From this illustration it is evident her parents hold the same standard of excellence and expectation for her as they do for her brother. The following data highlight the fourth participant’s parental involvement illustrated in two excerpts. Like Aaliyah above, Arden’s parents wanted her to see her future in college. Even by third grade she reported that her “dad was very strict and he like used to tell me to make honor roll or distinguished honor roll because he knows it’s hard to get into college and he wants me to be successful” (III).

Like Anya, Arden’s parents are also from another country. Their home country is located in West Africa, bordered by the Ivory Coast. Below, Arden’s father wanted to see good report card grades but did not mention college explicitly:

Arden: He [her father] tells me that he doesn’t want to see any F’s on my report card. It’s not like it’s really a long conversation. He just mainly from time to time tells me to do well in school. (III)

Arden describes academic exchanges between her father and her that clearly had an impact on her academic goal attainment. At such an early age, one can infer that

Arden's father's strict academic policies have made a marked impression on her. Perhaps he is aware of the challenges in terms of college entrance because of his own experiences. During an interview, Arden expressed how her brother engages her in discussion about her academic plans.

Arden: Well, I guess my family. Well like, my brother, he's going to medical school. So like he wants me to be successful so that when I grow older, if being a doctor is my passion, then I'll be able to go to medical school too.

This bit of data reveals when parents and siblings are supportive, children not only succeed, but may also stand out. Standing out as a high-achiever may be a troubling issue for some students. Standing out indicates confidence and individuality. Though Asia spoke about a disadvantage of standing out in the following passage, she is not swayed by the majority to conform. She says:

Asia: Well there kind of is because if you stand out, maybe more people will dislike you and more people will try to fight you I guess or try to put you down. I think that there is a disadvantage because when people judge you, they have an urge to be higher than you so they want to put you down. That would sort of lead to bullying. (III)

In the above narrative account, the participant articulates the drawback of isolation due to her academic success. She then explains why standing out is a disadvantage, attributing subjugation as the source. Asia is insightful in this interaction and her tone is interesting. As she opens the interaction, there is rising intonation as she thinks aloud about her belief. She then levels off in tone. As she continues, there is an initial falling intonation, but becomes more monotone. Her academic performance is a social obstacle, thus affecting her academic identity. While it is clear this participant's high-achieving peers are supportive, her school-mates do not only invalidate her, but could ostracize her because of high achievement. While her parents are supportive and

involved, there must be intrinsic characteristics and other persons who are also supportive, giving her a sense of balance.

The results from the data indicate a significant relationship between parental involvement, parent support, and the connection to academic achievement. The clear results of parental involvement as evidenced in the data include positive behavior and student achievement. The data also show when a child's home life supports learning, this is more important than socioeconomic status, education level, or ethnic background.

While the data proved that the participants' parents and siblings were highly and actively involved, the data also showed evidence of the influence of extended family members and community members as transmitters of success. The following are illustrations of extended family members and community members, including those from the church congregation as sources of academic support.

Anya: I don't really talk to my extended family but my grandmother always encourages me. (III)

While Anya does not engage with her grandmother often about her academics, below, Aaliyah explains she often speaks with her cousin about academic performance.

Aaliyah: Mm Hmm, yes, I have a lot of little cousins and we're always telling each other that we should do really good.

In the passage above, the informant uses an informal register as evidenced in her response "mm hmm." This could again be her growing familiarity with me, the researcher. In addition, DC explains the support of her church "family" in terms of her academic achievement.

Aaliyah: Yes because whenever we get a report card, we can bring it to church and show members. (III)



In another interview Aaliyah again expresses the support of a particular church member saying: “She [Ms. Aziz] says that we should do our best, try and get straight A’s so we can get into a good college and get the best job” (III).

We share this experience. I remember Pastor Harris, my childhood Baptist church pastor and a younger Black couple by the name of David and Robin encouraging and applauding my academic achievement. At the 11 a.m. service, I recall when Pastor Harris would recognize all of the students who received all A’s or mostly A’s on their report card. I received this honor in the fifth and sixth grades. As a result, the young couple David and Robin invited my mom and me over for a celebration dinner in my honor during my fifth grade year. Asia echoes the same sentiment as Aaliyah, describing how two adolescent church members assist her with skill mastery.

Asia: If I say I’m struggling in a certain subject like science, then they’ll [Anne and Amir] help me. (III)

All four of the participants expressed the influence of immediate family members, extended family members, and community members in how they are expected to succeed in school. For the participants, family and community members were a motivating force in their academic achievement. This was one of the most significant causes of these students’ academic achievement as evidenced. The data reveal two important factors for this overarching theme: 1) all four participants are products of a two-parent household, and 2) whether their parents were college educated or academically successful, they all have high expectations of their children.

### **Perspective on Self**

**Self-respecting children.** As stated above, the themes in the category Perspective on Self were one of the most dominant. The findings indicate that the four participants

display characteristics that are sources of their academic achievement. Moreover, the participants under study epitomized a deep self-respect that was manifested across the data sources. As evidenced particularly in the interviews, the students displayed this trait, which was profoundly insightful. As the four participants engaged in the learning process, their self-respect seemed to have an obvious influence on their behavior, judgment, and self-esteem. The data revealed a clear connection between the theme of Self-Respecting Children and their self-concept in relation to their academic identity. Socializing factors such as peers, parents, and the teacher's influence contributed to the development of a positive self-concept. This positive self-concept or self-image then results in their evident behaviors of self-respecting children. I will begin with two examples from Anya as she illuminates this theme during individual in-depth interviews and continue with excerpts from the other three participants. Anya said, for example, "If you're happy about yourself, if you respect yourself, if you know that you can do something and you're into it, then you can be successful by being happy and just being confident" (III).

In the above passage, the word choice and intonation are striking. Anya uses the personal pronoun "you" four times and "you're" twice, perhaps indicating a reluctance to claim it for herself. As Anya narrated the event, there was a consistent and steady intonation as she approached the next thought. With terms such as "happy," "respect," and "confident," it is clear she receives real support in her development toward womanhood. Her word choice is most notable because it suggests she is forward-thinking, intuitive, and self-knowledgeable. However her language use also implies that she seems to be very aware of her purpose and motivation as she follows her inner

compass. That motivation helps her to assert her exclusion from conflict, stating, “I don’t want to be a part of he said, she said, or I want to fight you, do you want to fight me? I just want to do what I have to do in school and what my parents tell me to do. Just learn, come back, homework, study, read or do something after school” (III).

