

VOICES OF HIGH-PERFORMING AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS

By

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To my late mom Elfreda Veronica Creary-Archer, my dedicated and loving husband Sim Hugh Banks, and my loving daughter Khadean Veronica Young. May this dissertation serve as a symbol of all that I have learned from each of you along this great journey, and a testimony of how the power of your unconditional love sustained me each and every day.

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LIST OF TERMS

The following terms used in this study are defined below:

- Academy pseudonym that refers to the school's academic magnet program.
- Academic climate the learning environment that exists within classrooms.
- Academic identity students self-perceptions of their abilities within the context of the school.
- Academic performance grades received by students at the end of each semester.
- Academic success grade point averages (GPAs) of 3.5 and higher on a 4.0 scale.
- African American dark-skinned individuals of African descent residing in the United States.
- African American identity the individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors and social and political contexts that define how African Americans view their position in society and their prospects for success (Tatum, 1998).
- Engagement students' classroom participation and is answered through the completion of assignments, homework, and consistent attendance.
- High performing maintaining a grade point average (GPA) of 3.5 or higher on a 4.0 scale.
- High school experiences the secondary school occurrences that influence students' perceptions, engagement and disengagement within the classroom.
- Negative school experiences those school occurrences that could cause students to disengage from the learning environment.
- Parent any adult who is responsible for the financial support and emotional care and support for a child under 18 years of age.
- Parental involvement the legal guardians' level of participation in the students' school.
- Positive school experiences those school occurrences that promote engagement within the classroom.
- School culture the activities, events, rituals and traditions of a school.
- Teacher efficacy the ability of teachers to effectively instruct, motivate and engage students in the classroom.

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The purpose of this multiple case study was to identify the factors that influenced high achievement among African American high school girls from the students' perspective. These descriptions are based on individual in-depth interviews, focus groups and journal entries. Eight African American girls with GPAs of 3.5 and above participated in this study to examine how social context such as the school and home environment impacted the participants' ability to excel in school.

A cross-case analysis of the data revealed common themes namely, types of school experiences, bridges to academic excellence, teachers' attitudes and practices that influenced students engagement, intersection of race and gender on school experiences, and the impact of family influence.

This study contributed to the dearth of research that currently exists regarding the school experiences of successful African American females. The findings from this study suggest that self determination, supportive learning environments and parents and family members play key roles in assisting African American high school girls to excel. The findings also revealed factors that created obstacles and how the participants utilized assertiveness, and discipline to complete

their required school work to ensure academic success. All the participants reported a personal goal of attending college to improve their socioeconomic status.

Overall this study illustrated the central role that school home and relationships played in the participants' success. An overview of how the findings confirm or disconfirm previous research is provided. In addition, recommendations are offered for teachers, school administrators and counselors who seek to improve school experiences for African American girls as well as all African American students.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

As one of two African American girls in the district's high school International Baccalaureate Program (IB), Margo (pseudonym) faced numerous social and emotional challenges. Her African American peers avoided her and in some cases made disparaging comments about the way she spoke. Others accused her of "Acting White"(Ogbu, 2004). Margo also had to cope with what she perceived as the subtle low expectations held by some of her teachers. Despite this however, she continued her pursuit for academic excellence. Margo represents one of many high-performing African American high school girls who succeed despite the numerous negative stereotypes and inequities that punctuated their high school experiences.

Sadker and Zittleman (2005) asserted that schools cheat girls. They argued that, in classrooms across America, girls and boys who sit in the same classroom receive very separate and unequal education. During instruction, teachers provide girls with less attention, less feedback and less encouragement. They actively discourage girls from academic success in math and science. In addition, textbook publishers provide fewer female role models compared to male role models.

As a group African American girls suffer from both racial and gender discrimination within the schools. Schools placed greater emphasis on the actions of African American girls' behaviors than they did on non-African American girls by insisting that they demonstrate gender appropriate behaviors in their voice volume. Such restrictions create disadvantages for African American girls, and discourage them to voice their opinions (Fordham, 1997; Morris, 2002). In high schools across the country, many African American girls are sometimes punished by school personnel for "being loud" or for having an attitude that does not conform to teachers'

expectations of feminine behavior (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002). African American girls, like some boys, who are candid and independent, are often stereotyped as troublemakers rather than leaders (American Association of University Women, 1998).

African American feminist scholars have “underscored that African American girls/women experiences are shaped by a web of interactions among social forces (e.g., race, class, and gender) and personal quality (i.e., agency)” (Pugh-Lilly, Neville, & Poulin, 2000, p.144). Girls’ approaches to school tend to become aligned with class, race, values and expectations (AAUW, 1998). African American girls who desire to blend into and succeed within the normative culture of the school environment must learn the value of “code switching,” the ability to communicate with adults and teens across lines of culture and class. Typically, girls who pursue academic excellence must transcend both cultures (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002). They also have tremendous responsibility placed on them by both adults and peers who seek to use them as role models, thus making it more difficult for them to gain acceptance from their peers (Grantham & Ford, 1998, 2003).

There are differences between African American males’ and females’ in academic performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Research suggests that, a larger percentage of African American girls (56%) graduate from high school compared to African American males (43%) (Frazier-Kouassi, 2000). Scholars who study African American academic performance argue that African American girls experience more success in school than their male counterparts. The reason for this within-group disparity remains unclear; and this issue continues to be a major concern among educators. Smith (2000) proposed that “the topic of school as an institution” (p. 1147) that reproduces inequalities of gender, race and class, has

never been the major focus of research. The need for such research as it relates to African American high school girls is important to researchers and educators.

Theoretical Framework

Ogbu's (1998) cultural-ecological framework was used to examine the research questions in this study. Cultural ecological theory posits that:

There are two sets of factors influencing minority school performance: how society at large and the school treat minorities (the system) and how minority groups respond to these treatments and to school (community forces). The theory further posits that differences in school performance between immigrants and nonimmigrant minorities are partly due to differences in their community forces (p. 156).

Ogbu (1992, 2003) suggested that African Americans, as non-immigrant (involuntary) minorities, lack “instrumental factors that motivate” (Stinson, 2006, p.491) immigrant (voluntary) minorities to gain academic success. Ogbu (1992) suggested that cultural differences define different minorities. In his view, primary cultural differences, namely language and custom differences, characterize voluntary minorities, while secondary cultural differences - the school's unwillingness or inability to assist minorities to overcome these barrier – characterize involuntary minorities. He further contends that African Americans, as involuntary minorities, are reluctant to relinquish these cultural differences because they perceive them as part of their collective identity. These beliefs cause many African American to view academic success as “acting White” and so hinder their ability to achieve academic success. Ogbu (1999) contends that many African Americans lack the belief that hard work guarantees them a better financial future.

Cultural ecological theory suggests that social context greatly influences African American students' academic performance (Ogbu, 1999, 2004; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998) and self-perception (Booker, 2004). In this study, the social context pertains to the participants' school and home environment. Research suggests that school context, activities, personnel and

events influence students' self-perception and ultimately their academic performance (Osterman, 2000; Nasir & Hand, 2006; Stinson, 2006). The researcher sought to examine how school experiences along with such external factors as the home environment influenced high performance among a group of African American girls in 11 and 12 grade. In addition, an interpretivist stance was used to fully understand and interpret how these contexts influenced the participants' construction and interpretation of their high school experiences (Glesne, 1998). Interpretivism suggests that there are multiple realities to a phenomenon and that realities can differ based on location and contexts. Constructionism, the epistemological framework that supports interpretivism, suggests that meaning is not discovered but constructed by human beings as they engage with the work they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998).

Competing Theoretical Perspectives

Numerous controversies exist regarding Ogbu's cultural ecological theory. Many researchers argue that Ogbu's theoretical perspective blame African Americans for their lack of academic success (Foley, 2004; Foster, 2004; Mickelson, 2003) and does not sufficiently address the inequities that exist within schools and other institutions. Recent researchers therefore consistently use other theoretical perspectives to explain the school experiences of African American students. These include racial/cultural development identity theory (Sue & Sue, 1999), critical consciousness theory (Freire, 1998), and stereotype threat theory, (Steele, 1997). An overview of these theories is included in this study to provide a more holistic interpretation of the participants' data.

Racial/Cultural Development Identity

Racial/cultural identity development theory (Sue & Sue, 1999) posits that there are five stages of development that people of color or oppressed people experience as they seek to understand themselves "in terms of their own culture, the dominant culture, and the oppressive

relationship between the two cultures” (p. 128). These include conformity, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection, and integrative awareness. In the conformity stage, individuals possess a greater preference for the dominant culture’s values. They also internalize messages about the inferiority of minorities and “self-depreciating attitudes and beliefs” (Delgado-Romero, 2001, p. 210). In the dissonance stage, individuals must deal with information or experiences that conflict with the beliefs, attitude and values of the dominant culture. During this stage individuals become suspicious of the dominant culture and begin to challenge previously held beliefs and assumptions. In the resistance and immersion stage, individuals embrace minority beliefs and reject the dominant culture. Feelings of guilt, shame and anger are dominant during this stage. During the introspection stage, individuals discover that the guilt, shame and anger from the previous stage “stifle individuality and are preventing a shared sense of experience with other minorities” (Delgado-Romero, 2001, p. 210). A reactive sense of self is therefore replaced with a proactive sense of self at this stage. Finally in the integrative stage, individuals develop an inner security that allows them to appreciate the unique and positive aspects of their culture and other minority cultures.

Critical Consciousness Theory

Critical consciousness is conceptually anchored in the work of Paulo Freire (1998) and is defined as “the development of critical awareness of how personal dynamics unfold within social and political contexts” (Hernandez, Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 2005, p. 110). Through critical consciousness, individuals gain a new understanding of themselves and their capacity to transform various realities within their lives. It presupposes that as individuals transform themselves, they simultaneously transform their relationships with others and their communities. Freire (1998) posits that critical consciousness involves the various stages through which people transform themselves. These include the (a) naïve, (b) mythological and (c) critical. During the

first stage, naïve, individuals “lack insight into the way in which their social conditions undermine their well being,” (Campbell & McPhail, 2002, p. 334) and do not believe that they have the capacity to change their conditions. At the mythological stage, individuals recognize the various inequities that exist in their conditions; however, their reactions to it are primarily emotional. In the final stage, critical, individuals are empowered to critically analyze the conditions that shape their life experiences and work collectively to change these conditions. This transformation ultimately results in a remodeling of their lives and their communities.

Stereotype Threat Theory

Steele’s (1997) stereotype threat theory posits that negative stereotypes about certain stigmatized groups’ intellectual or academic ability on any given domain can lead to high levels of anxiety and so impact their academic performance. For example, research suggests that stereotype threat is manifested in low standardized test scores among African Americans. In the case of gender, research indicates that females who have internalized negative stereotypes regarding their mathematical skills could perform below their potential on these tests, however, if these negative stereotypes were replaced with more positive perceptions of their ability, their performance greatly improved (McGlone & Aronson, 2007).

Stereo-type threat is therefore a . . . “social-psychological threat that occurs when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype of one’s group applies” . . . A stereotype threat is a “situational threat. . .that, in general can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists” (Steele, 1997, p. 614).

Stereotype threat becomes self-fulfilling or self-threatening when group members strongly identify with a behavior that “has been atypically stereotyped for that specific group such as the case for school success among African Americans” (Stinson, 2006, p. 489). Stereotype threat therefore becomes non-existent if group members reject the stereotyped behavior as a basis of

their self-evaluation. In the case of African Americans, stereotype is no longer a threat when they reject academic failure as being part of their self-identity.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that influenced high performance among African American high school girls from the students' perspective. Through the utilization of multiple case studies, this study provided a description and an explanation of the factors that impact the school experiences of African American high school girls (Stake, 2000). Individual semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and researcher-prescribed journal entries for the participants were used to gather data. Utilizing a constructionist framework, the researcher considered the students' perceptions of their experiences within the high school context. Qualitative methodology was used to give students a voice to fully express their perceptions of those factors that have influenced their high academic performance within the high school context.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions

1. How do high school African American girls view their school experience?
2. How do they describe factors that motivate/discourage academic success?
3. From the African American girls' perspective:
 - a. How do they think teachers influence their academic success?
 - b. How are teachers' expectations for academic success for participants and other students similar/different?
 - c. How does identity influence their academic performance?
 - d. How do race and gender influence their school experience?
 - e. How do parents influence their academic performance?

Significance of Study

Individuals' earning power, social status, and standard of living are all considerably affected when they have not earned a high school diploma (Lange & Lehr, 1999). Each African American girl who does not succeed or realize her potential in school creates a financial burden for her community and society as a whole (Manlove, 1998). Frazier-Kouassi (2002) maintained that "the experience of African American girls' in American schools as differentiated by the group experiences of African Americans as well as that of females, is a subject that has received relatively little attention by both scholars and the media" (p. 157). Added to this, little is known about the factors that influence high academic performance among African American high school girls. Qualitative inquiry offered a way to explore the interactions and processes that occur among high-performing African American females within one high school. This type of inquiry generated an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the factors that affected academic performance among African American girls from their perspectives. This study also examined the African American females' perceptions of the high school environment and school personnel, their beliefs regarding school and academic performance, and how factors such as parental involvement and teacher beliefs and expectations influenced their academic performance.

The findings of this study provided participants' insights into the factors that influence high academic performance among African American high school girls. A better understanding of the factors that influence high academic performance among African American high school girls may assist educators, school administrators and policymakers in developing the infrastructures that are needed to increase academic performance among all African American high school girls. Increased academic performance among African American high school girls is

likely to increase their earning power and reduce the likelihood of them becoming financial burdens to society.

Limitations

This study was designed to explore the school experiences of high-performing African American high school girls in grades 11 and 12, as seen through the eyes of students within a single high school located in north central region of Florida. Perceptions regarding the factors that influence high performance among African American high school students were limited to the participants' viewpoints.

The number of participants in the study was also limited by the availability of African American high school girls in grades 11 and 12 that have GPAs of 3.5 and above on a 4.0 scale and their willingness to participate. Although the researcher shares the same ethnicity and gender of the participants, differences in age might have caused the participants to be unwilling to share their thoughts on the topic under study. Participants may also have been apprehensive about authentically sharing their perceptions because they did not know the researcher.

The students were recruited from a high school within a single district. Therefore, the findings of this study may only be applicable to the context of this study. However, the findings may be meaningful for African Americans high school girls in similar situations or geographic locations.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of research related to (a) African American girls' high school experiences, (b) African American parents' influence and involvement in their children's academic experiences, (c) African American academic identity and beliefs regarding school, (d) teachers' beliefs and expectations regarding African American students, and (e) the African American culture.

African American Girls' High School Experiences

According to research, African American students continue to demonstrate poor academic performance (Fletcher, 1998; Ogbu, 2003). Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, and Williams (2002) maintained that the persistent low academic performance of African Americans continues to perplex educators in the United States. Fletcher (1998) and Ogbu (2003) found that "even in prosperous middle-class school districts like Shaker Heights, Ohio which spends more than \$10,000 per child per year, African American students continue to exhibit poor academic performance" (Pino & Smith, 2000, p. 114). Ogbu (2004) suggested that many African American students underachieve in school because they do not want to be accused of "acting white" by their African American classmates and other peers.

African American males and females experience school differently. While African American males are "more likely to be behind in school and have lower grades" (p. 82), African American females tend to experience more academic success which increases their confidence in their academic abilities and self worth (Gregory, 1997). Saunders, Williams, and Williams (2004) suggest that different social responses to African American males and females cause African American males to question the relevance and importance of a high school education,

while African American girls typically have more positive perceptions and attitudes about the benefits of a high school diploma, and as a result expend greater effort in school.

In a study exploring the gender differences in self perceptions and academics among African American high school students, the researchers found that African American high school girls were more determined to complete high school than their male counterparts. Saunders et al. (2004) suggested that this could be a reflection of the societal messages that African American girls receive regarding the lucrative benefits of a high school education. African American girls have also reported “higher levels of academic self-efficacy and importance of school completion to self” (p. 87). Despite these positive attributes, Frazier-Kouassi (2001) suggests that African American girls, and in particular African American gifted girls, are at greater risk than White girls for underperformance, dropping out of school, and school failure.