The above excerpt reveals that not only is this student completely uninterested in conflict, but far removed from it, a position she takes both at school and home. This self-exclusion from conflict highlights her maturity as a middle school student, and as the first passage reveals, it also uncovers her sense of self-worth. As a reminder, Anya has skipped kindergarten and is therefore a year younger than her classmates. This one-year age gap relative to her socio-emotional and academic development is worth noting, as it could be a drawback. The above example underscores the participant’s maturity and good judgment as she understands that nothing about conflict will advance her academic vision. There are extrinsic factors such as parental support, extended family members, and caring teachers who encourage Anya to continue to succeed. While the extrinsic factors are important, what seem to separate this participant and the others from the majority of her school-mates are the now intrinsic characteristics that energize her purpose and her will to succeed. The participant’s gender identity and academic identity as a high-achieving female student then affect her social positioning, removing herself from any and all occurrences which may interfere with her academic plan. Another notable bit of analysis from the excerpt above is Anya’s awareness of boundaries. She understands the importance of obeying her parents’ rules and thereby she adheres to rituals and routines that yet again keep her on the right track. We share this awareness of boundaries. Throughout my K-6 experiences and beyond, I was always described by my

teachers and church family as a respectful child. Disrespect was not at all tolerated under my mother's roof. Because I knew to obey my mother's rules thereby having boundaries, not only did I abide by rules, but in the process I also cultivated self-respect, which is still with me today. There is a connection between boundaries and self-respect. Perhaps through self-regulation, boundaries help us to learn. They seem to help Anya learn and certainly helped me to learn as well.

For Aaliyah, being temporarily in the group of non-achievers, spurred her to work harder. In the following passage drawn from an interview, Aaliyah speaks about a fourth grade experience when she received her first grade of a "C." She explains:

Aaliyah: That would have to be when my parents were getting mad at my brother because he wasn't doing so well, he started slacking off. That would be when I got a C on my report card. They [her parents] were mad but they weren't as mad as I was at myself because I knew I wasn't doing my homework. Because I don't want to get another C because that's going to bring down my G.P.A. I think that's what it's called. (III)

The above narrative account highlights the participant's perception of failure. She understood her parents were disappointed in her, but she was more dissatisfied with her own performance realizing her lack of effort. Here Aaliyah's word choice, intonation, and abrupt break are important to note. When she begins to speak about this event, there is a rising intonation until the point when she communicates receiving her first "C." There is a steady rise and then her tone begins to fall after she expresses, "I don't want to get another C because that's going to bring down my G.P.A." After speaking about her GPA, there is an abrupt break as the participant reflects about her accuracy of the term, GPA. Her need for accuracy is noticeable in this abrupt break as she tries to remember the correct acronym. Aaliyah's use of temporal deictics and personal pronouns in this passage cannot be overlooked either. The temporal deictic "that" is mentioned three times

in this example. “He,” “my,” “they,” and the use of “I” five times provide footing and interactional significance of this event. Because she was disappointed with her grade, as a result, Aaliyah engaged in self-reflection about the experience. Motivation in this context seemed to be restored because the participant reflected about two things: 1) her autonomy or control, knowing she had control of the situation, but made a choice which resulted in the outcome; and 2) understanding the disapproval of her parents drawing upon what others think about her. The experience appears to have caused the participant to clarify her values and perhaps develop a more comprehensive plan to achieve her academic goals and improve her grade point average.

While Aaliyah articulated her perception of failure, Asia recognized how poor behaviors are a distraction for her in the classroom and thus attempts to disregard them, devoting her attention to the tasks. She describes it this way:

Asia: Well I don't know. Sometimes I'll do the work if they assigned work and they're just loud because we're working together. Or some of them will scream, but I don't really do that. Only if they get really out of hand or really loud. (III)

Like Anya, Asia shares an experience that illuminates her maturity and social separation from misbehaving students. Here Asia's language use of “I,” “we're,” and “they,” referring to teachers as well as students, cites disapproval of her classmates' poor behavior. While she acknowledges her inclusion with “we're” as part of the student body, she separates herself with the use of “they” and “them” in terms of her classmates' loud volume during the work period. As evidenced in the data, the participant's maturity is significantly influenced by personal factors such as gender, values, self-efficacy, and academic achievement. However, there are also contextual considerations, which also

impact her maturity such as the single gender classroom format, interactions with parents and teachers, as well as friendships.

When Arden spoke about her need to be academically successful, it was framed with commitment and moral awareness at the center. She asserted:

Arden: It's like I sign up or like plan on doing something and get it done (III).

This brief excerpt highlights the participant's commitment to her studies. She has a goal commitment, time commitment, and plan commitment, however, she also has support. This includes teacher support, parent support, and peer support. This in turn has an impact on her academic achievement. While it is evident teacher support, parent support, and peer support play critical roles in a child's academic success, the benefits of these variables cannot be achieved without a personal commitment. The data show a number of significant factors influence the participant's moral awareness, including parents, teachers, spirituality, mentors, friends, and learning experiences. These very factors have influenced the participant's moral development and continue to lead her moral awareness, which foster a keen mindfulness in terms of right and wrong steering her decision-making.

All four participants exhibited the characteristic of self-respect, which has an effect on their behavior, conduct, and academic attainment. The narrative accounts emphasized the importance of pride, commitment, self-esteem, happiness, confidence, and self-reflection. The participants substantiated these ideas by discussing their K-6 experiences as they become aware of purpose and motivation.

**Self-efficacy.** Success is one of the key factors affecting a student's self-efficacy. As evidenced in the data sources, self-efficacy influences students' behavior, motivation,

and academic productivity. The data show the participants under study can successfully complete academic tasks, but also have the personal commitment to continue to pursue academic goals. Likewise, the findings reveal the participants' belief that there is something fundamentally wrong with being lazy. This theme is supported with evidence gleaned from the observations.

For example, shortly after I entered the classroom one day, Anya was assisting other students with work. A few minutes later after reviewing the lesson in the book, Anya got up after a clear sign of uncertainty and asked the teacher for help. The teacher explained the math process in depth and then asked Anya if she understood. Anya responded by answering, "Yes," and she then proceeded back to her seat. Anya then began to apply the method the teacher just previously explained and finished the problem (FN, May 14, 2012).

In the above example, the practitioner clearly conducted his work with the ethic of care. Whether or not the teacher's perception of Anya was changed as a result of this interaction, he recognized her academic potential and academic identity. This example highlights this participant's conscientiousness, openness, and willingness to listen. Based on the data, her core self-worth influences her academic and gender identity both directly and indirectly, but also impacts her academic self-efficacy. Below Aaliyah's self-efficacy is illuminated. I saw that during an observation when Aaliyah and a few other students got up from their desks and began to walk to the front of the class. The teacher asked for volunteers to come to the front of the class, read, and complete an assignment she had written on the board. Aaliyah is one of the students who volunteered, but did not get the opportunity to demonstrate her knowledge of the problem although two other students

were allowed to participate and given the time to explain. Aaliyah returns to her desk and asks the teacher a question about the new class assignment (FN).

Though the participant was not given the opportunity to demonstrate her knowledge, it is evident she has an understanding about the content. The above example underscores how she manages tasks and her behavior. Though Aaliyah was not able to exhibit her skill proficiency, her response did not indicate disappointment, but rather acceptance. This is evidence of the participant's cognition and her ability to self-regulate. Aaliyah's sensibleness is linked to how she responds to events. Much like this participant, throughout my elementary and middle school experiences, I did not always understand the concepts being presented, especially science. I distinctly recall in the sixth grade asking my teacher about a concept I had been struggling with for some time. I took a liking to the science teacher because we shared the same gender and race. Yet she was also caring and helpful. Upon gaining clarity after asking her the question, I remember returning to my lab group and telling my friend Tamara that I liked her. Though I did not enjoy science, this teacher assisted in my development of self-efficacy as she displayed the ethic of care. Because of her ethic of care, my subject matter struggle was minimized, connecting how I addressed future academic challenges. Though this experience occurred when I was in the sixth grade, I remember it distinctly in terms of the ethic of care, how I managed tasks after this time as well as how I approached complex science concepts.

In the following passage, I am pleasantly surprised by Asia's behavior as she obtains missed work from one of her classmates. While observing during the 40 minute period, a student came over to Asia to get her composition notebook. As Asia looked at her classmate's notes, she realized she had missed some notes from the previous class



lesson and copied notes from her classmate. As I acknowledged earlier in this observation, I noticed that in-action reflection would be a constant and recurring variable during classroom observations. In this moment, I was thinking, how responsible a student to obtain the notes from a classmate for the purposes of being abreast with the very lessons that lead to skill development. Although this is grounded in common sense and what would seem the obvious, my experience as a teacher leader has not slanted in this common sense approach in terms of student accountability. Asia clearly understands the notion that a responsible student, despite interferences and other challenges, is accountable and wise to obtain work that was missed. This is a noteworthy talking point for an urban student who is beating the odds despite the material challenges against her. I thought to myself, “Maybe these are the very characteristics that separate a responsible student from the other types of students.” (FN)

This encounter with Asia was one of the most memorable moments. She is responsible and organized, seeking out her classmate to obtain work that was missed. While I may have observed this at some point during my 10 years of teaching, the previous encounters were less memorable. This observation illuminated the conscientiousness and accountability of the student. We share these characteristics. I recall a relatively upsetting event that occurred in my fifth grade year. As a tomboy, I was always the last girl standing during our gym class. On this particular day, the class was engaged in dodge ball. Every other student, with the exception of maybe three or four students including me, had been eliminated. One student always targeted me because of my speed and skill. This day I would not be able to outrun his intentions. During one of the last rounds of the game, the boy threw the ball at my feet and I tripped and fell to the

concrete chipping my tooth and busting my lip. My mother was immediately called. Ultimately, my tooth was repaired that day and my lip healed. Today there are no traces of the event. Upon returning to school some days later I asked my teacher for all of the work I missed. I returned the work within days for the purpose of being current with the skills addressed in class. Asia and I are self-efficacious because we are both organized, but also responsible. This is evidence of our academic identity and role as high-achieving students. We play active roles in our achievement knowing that nothing and no one can derail our path to success, and thus assume positions that underscore this belief. We have always been high-achieving from kindergarten through sixth grade and I have maintained a steadfast direction in accomplishing my academic goals through my current doctoral coursework. This inner push we share causes us to exhibit self-efficacy. This is something that perhaps can be cultivated, but my thought is it has to intrinsically exist first. In another observation, Arden illustrates self-efficacy as she shares her textbook with a classmate. When I entered the classroom, Arden was sharing her science book with her classmate because the other student did not have the book (FN).

Arden arrived to class prepared and willing to share her materials with a fellow classmate. This shows her preparedness to learn, but also reveals an important personality trait of sharing. Throughout my K-6 experiences I remember my mom always having several canisters full of pens and pencils on her wooden desk. There were always ample resources for me to use. These pens and pencils denoted the many cities, conferences, and faith-based organizations my mother attended, or was a member of, by the markings on them. As a result of these resources and others, I always came to class prepared, ready to

learn, and willing to share my pens or pencils with my classmates. We are self-efficacious in this way and we both had enough to share.

The above observations illustrate the participants' self-efficacy. We are self-efficacious as tasks and assignments are efficiently managed, behaviors and responses during work periods are controlled, evidence of our preparedness to learn illuminated, and our conscientiousness to listen and ultimately apply difficult concepts are challenged. This underscores the role we play in our academic success as well as the characteristics we possess as high-achieving students.

**Motivation.** Self-efficacy affects students' choices, responses, and motivation, among other things. It is evident the participants' under study demonstrate intrinsic and extrinsic motivation that causes them to be academically successful. They have an intrinsic desire to do or achieve something because they want to. However, they also carry an extrinsic motivation because they realize completing tasks leads to certain results. Each student does not just exemplify self-efficacy to complete tasks and assignments, but there is something inside of them (intrinsic) that causes a push towards success (extrinsic). Because of the students' self-efficacy and their own capacity to complete tasks, this then influences how motivated they are. Motivation was especially evident in the interviews as well as the personal autobiographical narratives. Below Anya provides an account that highlights her intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Anya: In life, there are many goals that I have yet to accomplish. I have a lot of dreams. One of which is to pursue an education in the field of mathematics. My parents have always taught me that getting an education is the first priority to a better future. The positive experiences I have had in my life give me more hope and encouragement to strive even more for my dreams. (PAN)

It is evident this student's belief affects her motivation. Anya believes she has the capacity for learning and feels because of this she is likely to succeed academically. As a result of her belief, she is motivated. This is evidenced in the opening sentence of the passage when Anya says, "In life, there are many goals that I have yet to accomplish." The temporal deictic "there" and the use of the pronoun "I" illustrates her role in terms of her academic success. "There" provides context footing and interactional organization while "I" uncovers the participant's interactional position of her role. Likewise, the participant understands the relationship between effort and success. There is a feeling of control she has in terms of the outcomes of her efforts and thereby puts forth the effort encapsulating her motivation. We share this characteristic. My mother instilled the importance of God being an anchor in the way I live my life. However, she also taught me about the importance of education. Instilling these beliefs ignited a motivation early on that still carries with me today. In the passage below, Aaliyah again highlights how rewards are a source of her motivation.