Racial stigma plays a significant role in the poor performance of all African American high school students (Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Zirkel, 2002). African Americans face negative stereotypes that portray members of their ethnic group as less intelligent than Whites (Steele, Spenser & Aronson; 2002). Tatum (2003) claimed that “living in the context of a larger African American community presents more choices, yet African American women still have to contend with devaluing messages about who they are, and who they will become, especially if they are poor or working class” (p. 57). In her view, “resisting stereotypes and affirming other definitions” (p. 57) of themselves is one of the task with which young African American women continue to struggle. Akom (2003), however found that African American girls were able to resist these stereotypes when they had supportive peers who had common academic goals. These peers “relied on each other” (Hubbard, 2005, p. 614) for help in dismantling the negative

stereotypes that existed about them, and for maintaining their commitment to academic excellence.

The academic climate of the school coupled with students' academic identity may influence students' engagement behaviors and feelings of attachment to school (Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder Jr., 2001). Grantham and Ford (1998, 2003) asserted that many gifted African Americans girls felt forced to choose between being accepted by peers and fulfilling teachers' expectation. They highlighted the challenges faced by a gifted African American female, Danisha, to fulfill teachers' expectations for her. As one of the few African American girls in the school's advanced classes she felt "pressured by teachers to be the leader and spokesperson for her African American peers" (Grantham, & Ford, 1998, p. 98). Although she welcomed this responsibility, she resented the feelings of isolation that accompanied this job.

African American girls must negotiate both race and gender to succeed in school. Pickens (2002) found that many African American girls expressed their "dissatisfaction with the low priority given to their pursuit of academic excellence" (p. 24). They claimed that males received preferential treatment in regards to household chores. However, they frequently had to neglect their schoolwork to care for their young siblings and do housework. This trend continues where African American girls have consistently been excluded from mathematics and science in school (AAUW, 1998; Park & Bauer, 1999; Russell, 2005). This prevents them from "pursuing lucrative careers in the sciences and experiencing economic and social mobility" (Russell, 2005, p. 168). African American girls also reported that that they had to adopt a confrontational attitude to encourage people to acknowledge and listen to them (Shaffer, Ortman & Denbo, 2002).

Typically, African American girls (a) get cited more frequently for dress code violations (b) receive more discipline referrals than their White peers (c) are disciplined in class more frequently for being talking back to teachers, and (d) receive more suspensions than their White, Latina and Asian peers (Smith, 1999; Frazier-Kouassi, 2002). Many school personnel also view African American girls as being “loud” and believe that this behavior signifies “social backwardness, and a general lack of appropriate values and taste” (Cousins, 1999, p. 308). Morris (2005) also found that many school personnel viewed African American girls as “inadequately feminine” (p. 44), and spent more time correcting their speech and dress patterns, and less time promoting their academic skills. In contrast, some African American girls are often viewed as being passive, dependent and full of self-doubt (Matthews-Armstead, 2002).

Ladson-Billings (2001) hypothesized that students of color may become alienated from the school process because they are often asked to be something or someone other than themselves. In some cases, White girls and White teachers perceive African American girls’ verbal assertiveness as problematic, intimidating and unfeminine. This perception creates more obstacles for African American girls within schools (Pugh-Lilly, et al., 2001). Collectively, African American girls have consistently struggled with the dominant image of beauty. Some African American girls “assimilate and appropriate the physical attributes and/or behavioral affects of the dominant White female culture to gain acceptance and make friends at school. This may involve straightening their hair, using creams to lighten the skin, and/or code switching” (Scott, 2004, p. 384). Nonetheless, some African American girls still experience rejection from their White counterparts at school.

Hubbard (1999, 2005) found that whereas African American males tend to rely on athletics to secure a better social and financial future, African American females tend to rely on academic

and peer support. Lareau and Horvat (2003) suggest that many African American girls have been able to achieve academic success because of the positive support of their peers. They claim that supportive friends helped to reduce the psychological stress that often accompanies their academic success.

School counselors are responsible for providing school-based direct services and interventions for students with personal, social, academic, and career difficulties (Riester, 2002). In a study conducted by Hubbard (2005), African American girls reported that they received unequal treatment from counselors which potentially affected their chances of being admitted to college. They suggested that the counselor (a) discouraged them from applying to notable colleges, (b) consistently gave them information for trade school and two year colleges, and (c) discouraged them from enrolling in advanced level courses. Butler (2002) emphasizes the importance of school counselors working collaboratively with school administrators, parents, and teachers in addressing the discriminatory attitudes and practices that prevents more African American students from being placed in college track programs. He maintains that school counselors, as social agents of change, could reduce some of the distrust that African American students and their families have regarding school counselors, and ensure that a larger percentage of these students receive the college preparation that they need.

African American Students' Identity and Beliefs

African American Students' Identity

The influence of racial identity on an individuals' academic performance has been the focus of many studies related to African American students. Racial identity development, the "process of defining for oneself the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial group" (Tatum, 2003, p. 16) is a complex concept "shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors and social and political contexts" (p. 18).

Tatum suggested that as children enter adolescence they begin to explore the question of identity. These identities are usually influenced by the messages that they receive from those around them. The racial content of these messages intensifies when young African American men and women enter adolescence.

Howard (2003) asserted that the concept of identity has many interpretations. He pointed out that adolescents become more aware of their identities within a racial, gender and academic context during high school. Like Tatum (2003), Kao (2000) maintained that “students become more aware of their self-identities during adolescence, however, for ethnic minorities, establishing their racial and/or ethnic self-identity becomes a central concern” (p. 429) during this period. She found that one of the major challenges for high achieving African Americans is to maintain academic success and their ethnic/racial identity simultaneously. Kao (2000) reported that many African American students compromised their academic success “to prove their loyalty to their Black peers” (p. 436). Conversely, African Americans, who had internalized dominant perception of race with all its inaccuracies and stereotypes, chose to avoid affiliations based on racial group and to de-emphasize race as an aspect of their social identity (Thompson, 2002). To avoid the stereotypes associated with being African Americans, these students avoided all activities that were associated with “Blackness” (Tatum, 2003, p. 63). Students also reported being “alienated by other African American teens because of their success in high school” (p. 62).

Racial and academic identity influences the academic choices of African American students (Howard, 2003). In a study of high achieving African American and Mexican students, Bergin and Cook (2002) found that some African American girls relinquished their ethnic identity to achieve academic success, while others did not feel pressured to do the same. Wright,

Weekes, and McGlaughlin (1999) proposed that African American students' beliefs about self and race relate to their educational and social development, and to their attitudes and self evaluation regarding education. They may therefore "reject the forms of knowledge available within schools and embrace alternative forms of knowledge available within their communities" (p. 297). African American students, who "recognize inequities in economic and social mobility for their group" (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood and Zimmerman, 2003, p. 1077), may find education useless for their goals and aspirations and demonstrate less engagement and effort in school. Schools often force African Americans students to relinquish their social, cultural and ethnic integrity to achieve academic success. However, unlike their male peers, African American girls do succeed, despite inequitable environments because of their persistence to challenge institutional discrimination (Hubbard, 2005). In her study, Hubbard described how a group of African American girls who felt singled out for being tardy and placed in ISD [In-School Detention], vehemently voiced their frustrations and appealed to one of their teachers to advocate for them. Their assertiveness resulted in them securing a meeting with an assistant principal to voice their concerns, and they were given the opportunity to complete the assignments they missed. This action increased their feelings of self-efficacy and reinforced their belief that they could successfully navigate the educational system.

Academic identity impacts the choices that many African American students make in school (Howard, 2003). Many gifted African American students intentionally underachieved in school because displaying superior competence required abandoning their own cultural and ethnic knowledge and identity. Many marginalized students disengaged from school when they perceived that their cultural knowledge and identity was viewed as unimportant (Ford & Harris, 1999; Grantham & Ford, 1998, 2003). Although not all African Americans place the same

importance on racial identity (Cross, Strauss & Fhaghan-Smith, 1999), gender may strongly influence students' perception and behaviors in and out of school even when students share the same racial and class identity" (Hubbard, 2005, p. 606). Saunders et al. (2004) reported that a "strong African American identity increases school persistence and performance for girls" (p. 83).