Aaliyah: When we did our portfolios in Ms. Aster's class, if you didn't finish your portfolio then you couldn't get chips or anything. You had to have everything in your portfolio or else you couldn't get them. In Ms. Archers' class if we're walking through the hallway and we're quiet and we get a compliment, then we get cookies or a treat that she brought in.

Aaliyah states "we" three times referring to and establishing an interactional group. She again underscores the importance of a receiving a "gift" in this context in the form of "chips" or "cookies" for completing a task.

However, Asia attributes a cause of her motivation from a harrowing experience rather than a positive one. She explains:

Asia: This boy punched me in the stomach and I don't know why. After that I figured out that I don't want anybody else to be in pain so I should start helping. It was

always like that. I want to be like a teacher and a lawyer when I grow up. Because you're helping them [troubled children] get an education. (III)

Here Asia recognizes a need to be of service. Interestingly, she cannot identify the cause of the hurtful act but leaves the experience with an impetus to change the state of affairs for troubled students. "This" and "that" are in use a few times in the excerpt, signaling interactional organization. "I" is also spoken several times. In the first sentence, Asia says "I" acknowledging she was a party to the reference. Also in the first sentence utterance, there is a rising intonation as the participant engages in critical thought and ultimate uncertainty about why the other student did such a wicked act. Asia closes the interaction with the shifter "them" referencing troubled children as those she wishes to help.

Arden also illustrates her motivation saying, "I guess like when I decide I'm going to do something, I stick to it" (III).

One of the most important factors in steering the participants through their academic journeys and in attaining academic success is motivation. The participants are motivated because they believe in their ability and they feel in control about their effort and the potential outcome. Whereas I was afraid of the consequence if my mother discovered I was underachieving, the participants and I share similar intrinsic factors such as self-efficacy, beliefs, values, and some personal interests. Likewise, contextual factors such as family and social influences motivate us as well. We believe we can succeed. This internal belief causes us to excel as an initial burst and then we accomplish tasks for a reason.

### **Academic Vision**

The participants in this study demonstrate an academic vision. All four of them have an academic destination, understand the steps required to reach their educational

goals, and set goals toward a forward thinking approach. This in turn drives the participants' day-to-day activities, which then causes them to proactively plan and execute for their future. Anya supports the finding this way:

Anya: We had to first see who wanted to run for student council president. Then we had to write a speech and then we had to have a shortened speech and we had to present it to many classes. Next after that, we went to the cafeteria and the teacher wrote us some things to say to the whole cafeteria. Like all the kids combined. So we presented that speech to the whole cafeteria. (III)

The participant implemented her vision through personal practice by way of her interpersonal behavior. In doing so, she displayed self-respect and a respect for others. This respect for self and others is evident in her interactions with teachers and friends who supported her campaign endeavor. This sense of self-respect and confidence in her ability was further apparent as her friends rallied for her election. The participant had obviously made it clear how important her friends were to her as evidenced in the shifter "we." Anya's self-respect, confidence, and belief in her ability as a potential student council leader center on constructing a vision, but also on engaging with others in order to create and support her vision. While Anya implemented her vision through personal practice, Aaliyah constructs a vision oriented toward college. She explains:

Aaliyah: Because a high G.P.A. you can get scholarships into colleges and you can get into really good jobs like teachers, lawyers, doctors, the jobs that you get paid a lot. (III)

Here the participant expresses her academic vision, which has a connection to her long-term goal. Though she has not formulated a plan, she realizes that in order to achieve her long-term goal, a sequence of actions must be taken to make the vision real. The shifter "you" signals footing and interactional position. Aaliyah utters "you" as an interactional dynamic, a specific pronoun connecting speech pattern she shares with Anya. Below,

Asia discusses one of the first conversations she had about college with her parents. She states:

Asia: Yes. I think when I first learned about college, I asked my parents if they ever went to college and they said no. Then they asked me if I wanted to go to college. I think that's how it really started.

Although the participant's parents did not attend college, engaging her in discussion about college attendance seemed to have sparked an interest, as evidenced in her excerpt below. She contends:

Asia: I like the College of New Jersey and Rowan College. I really like the College of New Jersey because I think it has a major in math so I would definitely go there. That was like one of my top choices. I like the basketball court and the track and stuff. (III)

This participant described her vision coupling her math and athletic interests. However, she also expanded this vision through a sense of inspiration and commitment that will potentially allow her to accomplish her goals. In this interaction, the shifter "I" and "that" are important to note. "I" is uttered five times as Asia expresses her high interest about two specific higher education institutions. "That" denotes Asia's reference to one of the two universities of which she is speaking. An informal register is also significant to notice. The participant said "like" and "stuff," acknowledging familiarity with the researcher as well as a growing researcher-researched relationship that has been established. Though Arden may not be certain like Asia about what higher education institution she would like to attend, she does map out a plan beginning with the attainment of good grades. She says, "I hope to continue with good grades, go to college and be a pediatrician." What is most notable here is the participant's use of the words "hope" and "continue." The term "hope" denotes her self-confidence in achieving her goal while "continue" acknowledges a personal commitment.

The data reveal that participants demonstrate an academic vision. We share this similarity, as our behaviors are illustrative of this characteristic. We envision accomplishing our dreams, develop a plan to attain goals, are energized in the process, and execute a plan for academic success. The findings show the participants are relentless in their academic pursuits, having fundamentally different visions than the majority of their school peers who share the same race, gender, and socioeconomic markers. They realize the world is broader than their situation.

In this chapter, the responses of the four participants were influenced by intrinsic characteristics and extrinsic factors. Some of the key external factors contributing to the participants' academic identities include familial support, extended family and community members support, caring teachers, and the opportunities educators provide the participants with that showcase their talent and abilities. The participants' roles and identities are at the center of the narrative accounts. It is important to highlight this finding, acknowledging the positions the participants assume in their academic success as well as the characteristics they exhibit as grade 6 high-achieving Black females. While there are cultural trappings that could derail the academic success of these adolescents, they do not allow it. Their race is a part of their African American identity. Their gender is a part of their gender identity. Their socioeconomic status is part of their economic identity. Though these markers are important, the participants' individual pathology and hard-working ideology is equally significant. They expressed how they achieve as evidenced in their language. The use of the personal pronoun "I" was consistent through the narratives. Similarly, "you," "they," and "them," were also constant. This implies their firm belief in themselves as well as suggests their support for others. Words of



affirmation such as pride, self-esteem, belief, happiness, and confidence were manifested across the data sources. This denotes the participants' are not only resourceful and tenacious in terms of an intrinsic push, but unwavering due to extrinsic factors that shape their dogged belief in themselves. Because of this self-awareness, they assume strategic positions in their success as well as undertake leadership roles to assist and support others. As good students, they take on the role of assisting their teachers in the classroom, be it the infusion of technology or helping with typical teacher responsibilities. They also assume the role of informal mentor regarding their assistance and support for their Black female classmates and friends. These are the roles they assume and this is their academic identity. They understand that the door will open, but you have to walk through it into your destiny.

## **Chapter V**

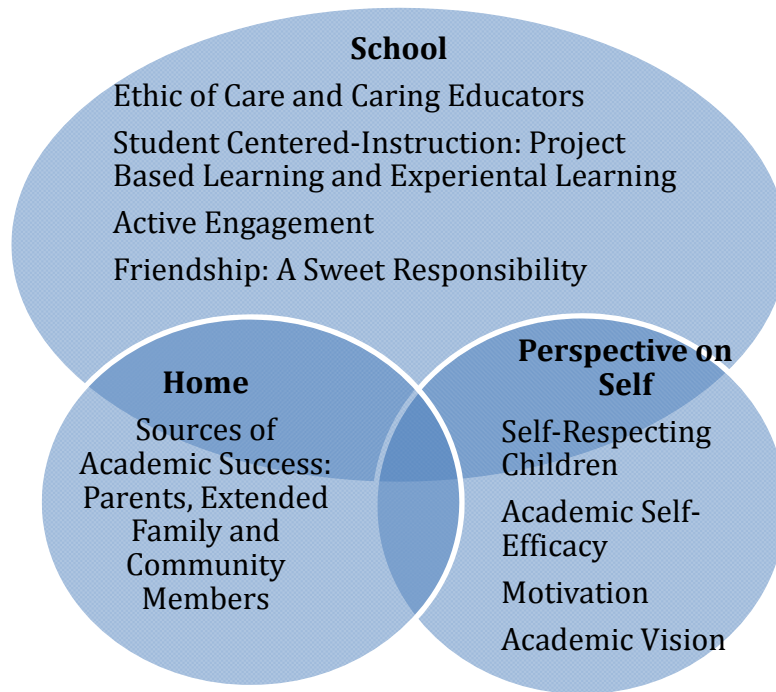
### **Interpretations, Implications, and Conclusions**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to investigate the academic experiences of four grade 6 high-achieving Black females in an urban middle school in the northeast U.S. The research questions for this study were:

- 1) How do four high-achieving African American girls in the 6th grade describe their academic experiences?
- 2) How do four 6th grade African American girls engage in the learning process in a gender separate classroom setting?
- 3) How do these 6th grade African American girls describe contributors to their academic success?
- 4) In what ways are the experiences of these learners as African American girls similar or different than those of the researcher?

#### **Overlapping Themes**

The overlap of the themes highlights the importance of these qualities and how they reinforce one another. The relationship between the overlapping themes shows the importance of external factors and intrinsic motivators that cause these students to academically thrive. Figure 2 provides a graphic illustration of the overlapping themes.



*Figure 2.* Graphic Illustration of Overlapping Themes

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I address my research questions, offering discussion about how the findings relate to previous empirical data about the phenomena. I also share implications and suggestions for policy and classroom practice. Implications and suggestions for further research are also included in this chapter.

The four participants’ revealed commonalities and differences in how they sustain high academic achievement, the roles they assume in their success, and how they construct their academic identities. Though Feminism and Critical Race Theory in particular, as lenses of analysis, were helpful to understand the findings, my initial assumptions about race and gender did not turn out the way I thought. While Feminism offered a tool to examine gender in isolation whereas Critical Race Theory provided a lens to analyze race, race and gender as foregrounds were less important than other factors. For these students, there is a different intersectionality other than race, class and

gender. The intersectionality is in the three categories of school, home and perspective on self that causes these students to be resilient despite their challenges. To this point, components of verve (Boykin, 1983) specifically, movement, individual expressionism and perspective turn out to be more important than some aspects of my conceptual framework. As a reminder, verve (Boykin, 1983) is defined as the nine dimensions of African American culture that find their roots in West Africa. These dimensions are spirituality, harmony, movement, affect, individual expressionism, communalism, social time, perspective, and oral tradition. With a turn toward movement, Arden said, “Ms. Anisa, she used the Smart Board and we could answer questions and write on the Smart Board.” This evidences students being able to move around the physical space of the classroom. In terms of individual expressionism, Asia recognized she “stands out” in comparison to her peers. Though she acknowledges this difference, she does not conform to be a part of the larger group. With an eye on perspective as a component of the nine dimensions of verve, all four participants illuminate how their outlook is unlike others who share their same race, class and gender. This very viewpoint of the four students is evident across the data sources and supported in the categorical themes Perspective on Self. Perspective on Self was not only one of the dominant categories, but perspective was also a dominant verve component. Examples of the participants’ perspectives are shared later in the chapter. Overall, the findings indicate verve is culturally important in the lives of the participants. The findings further prove that verve has positive psychological, social and emotional effects for the students in the sample group. With a shift toward the school environment category, caring educators was one of the dominant themes. Each participant spoke candidly about teachers who displayed the ethic of care.

What was interesting was the mutuality of care students expressed about helping their teachers with technology. For example, Anya said, “And we had a Smart Board and my table, it was four of us, we all knew a lot about technology. So we helped the teacher because she was more old-fashioned.” Teachers care about students and students in turn care about their teachers. Anya also discussed her math teacher as “passionate about what she does” whereas Aaliyah describes a caring educator as one who is helpful. Verve is also evident in the Ethic of Care and Caring Educators theme as the findings show that teachers devise ways of delivering instruction that are optimized for student learning.