African American Students' Beliefs

"Cultural ecological theory suggests that African American students' performances are chiefly influenced by the students' perception of themselves within the context of the school" (Booker, 2004, p. 132). Likewise, Chavous, et al. (2003) suggested that African American youths' beliefs about race and self relate to their educational and social development, their attitudes and through their self evaluation regarding education. For example, in a study examining the linkages between two African American girls' sociocultural orientations and their self-perceptions of their ability to succeed in mathematics, Moody (2004) found that an individual's social realities influenced their self-perceptions of their ability to succeed. For one participant, belonging to a social circle that viewed the school curriculum and academic success as being a White domain, forced her to adapt her behavior to achieve academic success. In contrast, the other participant did not believe that she had to assimilate into the White culture or school's culture to achieve academic success, because her cultural experiences mirrored that of the school's culture.

Students' perspectives may represent the most important aspect of reality (Richman, Rosenfield & Bowen, 1998). Miller-Cribbs, Cronen, Davis and Johnson, (2002) found that although African American students believed that school completion was important to their futures, they did not expect that school completion would help them get jobs or acquire material goods. Rosenbloom and Way (2004) reported that African American and Hispanic students

believed that teachers favored and had high expectations for Asian American students but not for them. When African American youths were exposed to conditions of underperformance among their group, they assumed that academic performance was a White domain. To avoid “acting White” they disassociated themselves from any academic behavior that might be perceived as White.

Teachers play a major role in developing positive relationships with students within their classroom. Howard ((2003) found that many African American students believed that they were placed in lower academic tracks because teachers thought they were incapable of learning. Many students also reported that teachers did not demonstrate genuine concern for their personal and academic well being, and offered no “encouragement or support for their academic pursuits” (p. 14). Horvat and Antonio (1999) reported that high-achieving African American girls in predominantly White schools felt alienated and were disengaged with teachers, viewed the curriculum as fragmented, and found school somewhat meaningless. African American girls also perceived that race and racism mediated how school personnel reacted to their actions/behaviors within school (Pugh-Lilly, et al., 2001). They believed that the consequences meted out to them for inappropriate actions were more severe than those for White girls with similar actions. However, they also reported that they participated in sports to improve the school’s perception of them and to increase their sense of connection to others in school.

African American Parental Involvement

Although there has been an increase in educational attainment and performance among different ethnic groups, African Americans remain significantly overrepresented among low-achieving students and underrepresented among high achievers (Howard, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education (2000a) asserted that family

involvement is linked to better attendance, higher test scores, grades, rate of homework completion, and a greater likelihood of college attendance.

Parental involvement is strongly associated with the academic performance among African American students (Drew, 1999; Jarrett & Burton, 1999). Research suggests that it is a key factor in academic performance among African American students (Hill & Craft, 2003; Epstein, 2001; Jarrett & Burton, 1999). As schools grapple with the complex task of meeting the needs of its diverse student population, the importance of collaboration between parents and schools has become increasingly significant (Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2003).

Racial discrimination has undermined the ability of African American parents to fully participate in their children's academic experiences (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). As a result, many African American parents become critical of the school's agenda and unwilling to support and or respect its goals and objectives. This causes many teachers to approach parental involvement with apathy and distrust. Thus, even when African American parents do try to become involved, some teachers reject their efforts, which further widens the interaction divide between African American parents and the school (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Researchers suggest that many African American parents do not attend school functions. This causes many educators to believe that African American parents do not care about their children's education (Thompson, 2003). However, Field-Smith (2005) found that although many "teachers often perceive African American parents as uninvolved and disinterested in their children's education" (p. 130), "[they] valued the education of their children and made it a priority in their lives (p.133)." According to Yan (1999), parents of successful African American students were more likely to participate in school activities (e.g., PTA meetings, school volunteer activities) than were parents of non-successful African American students.

Parental involvement can increase school performance (Bowen & Bowen, 1998a; Howard, 2003; Trotman, 2001). Research however suggests that parents typically communicate more frequently with the school when their children are perceived to be at risk. Parental involvement is highly important for pushing the public school systems to higher standards (Machen, Wilson & Notar, 2000). In addition, research indicates that engaging parents who play an active role in the school curriculum can open alternative opportunities for children to succeed in academics (Nistler & Angela, 2000).

Research suggested that parents' response to the school of their children ultimately influences academic performance (Gutman & McLloyd, 2000). They found that parents of high-achieving African American students used various strategies to assist their children at home such as tutoring, additional academic work, and close monitoring of their children's homework schedule. These parents held high expectations for their children's academic performance and supported their academic aspirations. Parents of high-achieving African American students also consistently visited the school to check on their children's progress and to maintain contact with school personnel. They ensured that their children were actively involved in various types of community-based activities such as dance, art, music and religious groups.

Social class and parental involvement. Family structure and socioeconomic status greatly affects African American parental involvement (Trotman, 2001; Park & Bauer, 2002). Middle-class and working-class African American parents "often navigate very different educational environments" (Diamond & Gomez, 2004, p. 387). Typically working-class African American parents live in more difficult neighborhoods and near lower quality schools than their middle class African American parents. Middle-class African American parents also tend to have greater access to human, financial, social and cultural resources than working-class parents. This

means that working-class parents are forced to navigate a more difficult terrain with fewer resources. Clearly, social class influences the academic choices that African American parents can make for their children. Typically, working class and poor African American families are more critical of schools than middle-class and affluent African American families (Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

Middle-class and working-class African American parents tend to “customize their children’s school experiences” (Diamond & Gomez, 2004, p.387) differently. Middle-class African American parents, however, are more proactive in selecting their children’s school and are more involved in the course placement decisions of their children. Working class African American parents tend to be more confrontational towards school personnel when they do intervene on their children’s behalf than middle-class African American parents (Diamond, 2000; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). According to Thompson (2003) this type of interaction may be attributable to their own school experiences. In many cases, they may have had unsuccessful educational outcomes or were not pleased with the education they had received. As a result, they seek quality education for their children. Conversely, middle-class African American parents who had successful histories with school tend to seek positive school environments for their children.

Kao and Tienda (1998) found that socioeconomic status greatly influenced the educational aspirations of girls. They stated that when economic and material resources were controlled, girls reared by single parents tended to have higher aspirations in grade 8, but that this aspiration was not maintained throughout high school. A long history of unsuccessful experiences with schools for some African Americans continues to influence the quality of their involvement (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In addition, parents whose cultural backgrounds are unlike those of

the mainstream within the school district, are placed at distinct disadvantages thus creating socio-cultural borders (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998).

Teachers' Expectations/Beliefs Regarding African American Students

Behar-Horenstein (1994) proposed that teachers have a “substantial impact on the maturation and development” (p. 45) of their students. Because teachers spend long periods of time with their students, their expectations and perceptions of their students have a significant effect on their academic performance (Booker, 2004; Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). Warren (2002) and Ladson-Billings (2001) posited that low teacher expectation usually resulted in students being exposed to a mediocre curriculum and low teacher effort. Research suggests that students tend to internalize the beliefs that teachers have about their ability and generally perform to the level of expectation of their teachers (Landsman, 2004). Teachers' low expectations are a form of discrimination that African American and Latino students face on a daily basis (Howard, 2001; Lipman, 1998).

Research indicates that many teachers have lower academic expectations for African American students than for White students (Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996; Reyna 2000; Richman et al., 1998). Jussim, et al. (1996) found that teacher expectations were three times greater for White than for African American students and that the effects were similar for girls and low-income students. Likewise Reyna (2000) posited that many teachers believe that low income students were incapable of learning and were therefore less likely to work hard to improve their students' academic performance. Matthews-Armstead's (2002) found that African American girls also complained that teachers offered them no encouragement or guidance on issues related to college. They noted that many teachers made college seem unrealistic to them and were more focused on just getting them out high school.

Casteel (1997) found that African American students were more sensitive to their teachers' perception than their White classmates. These subtle expectations and beliefs also influenced how African American students were treated in the classroom. Many teachers held negative misconceptions and expectations for African American students and treated them differently thereby creating negative experiences for African American students (Graybill, 1997). Teachers who underestimate their students' potential tend to set goals that are too low, thus denying the human potential among African American students (Ferguson, 2003).

African American students are successful in the classroom when they have teachers who respect and understand their culture (Boykin & Bailey, 2000). Teachers can inadvertently impede their students' learning by adhering to their values when conflicts related to cultural values occur (Graybill, 1997). Teachers' prejudices and stereotypes cause them to form assumptions that influence their actions and interfere with teaching effectiveness through actions such as setting low expectations and exposing students to less challenging curricula. Irvine (1999) argued that White teachers continually make negative assumptions regarding African American students' intellectual abilities and classroom behavior based on negative stereotypes that are perpetuated by the media. These negative assumptions have resulted in the placement of many African American students in special education classes, because they demonstrated oppositional behaviors in the classroom or failed to respond to the teachings or instructions (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

Race affects class assignment (Bartlett & Braybody, 2005; Russell, 2005). For example, African Americans and Hispanics are overrepresented in both special education and lower tracks. Norman, Ault, Bentz and Meskimen (2002), found that although enrollment in Advanced Placement classes has continued to grow nationally, minority students remain underrepresented

in such programs. Many teachers avoid asking African American students complex questions because they believe that they will not know the answer (Landsman, 2004). This inequity has a deleterious impact on students' academic, professional, and personal success and leads to the reproduction of society's inequities and injustices.

Teachers who are unfamiliar with the African American culture tend to overreact when students exhibit behaviors that they don't see exhibited in their cultural contexts (Irvine & Armento, 2001). Interestingly, Casteel (2000) found that African American high school students frequently complained that some teachers, especially White teachers, do not relate well to them. Behar-Horenstein (1994) emphasized the need for teachers to create an environment that fosters an understanding and appreciation for different points of view. Ladson-Billings (2001) also stressed the need for culturally relevant classroom instruction. In her view, culturally relevant teaching methods do not suggest to students that they are incapable of learning. She contends that teachers with culturally relevant practices have the belief that all students can succeed and seek to help students make connections between their community, national and global identities.

The African American Culture

Tillman (2002) defines culture as "a group's individual and collective ways of thinking, believing, and knowing, which includes their shared experiences, consciousness, skills, values, forms of expression, social institutions, and behaviors" (p.4). Research suggests that "African Americans have a complicated cultural reality that is rooted in both African cosmology and the historical and contemporary experiences of being Black in America" (Dill & Boykin, 2000, p. 68). Embedded in this culture is a strong sense of "connectedness and responsibility to one's group" (Boykin, Jagers, Ellison & Albury, 1997, p. 411).

Role of Communalism

Sankofa, Hurley, Allen and Boykin (2005) asserted that communalism is “a form of collectivism and is described as a cooperative and affiliative orientation” (p. 249).

Communalism emphasizes “social bonds, an awareness of interconnectedness among people, and a sense of mutual responsibility” (Hurley, Boykin & Allen, 2005, p. 516). “ ‘I am because we are’ represents a common generative theme in Black philosophy and in understanding African American social and historical experiences” (Seiler & Elmesky, 2007, p. 396). This theme has been the central belief of many African groups, and was developed as a response to historical and current racial oppression and marginalization. The concept of communalism is a stark contrast to the interaction patterns occurring in many classrooms where teacher-led instruction, and individual student recognition predominates and perpetuates the status quo in which most African American students do not achieve academic success. Research suggests that African American students perform better in communal learning contexts than they do in those contexts that emphasize competition and individualism (Albury, 1993; Dill & Boykin, 2000; Hurley, et al., 2005). Dill and Boykin (2000) found that when African American students were given a text-learning task and placed in a communal learning context, they recalled significantly more text than those students that were assigned peer tutors or placed in individual contexts. A later study by Hurley, et al. (2005) replicated the previous finding in the context of a mathematics classroom with similar results.

It should, however, not be construed that all African Americans exhibit communalism to the same degree, as variations do exist within the African American culture and subculture (Sewell, 1999). The premise of communalism should however provide an indication of the value placed on group participation and interaction among African Americans. Typically African American homes and communities school their children to value interpersonal relationships,

group identity formation, and shared responsibility. Therefore, incorporating these familiar themes into their learning contexts creates positive learning outcomes (Hurley, et al., 2005).

Role of Gender

African American feminist scholars asserted that “African American girls/women experiences are shaped by a web of interactions among social forces (e.g., race, class, and gender), and personal quality (i.e., agency)” (Pugh-Lilly, et al., 2000, p.146). African American women, like other women, continue to maintain secondary roles in society, however “the interface of race and class produces distinct and different roles” (Hill, 2002, p. 495) for them. Within many African American homes, women assume primary roles related to providing economic and social stability for the family. Research suggests that African American girls “learn gender roles that often emphasize a combination of traditional gender-typed values, along with teaching the importance of economic self-reliance, community activism, and assertiveness. In her (2002) study, Hill indicated that African American girls who grew up in homes where parents had some college education were schooled to value gender equality and independence. She posited that in these homes, parents stressed the importance of education, and the values of having viable careers that would make them successful in the job market and less dependent on their male spouses. However, she also found that less emphasis was placed on teaching gender equality in homes that had less educated parents. Although traditional gender roles were emphasized within these homes, parents still had an underlying belief in gender equality in the workplace.

Family structure influences gender-role socialization. Research suggests that children in single-parent family homes are socialized according to less traditional gender roles (Leve & Fagot, 1997). Traditionally, a larger percentage of African American children come from single-parent family households. As a consequence, egalitarian gender roles tend to be more

prominent. Because African American women tend to be the major ‘breadwinners’ they are typically taught to define themselves as being independent, self-reliant, and aggressive in achieving their goals (Slavkin & Straight, 2000).

Role of Parents

African American parents play an instrumental role in teaching their children to successfully navigate life’s social realities. This includes instilling positive self-concepts, emphasizing the importance of having a positive racial identity, and developing the ability to effectively adapt and “live in the dominant society” (Thomas, 2000, p. 319). Racism, negative media images, and stereotypes make the task of parenting more difficult for African American parents (Thomas & Speight, 1999). Because parents “serve as the primary socializing agents for children” (p. 153), they must implicitly and explicitly prepare their children to cope with racism. This involves raising their children to be physically and emotionally healthy to cope with the numerous inequities that exist.

African American girls are constantly confronted with negative messages about who they are (Diller, 1999). Parents must therefore develop the global self-esteem that they need to avert the numerous racist and sexist ideas that demean African American females. Because African American mothers are often the only parent, they must serve as catalysts of change as they prepare their daughters to face society’s racial, social, and economic challenges. This involves being supportive and protective, being positive role models in setting and achieving their personal goals, providing positive images of womanhood, and teaching their daughters to circumvent the numerous barriers and inequities that exist (Turnage, 2004).

The disproportionate absence of African American fathers from many homes does not negate the roles that they must also play in preparing their daughters to be successful and productive members of society. Like African American mothers, fathers must “draw from varied

resources to provide protection for and teach valuable survival skills to their daughters” (Davis-Maye, 2004, p. 56). While tangible financial support is necessary, African American fathers’ ability to provide for the holistic needs of their daughters, by providing emotional and moral support, is extremely important. A study conducted by Davis-Maye (2004) found that African American girls “benefit from healthy supportive relationships with their fathers when these fathers are able to direct and model relationship development and decision-making skills,” (p. 64), and that this contributed to an increased hope in their ability to achieve academic and economic success. African American parents, as agents of change, must therefore transmit the values, belief and ideas that socialize their daughters to accept adult roles and responsibilities in society.

Summary

The underperformance of African American children and adolescents has been a longstanding concern for educators, policymakers and researchers (Howard, 2001, Morris, 2005). The disparity in the academic performance between African Americans and their White peers leaves many unanswered questions. Although “issues of gender bias also figure in inequitable school” (p. 51), there is a dearth of information on the school experiences of high achieving African American high school girls (Smith, 2000).

Teachers’ academic expectations have a profound influence on student performance. Their cultural backgrounds also influence their perceptions of what is appropriate social behavior. Teachers who believe stories of academic success (and failure) and focus solely on one’s personal attributes tend to hold lower expectations for those students whom they perceive have limited ability. These subtle expectations have hindered the academic progress of many African American students (Gayle & Densmore, 2002; Graybill, 1997; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson & Bridgest, 2003).