While Student-Centered Instruction: Project Based Learning and Experiential Learning was not a dominant theme, the data revealed the role of the projects the students completed that afforded opportunities for teachers to get to know their students better. This underscores care as well. Though the participants’ experiences with caring teachers may be different, they describe the characteristics, behaviors, and actions of educators who demonstrate care and thereby are committed to their academic achievement. Rich (2006) asserts caring teachers have the potential to motivate students to succeed in their academic journeys. Garza, Ryser, and Lee (2010) and Nieto (2004) share similar views about care. Garza et al. contend caring behaviors are critical for student achievement while Nieto maintains that caring behaviors also involve providing students with necessary support. Asia and Arden support these assertions as evidenced in the data. During two separate interviews with these participants, Asia referenced her kindergarten teacher and the teacher’s assistant stating, “They helped me enjoy learning,” whereas Arden spoke of her mentor, Ms. Anar saying, “She would like bring me old books that

her daughter used to read.” No matter the experience, all four participants described their perceptions of what defines a teacher demonstrating care.

Also in the school environment category was the emergent theme of Friendship: A Sweet Responsibility. The Friendship theme elicited valuable data. The findings revealed that the high-achieving students benefited from having high-achieving friends as evidenced in my literature review. Dishion and Véronneau (2011) investigated the influence of friends’ characteristics on change in academic achievement from grade 6 to grade 8. They too found that high-achieving middle school females seemed to benefit from having high-achieving friends. It is evident that friendship for Black females with other Black females drives their academic success because support is at the center. The high-achieving grade 6 females for this study cultivate intentional alliances with other high-achieving grade 6 females. Though all of the themes in the school environment category are significant – Ethic of Care and Caring Educators, Student-Centered Instruction: Project Based Learning and Experiential Learning, Active Engagement, and Friendships: A Sweet Responsibility – Ethic of Care and Caring Educators and Friendships: A Sweet Responsibility share similar characteristics and are the most notable in this category because the value of interpersonal relationships is illuminated.

The importance of education and the attainment of academic success were instilled early on in the lives of the four participants. The findings reveal the support and involvement of family helps them to excel academically. These data support previous findings that suggest family support and parental influence are central to academic identity (Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997). For all four students, parental and family influence shaped their academic identities. When asked about parental support,

one participant pointed to a lack of access, few educational resources, and limited opportunity in her parents' home country. Anya admitted, "My parents are from another country. In that country they don't have education that we have here." The participant is saying her parents realize there is limited opportunity and access to resources in their native country and because of these reasons, they desire more for their children and thereby instilled a value of education. Thus, there is an expectation of academic excellence. Like Anya, Arden echoes this sentiment about her parents' academic push. She states, "He [her father] tells me that he doesn't want to see any F's on my report card." Both participants are influenced by their parents to academically perform, as the value of education and interactional engagement about success were major indicators contributing to their concept of academic identity.

Extended family relationships and religious participation were also significant findings. While parental support and involvement had an impact on all of the participants, two of them revealed the important role church members serve as sources of their informal social support network. In addition, all four expressed the significance of extended family care as well. Aaliyah spoke about an encounter she had with her cousin saying, "Mm Hmm, yes, I have a lot of little cousins and we're always telling each other that we should do really good." The findings also suggest the relationships developed with church members address the participants social support needs. Previous research conducted by Hill (1972) substantiates the finding, claiming extended family relationships and religious participation are major strengths of Black families. Aaliyah also spoke about one such relationship explaining, "She [Ms. Aziz] says that we should do our best, try and get straight A's so we can get into a good college and get the best

job.” Aaliyah acknowledges this church member as one who encourages her to do well in school. Similarly, Asia describes the hands-on help she receives from two youth church members stating, “If I say I’m struggling in a certain subject like science, then they’ll [Anne and Amir] help me.” The findings reveal two important pieces of information: 1) the role of church members are important as they serve as sources of support, and 2) the care the participants receive are responsive in meeting their support needs (Billingsley, 1999; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, and Schroepfer (2002) found a connection between support from family and church members in which half of the African American sample group received assistance from both family and church networks. Overall, the data revealed extended family relationships are important and church members play a central role in the participants’ social support networks.

The data reveal there are several extrinsic factors that cause the students to be high-achieving. As stated above, high-achieving middle school female students seem to benefit from having high-achieving friends (Dishion and Veronneau, 2011). This claim was supported with my findings. Other literature about high-achieving Latina students reveal that school resources are critical to achievement (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2008). Bergin and Cooks (2000) underscore the benefits of competing for grades. Geiser et al. (2009) support the use of differentiated interventions for the sample student group. This data about high-achieving students of color fit into what is already known about them because it emphasizes the personal characteristics that potentially separate them from others. This belief in one’s self has a connection to resiliency because the sample group exhibit signs of resiliency through both attitudes and behaviors.



Data revealed four emergent themes in the category Perspective on Self. Of the four themes, motivation and self-efficacy were the most dominant. Not surprisingly, students' motivation to learn and excel has been associated to academic performance and self-esteem (Gottfried, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2009). As evidenced in the findings, motivation was a critical part of the participants' experiences and affected every aspect of their learning. The data uncovered that motivation influenced how the participants approached learning, how they interacted with teachers and peers, as well as how they engaged in the learning process. One can infer the participants have what Pintrich (2003) describes as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is when one wants to achieve something because one truly wants to and sees the value in it (Pintrich, 2003). Extrinsic motivation is the desire to do or achieve something because it leads to a certain outcome (Pintrich, 2003). Rather than intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, the participants have both.

Rigby, Deci, Patrick, and Ryan (1992) assert any action can be motivated by a blend of both intrinsic and extrinsic influences. The findings support this claim. Anya explains, "I have a lot of dreams. One of which is to pursue an education in the field of mathematics." Arden describes it this way, "I guess like when I decide I'm going to do something, I stick to it." Though it is difficult to determine and measure intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, based on what the participants shared, they have both types. Their motivation, as revealed in the findings, is grounded in their dogged belief. The participants feel they have an unlimited capacity for learning, and because of this embedded conviction, as well as positive external influences, they believe they are going to succeed. Welch and Hodges (1997) describe this characteristic as academic

motivation. The participants' academic identities were bolstered as they overcame struggles by facing challenges straight on that were in close relation to their academic motivation. Again, taking verve into account, upon examining the academic experiences of these students with an increased emphasis on perspective and spirituality, in particular, both dimensions seem to have positive psychological, social, and emotional effects on the participants. For example, Aaliyah and Asia expressed their church members are sources of their academic support network which connects the dimension of spirituality. All four participants display characteristics that are sources of their academic achievement. They also have a clear understanding about their identity and role in their academic success.