Parents' behaviors and expectations influence students' self-perceptions and performance. Yet misconceptions exist regarding African American parental academic expectations for their children. Despite beliefs that African American parents hold lower academic aspirations and expectations for their children, research has shown that parents' educational aspirations and levels of investment in education are relatively consistent across racial groups and social class (Henig, Hula, Orr & Pedescleaux, 1999; Halle, Costes, & Mahoney, 1997).

The uniqueness of the African American culture cannot be overlooked. Research suggests that communalism, gender, and parents play integral roles in assisting African girls to excel. Communalism, as it relates to the African American culture, demonstrates the importance of providing opportunities for interpersonal connections within the classroom. Family structure has in many ways formulated African American's perception of gender roles. In many cases, these perceptions contradict those of the dominant culture where more traditional views of gender roles are practiced. The important role that African American parents play is socializing their daughters to overcome negative racial and social stereotypes makes parenting more difficult.

There is a need for research that can increase our theoretical understanding of marginalized students high-performing and low-performing' school experiences. This study focused solely on the school experiences of high-performing students because they too, are a vulnerable population (Conchas & Clark, 2002; Ferguson, 2003; Howard, 2003). Qualitative research facilitated an in-depth examination of school processes and how they continue the deliberate and subtle cycle of inequality. Identifying the factors that influence high performance among African American high school girls will be helpful in broadening the perspectives of school personnel by adding voices of students to the body of knowledge and also to address gaps in knowledge about the school experiences of high-performing female African American high school students (Creswell,

2005). The information provided through such research is likely to assist school personnel to better meet the academic needs of this population (Gibson, 2005; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Zirkel, 2005).

CHAPTER 3 METHODS

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology, research setting, participants, instrumentation, and to outline the procedures utilized for data collection and data analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the researcher's biases and how trustworthiness was established in this study.

Methodology

To better understand high school experiences of a group of high achieving African American high school girls in 11 and 12 grade, the researcher used the method of multiple cases studies. In case study research, the investigator chooses what will be studied (Stake, 1995, 2000; Creswell, 1998) such as a single phenomenon. "By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon" (Merriam, 1998, p. 29). Multiple case study "involves collecting and analyzing data from several cases. The multiple case study method allowed the researcher to collect "comprehensive, systematic and in-depth information" (Patton, 2000, p. 447) about the shared high school experiences of eight high-achieving African American girls in 11 and 12 grade. These students had grade point averages (GPA) of 3.5 and higher on a 4.0 scale at a specific site within a north central Florida school district, and were enrolled in Academy, Advanced Placement or honors programs. The Academy program is college preparatory curriculum. Students enrolled in this program have the opportunity to achieve an Academy diploma that guarantees them advanced placement in universities internationally. Conversely, Advanced Placement is a national curriculum that prepares students to take the College Board sponsored Advanced Placement exam. Students who receive scores of 3 to 5 are exempted from introductory college coursework at most colleges and universities in the United States. Honors

classes were developed by the local school district to meet the needs of talented students; however, they do not provide students with any college coursework exemptions.

Gaining Access

After receiving permission to conduct this study from University of Florida's Institutional Review Board (UFIRB), the researcher contacted the Director of Research and Evaluation at a local school district in Florida and was instructed to complete the application for permission to conduct the study. The director then contacted four high school principals within the district. Two principals contacted granted their approval. The researcher chose to conduct the study at the high school with the largest percentage of African American students. The principal of the high school called the researcher and expressed his willingness to assist in the study. He notified her that a high school staff member had been assigned to facilitate the researcher's access to the students and other necessary documentation. The researcher met with the contact staff member two weeks prior to the actual data collection and discussed how to best facilitate the individual and focus group interviews. During this meeting the staff member provided the names of African American girls who had cumulative GPAs of 3.5 and higher. The researcher met with prospective participants to discuss the study and invited them to participate. Each prospective participant received parental letters of consent, participants' informed consents and child assent forms during this meeting. The researcher also responded to questions related to the study during this meeting. For example, they asked (a) Who would read the study? (b) Would they identified at any time? and (c) How long would the study last?

The Site.

The study was conducted at a high school located in a north central region of Florida. Jamdung (pseudonym) High school is one of 15 high school in the Jam Rock school district (Jam Rock is a fictitious name used to preserve confidentiality) and houses two magnet programs.

The school student population is comprised of more than 1,900 students. The ethnic make up of the school's population is shown in Table 3-1. The ethnicity of the students in the Academy Program is reported in Table 3-2. In addition, the school employs 124 teachers and six guidance counselors. Historically, the majority of students attending Jamdung High are of African American descent, making it an ideal location for this study. The decision to use this location was based in part on the demographics of the school and because of the amicable relationships that the researcher had developed with many of the school administrators and staff members.

Participants

Initially, the researcher sought to recruit 14 African American girls in grades 11 and 12 with cumulative GPAs of 3.5 and higher. However, there were only 11 (< .005%) African American girls out of 1900 students who fulfilled these criteria. Because the prospective participants were under 18-years-old, a letter seeking parental consent was sent to each girl's parents. This letter described the aims of study. Also the contents of the letter provided each parent with an email address and phone number that they could use to contact the researcher. Each participant also received an assent letter. One parent contacted the researcher to clarify the format of the study and later gave her daughter permission to participate. Eight of the 11 girls received parental permission to participate. The researcher met with each participant and scheduled a convenient time to conduct each interview. Lofland and Lofland (1995) and Ortiz (2003) state that the confidentiality of the participant must be maintained throughout the project. The participants were therefore invited to choose their own pseudonyms. Each participant chose the names of their favorite female entertainer as their pseudonym. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used to describe the participants in the results sections of the study. Table 3-3 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the participants using their pseudonyms. This tables shows the participants' grade levels, cumulative grade point averages and program of study

Participants Profile

Aaliyah is one of three children who currently resides with both parents. Both her parents have high school diplomas. Her parents have an approximate combined income of \$30,000. She lists her hobbies as singing and dancing, and participates in both the school's cheerleading squad and student government. Aaliyah also has a part-time job.

Beyonce is one three children who currently lives with both her parents. Both her parents have college degrees. Her parents have an approximate combined income of \$70,000. She lists her hobbies as music and dancing, and participates in numerous extracurricular activities such as student government, Key Club, and the Spanish Club. In addition, she also volunteers weekly at a local retirement home.

Brandy is one of six children who lives with her mother. Her father does not participate in her life. Her mother's approximate income is \$25,000. Both her parents have high school diplomas. She lists her hobbies as working and playing on the computer, hanging out with her friends and talking on the phone. She does not participate in any extracurricular activity.

Cassie is one of three children who currently lives with both parents. Both her parents have high school diplomas. Her parents have an approximate combined income of \$ 40,000. She lists her hobbies as basketball and music. She does not participate in any extracurricular activities, and has a part-time job.

Ciera is one of two children who lives with her mother. Her mother has a high school diploma and earns an approximate income of \$18,000. She lists her hobbies as reading and listening to music. She does not participate in any extracurricular activity.

Erika is one of three children who currently lives with both her parents. Both her parents have high school diplomas. Her parents have an approximate combined income of \$40,000. She

lists her hobbies as watching TV, talking on the phone and hanging out with her friends. She does not participate in any extra-curricular activities, and has a part-time job.

Trina is one of four children who currently lives with her mother. Both her parents have some college education. Her parents have an approximate income of \$50,000. She lists her hobbies as reading, writing and poetry. She is currently a member of Precious Pearls, a junior sorority.

Veronica is one of four children who currently lives with her parents and two cousins. Her father has a high school diploma and her mother did not graduate from high school, but is gainfully employed. Her parents have an approximate combined income of \$30,000. She lists her hobbies as shopping, cooking and traveling and participates in the school's Pre-Collegiate club.

All the participants of this study were able to ignore the many negative stereotypes and perceptions that seem to cause many of their peers to not excel, namely: early parenting, drugs, and inequities within the school and general society. They all had the positive self-esteem and self-determinations that helped them to maintain high cumulative GPAs.