Self-efficacy was an important indicator in the participants' high academic achievement. Merriman (2012) asserts academic self-efficacy refers to a student's perception of his or her ability to engage and successfully complete tasks. The findings reveal self-efficacy influenced students' behavior, motivation, and academic productivity again linking verve.

While observing Asia, I had one of the most memorable moments as a researcher. During the 40 minute observation, another student came over to Asia asking her for notes. As Asia looked at her classmates notes, she realized she had missed some important information from the previous class lesson and began copying the missed work. This example demonstrates the participant's academic self-efficacy, but also points to her academic identity. The participant's positive academic habits have a connection with her identity as she possesses a strong belief in her ability and aptitude to complete tasks (Ward, 2000). While observing Arden, I noticed she shared her textbook with a classmate. In this case, the data reveal the participant's preparedness for class, thus

exhibiting self-efficacy. She comes to class prepared with materials and thereby is ready to learn. All four of the participants revealed self-efficacy, which was evident in their words, behaviors, and choices. They then assume positions or roles as high-achieving students in the school environment that foster this belief.

Language use and word choice were central to the narrative. The participants expressed how they achieved as evidenced in their language use. The use of personal pronouns was manifested across the data sources. First, second, and third singular and plural pronouns were consistent. Participants relied heavily on the use of personal pronouns such as “I,” “he,” “she,” “it,” “they,” and “them” for denotational and interactional organization. These personal pronouns or language shifters played an important role in terms of linguistic footing, providing insight about a specific interaction (Goffman, 1979). Temporal deictics including “there,” “then,” “here,” and “now” were also consistent across the data. The deictics provided structure to the interactional message. Schegloff (1984) asserts language use creates interactional organization in particular contexts. Language shifters are a tool for dialogue analysis used to establish both denotational and interactional organization (Schegloff, 1984). Temporal deictics, on the other hand, provide insight about particular interactions. Language use and word choice are important in juxtaposition to roles and identities because they reveal where the participants are in their identity development.

All four students have strong academic identities. Berzonsky and Neimeyer (2006) contend academic success is dependent upon where one is in one’s own identity development, which includes roles, attitudes, and beliefs. One of the four participants, Asia, revealed there is a disadvantage to standing out. She stated, “Well there kind of is

[a disadvantage] because if you stand out, maybe more people will dislike you and more people will try to fight you I guess or try to put you down.” Previous research supports this finding that high achieving African American students experience being ostracized because of their academic merits (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Milner, 2002). While Asia expressed being excluded from the larger student population because of her academic merit, this reality did not seem to impact her self-confidence. Though confidence was not an emergent theme, the term was evident across the data sources in the theme Self-Respecting Children. This confidence was apparent, as the strength of the participants’ academic identities was unmistakable.

While the students self-identified as Black females, the findings did not reveal much data connecting race or gender as sources of their academic success. Asia, the participant who expressed there was a disadvantage to standing out because of academic ability, later described, despite the perceived disadvantage, believes one should be noticeable. In the following quote, the participant as a grade 6 female in a single gender classroom format, illustrates removal of raced and gendered influences. She describes it this way, “It’s not really your unique perspective because it’s mostly one race so it’s not really a competition between the races.” The participant reveals, though there is not much racial diversity and certainly no gender diversity in her classes, she assumes a role of rugged individualism without negating her racial and gender identity. Fordham (1988) contends separation from the Black collective is necessary, particularly with females as they consider this rejection is required “as the price to pay if they desire to achieve vertical mobility” (p. 74). While Fordham’s research suggests high achieving Black females assume a “raceless” identity for the purpose of maintaining academic success,

the participants for this study rejected this notion, acknowledging race and gender, but placing greater emphasis on their academic identity. I argue these participants seem to excel while acknowledging their race, gender, and academic capacity supporting their academic identity as high achieving grade 6 Black females.

## **Implications**

**Student suggestions: Black female and male learners.** Since this study focused on the lived experiences of high-achieving grade 6 females, it is important to provide useful implications for adolescent Black female and male learners. These implications may be instructive in terms of their engagement in academia and their overall success. Black adolescent female students can shape and develop conceptions of what it means to be Black, female, and academically successful in urban middle school institutions in the United States to make it compatible with academic excellence. This implication will capture students' voices with an aim to awaken educators about the inequities, specifically those in urban schools regarding issues of race, class, and gender. In this way, the illumination of students' voices is what Giroux and Aronowitz (1985) call a "language of possibility" that may avoid the reproduction of racism, classism, and sexism (p. 27). Likewise, Black female students can strategically become involved in meaningful and enriching experiences that include athletic teams, cultural student organizations, religious organizations, academic organizations, and community service groups. In addition, Black female and male learners should seek challenging educational opportunities to self-engage with their learning environment while also distinguishing themselves among their peers as high-achievers. All four of the participants highlighted the benefit of having supportive Black female classmates and friends across their K-6

experiences that supported them in their academic endeavors. Much can be learned from the continued success of young Black females in the academy through the sharing of success strategies and support. Such strategies and support can be used to assist other Black females, and perhaps males as well, who may be deficient in skill development.

**Classroom suggestions.** Educators play a critical role in the academic success and identity construction of the sample student population. Teachers need to understand the power and ultimate impact of an effective and student-centered instructional program. For this reason, implications for educators are also important to note. There is a growing body of research about adolescent Black females. This literature advocates for “space” and literary practices that will afford learning opportunities for this student population to make meaning of their identities within schools (Blake, 1995; Sutherland, 2005; Winn, 2010; Wissman, 2011). Educators need to invest the time to get to know these students and their families. Discourse with these stakeholders will undoubtedly serve adolescent Black females more effectively, while also developing their cognitive identities (Cortes, 1979).

This implication has a direct correlation to the ethic of care. It is important that educators know the major complaint of young people concerning adults is, “They don’t care!” (Comer, 1988, p. 37). If teachers would take just a little more time out of their busy schedules to get to know these students, this dialogue may yield some insightful data. This implication aligns with Noddings’ assertion. Noddings (1992) contends, “Caring is the very bedrock of all successful education and...contemporary schooling can be revitalized in its light” (p. 27). Furthermore, teachers must be committed to an engaging and liberatory pedagogy that inspires students and reflects their lived

experiences. Carter (2005) maintains this idea fosters the development of positive academic success beliefs.

The findings from this study reveal active engagement and strong pedagogical practices have a powerful impact for high-achievers. Teachers must also engage in professional development training, which draws upon student-centered instructional techniques and other best practices that promote high academic achievement (Carter, 2008). Educators should also establish a classroom culture that is conducive to meet the diverse learning needs of academically gifted students. The literature shows a positive classroom environment has a significant impact on student behavior and achievement (Wilson-Fleming & Wilson-Younger, 2012). These authors also claim a positive classroom environment provides strategies for developing expectations for student achievement. It is essential for teachers to establish a culture of high expectations, which in turn yields positive academic results.

**Administrative suggestions.** Though the participants did not reveal much data about their school leaders' impact, one student did illuminate her principal's positive influence. Asia explained, "Well he like talks about the stuff [conflict] in our classroom. He tells me to stay out of that stuff and keep my grades up." While this administrator demonstrated an ethic of care with the participant in the school context, administrators must be willing to take an interest in students beyond the classroom. Efforts must be made to better reach this student population, who are often masked by students who are low or underachieving. In addition, administrators must be sure to recruit and hire highly qualified educators having the training, skill sets, and aptitude to meet the diverse needs of high-achieving students.

The participants for this study revealed their teachers were effective and knowledgeable about their respective subject matter. It would benefit the sample student population if school leaders were able to continue this model of talent recruitment and hiring to retain not only highly-qualified teachers, but those with excellent training as well. This evaluation model could be more effective in terms of ensuring the most highly-qualified staff is hired to teach and meet the diverse needs of the sample population.

School leaders can also make recommendations by means of a teacher's evaluation about professional development training that may strengthen pedagogical practice, thus benefiting high-achieving students. In this way, educational leaders uphold the big ideas of a professional learning community which are the following: 1) Ensure that students learn, 2) Foster a culture of collaboration, and, 3) Focus on results (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). Likewise, school leaders should engage themselves in professional development training to remain current about educational trends that may be of great importance to the study's sample group.

Administrators should also establish a positive school culture where there is an expectation of academic excellence. Finally, school administrators should create, develop, and implement programs for the high-achieving student population, which foster learning growth and the development of academic identity. Such programs could include extensions to the academic program, including programs for advanced learners and character education programs.

**Policy suggestions.** There are also policy implications. Policymakers and policy stakeholders must be sure to equitably allocate and distribute funding to state, district, and local agencies to provide educational programs to all students, particularly those who



have been historically marginalized due to race and class markers. Baker and Corcoran (2012) reported about the stealth inequities of school funding. The report revealed systems tend to exacerbate inequities in per-pupil spending and in doing so, show favorability to communities with the least need. The findings in this study show these low-socioeconomic, high-achieving Black female students benefit from extracurricular programs and clubs, which rely primarily on federal funding. These programs, as evidenced in the data, enrich the learning experiences and enhance the achievement of high-achieving students.

In addition, lawmakers need to consider lifting the mandate for funding research using only “experimental or quasi-experimental designs” (Maxwell, 2004, p. 3). The National Research Council (2002) issued a call to establish empirically based research in education that uses only experimental designs. There is also a need to fund qualitative research. The findings from this study support this theory revealing the importance of story and its telling, and “how it might be used in the future” (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002, p. 2). Narrative is deeply embedded in many professions, including education. Legislators need to acknowledge the value of qualitative research, in particular narrative inquiry, as the illumination of stories might identify good teaching practices for U.S. classrooms. Policymakers must also continue to fund teacher education programs. A model must be implemented that provides top-quality training for pre-service educators and those already in the field to meet the diverse needs of students (Milner, 2002).

### **Future Research**

Based on the discussion and analysis of this narrative inquiry study, there is a need for future research. Because of the small sample size for this study, one

recommendation for future research is to conduct a larger study that includes more students' socio-educational experiences. Such a project could provide even more insight to help educators effectively teach Black females. I also propose an ethnographic analysis of the teaching practices, curricula, and classroom discourses of K-12 educators who instruct Black female students. These students' perceptions of the curriculum would likely yield insight on the ways in which instructors engage and educate young Black females. It would also be interesting to examine the ways in which Black female students define and perform leadership using a qualitative design. All of the participants demonstrated leadership practices as informal mentors and teacher helpers. They also extended unsolicited, and on one occasion, solicited academic assistance to classmates and friends. Information from such a study may reveal how these students engage in the learning process in the classroom as well as illuminate their habits as participants in school clubs and local community organizations.

Another way to build upon the work of this study is to qualitatively examine how parents are transmitters of aspirational capital for young women, including females of color of all academic abilities, using a larger data set. The findings for this study revealed parents were sources of academic success and it would be fascinating to capture more of the story with an objective lens on parental impact. I would also suggest conducting a comparative analysis to examine how high-achieving African American middle and high school females construct their academic identities with that of high-achieving Latina middle and high school females. A final recommendation for future research is to conduct a collective case study examining factors of motivation for high-achieving K-12 females in various U.S. geographic regions who have different socioeconomic statuses.

## **Summary**

The four high-achieving grade 6 African American females in this study demonstrate characteristics that are sources of their academic excellence. In the school context, there are caring educators, friends, and teacher pedagogical practices that contribute to their high-achievement. At home, parents, church members, and extended family provide additional support. Though it is the participants' internal desires to academically excel, that separates them from others who share their same race, class, and gender. They want to win. There simply is no material challenge, socioeconomic marker, race, or gender concern too great to derail them off the fast track of success. The students' language use and word choice, used to describe their experiences and themselves, are in relation to their role and academic identity. The participants assume different leadership positions as grade 6 high-achieving African American females and are very grounded about who they are. Thus they exhibit strong academic identities.

The implications of this study suggest that policymakers, administrators, teachers, and other high-achieving students play central roles in the success and support of high-achieving students. It is important to conduct more research that captures the voice of high-achieving African American students, in particular females, because these students understand you have to walk into your destiny.

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