Instrumentation

The methods of data collection for this study were individual semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) and researcher-specified journal entries. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, nature of interview and the length of the interview. The main objective of the interviews was to encourage open discussions with the participants, while simultaneously giving them the opportunity to explore their perceptions and experiences.

Following Glesne's (1999) suggestion, peer reviewers were used to assess the first draft of the developed interview protocol. A fellow doctoral student and a recent doctoral graduate acted

as peer reviewers and assessed the questions for grammar, clarity, and relevance. The interview protocols were then field tested with a group of four high-achieving African American girls from a site not chosen for the study. The researcher met with each student and went over each question with them. Students were asked to tell what they thought the question was asking them and if they thought the question was worded clearly. The researcher also solicited their suggestions on ways in which the questions could be made more understandable. The students suggested the use of less complex vocabulary and pointed out questions that they thought were redundant. Revisions were made based on the suggestions that were made by both the peer reviewers and the students in the field test.

Individual student interviews were used to acquire African American high school girls' perceptions of their high school experience, a description of the factors that influence their engagement or disengagement in school, and a discussion of the value students placed on parental influence and involvement. Many of the interview questions were derived from the research related to the topic. Appendix A lists the questions that were used for the individual student interviews. The protocol used in this study was primarily comprised of open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to provide in-depth responses and permitted the researcher to "respond to the situation at hand," (Merriam, 1998, p. 74) and to further probe emerging issues. Individual interviews lasted from 35- 65 minutes. The first focus group was used to explore issues and themes that emerged during the individual interviews. This first group meeting lasted approximately 1½ hours. Appendix B lists the questions used during the first focus group. This protocol was also comprised of open-ended questions. The final focus group was used to get feedback on the researcher's reconstructions and interpretations of what was documented during the first focus group. The researcher also discussed her observations

and perceptions of the first focus group meeting with the participants. This interview lasted one hour. Refreshments were served during the second focus group meeting to demonstrate the researcher's appreciation for the participants' time and effort. A total of eight individual interviews, eight follow-up interviews and two focus meetings were conducted.

To fully capture the thoughts and feeling of the participants, each participant was provided with a nicely decorated journal to document their viewpoints on various issues related to their school experiences. Participants documented their thoughts from mid-November 2006 to mid-January 2007.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected from two sets of individual interviews, focus group meetings, students' journals, and researcher fieldnotes. Triangulation of the data contributed to the credibility of the results (Patton, 2002). Fieldnote comments and researcher reflections were recorded following each interview to ensure that the richness of the interviews were preserved in all cases, and to ensure that the researchers' experiences were recorded.

Journal entries followed both the individual and follow-up interviews. This provided the researcher an opportunity to further probe issues that surfaced during each of the interviews, and provided the participants the opportunity to elaborate on those issues that they were not able to fully explain during the one-on-one interviews. The initial and follow-up focus group meetings were consecutive to ensure that the issues that surfaced in the first focus group could be addressed within a timely manner and to also facilitate the participant's busy schedules. The final journal entry allowed the participants to respond to the researcher-prescribed topic and document their views on any topic that impacted their academic performance. (Figure 3-1).

Interviews

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) suggested that interviews may be used in two ways in qualitative research, as a dominant strategy for data collection, or in conjunction with other techniques. In this study, interviews were used in conjunction with the focus group meetings and journal entries. Interviews facilitated the gathering of descriptive data in the participants' own words so that the researcher could "develop insights on how participants interpret some piece of their world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 94). They contended that "good interviews are those in which the participants are at ease, and talk freely about their points of view" (p. 95). Glesne (1999) emphasizes the need to ensure privacy during interviews. Following these suggestions, each interview was conducted in one of the school's conference rooms. The room was well lit and the walls were decorated with various affirmation statements and framed pictures. A beautiful round conference table and very comfortable chairs were set in this room that was situated away from most of the other rooms in the building. The location of the room offered the necessary privacy. Prior to conducting each interview, the researcher reflected on the issue of personal biases to eliminate any pre-conceptions that existed about the participants (Bogdevic, 1999). The researcher therefore chronicled her thoughts regarding the topic being discussed and any apprehensions that she had regarding the interview or the individuals being interviewed. For example in one journal entry the researcher wrote:

Today is going to be challenging for me. A lot of the issues that came up in the first interview reminded me of the challenges faced by Patra (pseudonym for a close family member). I have to be careful to listen intently to the participant and not make any assumptions about what she is saying or about to say. This is going to be challenging. . . I probably should have chosen a different topic.

Glesne (1999) argued that "rapport is tantamount to trust, and trust is the foundation for facilitating full and detailed responses to questions" (p. 83). Like Glesne (1999), Bogdan and Biklen (1998) recommended that researchers develop a good rapport with participants to

encourage participants to talk freely about their experiences. Therefore the researcher took some time prior to each interview to find out how the participant's day was going, to reduce their nervousness and apprehension. Participants were also reminded that they could reschedule the interview if necessary. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) emphasized that researchers need to demonstrate genuine interest and pay close attention to the participants views, while bearing in mind that the participant is the "expert of his or her experiences" (p. 94). During the interview the researcher sat facing the participants with the tape-recorder visible on the conference table. This ensured that she could offer each participant her full attention and also permitted observation of the participants' non-verbal expressions. The researcher placed importance on understanding participants' views by listening carefully, paying attention to detail and using member checks (Ortiz, 2003; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). One-on-one in-depth tape-recorded semi-structured interviews, that lasted 35 to 65 minutes, were conducted with each participant. Field notes consisting of descriptive and reflective materials were developed at the end of each interview to reflect the researcher's thoughts and feelings prior to, during, and after the interview (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1999; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). In one of these field notes, the researcher described the challenges she faced maintaining her researcher role during the first focus group meeting. These field notes assisted the researcher in consistently examining her actions and thoughts during the process.

At the end of each interview the researcher thanked the participants for their time and effort and scheduled a follow-up interview. A total of eight initial and eight follow-up interviews were conducted. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher within two to five days of the interviews. Interview transcripts and reflective field journal notes were synthesized and typed into word processing computer files throughout data collection. This

allowed the researcher to examine areas that need to be revised or revamped for consecutive interviews and kept her deeply immersed into the data. Table 3-4 provides a list of dates and lengths of each of the first interviews.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with each participant to clarify statements that were ambiguous or that required further explanation. Table 3-5 provides the lists of dates and lengths of the follow-up (second) interviews. During the follow-up interviews, the researcher provided each participant with a copy of their interview transcript. Participants were asked to read the transcripts of their interviews, highlight interpretations they disagreed with, replace them with more accurate interpretations and return the transcript to the researcher in a self-addressed stamped envelope. Each of the eight participants returned the transcripts; however, only one made any modification to the transcript information. One participant also complimented the researcher by stating “great job, thank you.”

Focus Group Interviews

Patton (2001) suggests that the object of a focus group interview is to “get high quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (p. 386). Focus group interviews are useful for gaining adolescents’ perspectives on particular issues, because it creates an environment that stimulates a desire to discuss the issues being addressed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The protocol for the first focus group meeting was developed from the themes that emerged during the individual interviews. (Appendix B). This meeting was conducted in a larger conference room than the one used for the individual interviews. This room also served as a storage area for school supplies; however, it provided enough room for all the participants to be seated comfortably. Prior to the interview, the researcher read an assent script to remind the participants of the goals of the study, to reiterate that their participation was entirely voluntarily and that confidentiality would always be

maintained. (Appendix C) During the focus group interview, the researcher used a series of semi-structured interview questions to explore the participants' shared experiences regarding their high school experiences. In keeping with Ortiz's (2003) recommendation, the researcher began the focus group interview with a non-threatening question. The participants were asked "Who influences you the most to achieve academic excellence?" to reduce their level of apprehension. The participants expressed their viewpoints about the factors that influenced their decision to pursue academic excellence. During this process, the researcher ensured that each participant received equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion. This was challenging because some of the participants were extremely dominant. Some participants appeared apprehensive or unwilling to share their viewpoints during this meeting. Following the advice of a peer, the researcher decided to conduct the second focus group meeting at a different location.

The final focus group interview was conducted away from the site in the meeting room of a local restaurant to reduce students' apprehensions that surfaced during the first focus group. During the final focus group meeting the participants were provided with copies of the researcher's reconstructions and interpretations of what was discussed during the first focus group. During this session, the researcher encouraged the participants to provide their feedback regarding the accuracy of these reconstructions and interpretations and to make any necessary corrections to them. Two of the eight students made some corrections. For example one participant commented on the researcher's misinterpretation of an incident that occurred between her and a teacher, and the second participant commented on the researcher's misinterpretation of an incident between her and a family member. During discussions related to the researcher's observations and perceptions of the first focus group interview, three of the eight participants stated that it was difficult for them to express their views in a group setting, while others said

that they were cautious about providing negative views of their peers or teachers. The researcher again reminded the participants that their anonymity would be maintained throughout the study.

Journal Entries

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) suggest that journals/diaries “can be particularly effective in capturing peoples’ moods and intimate thoughts” (p. 135). Participants were asked to write journal entries related to issues that emerged during the interviews. Each participant was required to submit at least three journal entries on topics that were specified by the researcher. In the first journal entry, the researcher asked the participants to record school related events within a two week period that assisted them to achieve academic excellence. For the second journal activity the participants documented their goals for the future and how they planned to achieve these goals. For the final journal activity, the participants were asked to write about individuals in their lives (peers, teachers, parents, family, and community members) and their actions that influenced their decision to maintain high GPAs. Participants were also invited to document any event or viewpoint on any topic that affected their school experiences. Interestingly, five of the eight participants wrote that the pressure that was placed on them by family members and their community to do well in school provided the impetus for their academic excellence. The journal activities occurred over a six week period. Only seven of the eight participants chose to participate in the journal activity. (Table 3-6). At the end of this six-week period the entries of the participants were transcribed by the researcher using a word processing program.

Data Analysis

Hatch (2002) maintained that “data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned may be communicated to others” (p. 148). All data was analyzed using Hatch’s (2002) inductive analysis method. Inductive analysis is a search for patterns of meaning in data that guides the researcher to make general

statements regarding the phenomenon being studied. After carefully transcribing interviews and journals, and compiling field notes, the data was read and reread to identify “frames of analysis” (Hatch, 2002, p. 163). This provided “rough parameters” (p. 164) on how to begin examining the data. A total of 30 frames of analysis were identified during this process. Many of these frames of analysis were based on the questions used in the interview protocol, for example, “most liked school experiences,” and “motivation for class participation.”

The use of a three-columned table as a word document aided in the management of the data during this process. (Appendix D). Domains that reflected relationships represented in the data were then created. Hatch (2002) notes that “discovering domains gives researchers a way of getting at how participants organize their thoughts” (p. 165). A three column table also facilitated this stage of the analysis. One column listed the included terms, identifying the members of a category/domain, the second column listed the semantic relationships, and the final column listed the domain/category. (Appendix E).

The researcher then identified the domains that were germane to the study (salient domains) and used Roman Numerals to code them (Miles & Huberman, 1994, Patton, 2001). Following this the data was reread and potential quotes were copied and pasted into a three-column table. The table illustrated the salient domains, excerpts and data location. In listing the location the researcher noted the page number, line number and source of the data. (Appendix F). The next step involved deciding if the domains were supported by the data. During this step, the researcher sought to determine (a) if there was enough data to support the domain, (b) if the data were rich enough to defend the decision to included the domain, and (c) if there were any data that did not fit or “run counter to the relationships expressed in the domains” (Hatch, 2002, p 172). The researcher then examined the salient domains to identify if there were any “special

relationships” (Hatch, 2002, p. 172) between or among the domains. This process was undertaken to grasp a better understanding of what was being expressed within each domain and to determine if any further analysis within the domains was necessary. Following this, the researcher looked for themes that existed among the domains. A master outline was created at this stage to list the themes, domains/categories and examples of excerpts that could be used to support each theme. These themes were used to discuss the researcher’s findings.

Researcher’s Subjectivity

Qualitative researchers are always concerned with how subjectivity affects data analysis and the writings they produce (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Using qualitative methodologies, the researcher spends a considerable amount of time collecting and reviewing data. “This data must bear the weight of any interpretation, so the researcher must constantly confront his or her own opinions and prejudices” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p.33). Glesne (1999) emphasizes the need for researchers to monitor his or her subjectivity and to increase their “awareness of the ways in it might distort, but also increase its virtuous capacity” (p.109). She contends that this process allows the researcher to learn more about his/her own values, attitudes, beliefs, interests and needs. Interpretivism requires the researcher to dialogue with the participants and the data.

The topic that I studied affected me both personally and professionally. My decision to research this topic was based on the experiences that I have had at various junctures of my life. The viewpoints expressed by the participants were in many ways synonymous to some of my experiences, but more so to the experiences of the girls I taught both in my island home and in the United States. Therefore, I had to continuously analyze my thoughts to remain neutral throughout the study. The following provides a synopsis of some of the personal issues and challenges that I had to consistently address during both the data collection and data analysis phases of this study.

Early in my life, I learned that gender inequities existed within our society. On a personal level, I had to constantly battle with both my brothers as a child to participate in their “boy activities.” They constantly reminded me that I was a girl, and I constantly fought to prove to them that girls could be as strong, quick and as smart as any boy. I took this determination with me through high school and enrolled in those courses that were considered “male dominated.” I excelled in these courses and like many of the participants I learned that I could achieve any goal that I set myself; if I was willing to expend the effort that was necessary.

Several participants discussed the low expectations that many of their high school teachers held for them. As a young newly graduated teacher, in a country of limited resources, I was given the insurmountable task of encouraging 90 at-risk students to become engaged in the classroom. This daunting task taught me many lessons namely: (a) the value of high teacher expectation, (b) how important it was for teachers to identify the strengths each student took to the learning environment, (c) the resilience that many at-risk students possessed and (d) how important it was for students to identify the relevance of each assigned task. Like the participants in the study, these girls had numerous talents and strengths however, their zest for excellence had been snuffed out at an early age. They all had dreams, but doubted their ability to achieve these dreams.

These young women were excellent dancers. On numerous occasions during lunch break, I would watch them display their dance skills. They seemed alive and in-touch with their world during these idyllic periods. After much thought, I decided to form a dance group and invited each of these young women to participate, on two conditions (a) they each had to achieve and maintain at least above average grades in all their classes, and (b) they could have no discipline referrals. What evolved was beyond breathtaking. Each girl approached this task with a sense of

purpose and determination. Their primary goal was to achieve the coveted gold medal in the island's annual arts competition. These girls worked hard each day to achieve this goal. Ultimately, their grades went up and their discipline referrals became non-existent. This group achieved not only the coveted gold medal they craved, but also became the National Rural Dance Champions for the island. Their triumph became my salient motivation to ensure that all students, but particularly girls were consistently held to high expectations, and provided with the opportunities they needed to realize their fullest potential

When I immigrated to the United States, I was given the unique opportunity to again work with at-risk girls. During the six years that I was the Academic Program Coordinator at a gender-specific program for at-risk girls, I observed that although each girl struggled with similar challenges, those of my African American girls were exacerbated by the various racial, and social inequities that they had to face. They had been accused of being "loud," possessing "bad attitudes" and many had been told that their future lay behind the grilled doors of some penal institution. These girls had also had their hopes and dreams cremated by teachers and other individuals who held negative images of who they were or could become. I constantly wondered about their prior school experiences and how other social contexts within their lives had promulgated these feelings of despondency. Although, these feelings of hopelessness were evident in their speech and actions, there was also an underlying resilience that each girl possessed. Like several participants in the study, they had survived numerous harsh realities, but still each one had a unique zest to persevere against the overwhelming odds that were stacked against them. Concomitantly, these girls also strove to dismantle the vicious cycle of underperformance that existed within their families and communities. However, this was

challenging for many of them because they lacked the support that they needed to achieve this goal.

After leaving this agency, I taught for one year at a local high school. Here I observed that African American girls faced similar difficulties. These students have viewpoints regarding their high school experiences, but to my knowledge have never been given an opportunity to voice these concerns. As an African American female, I feel compelled to give high-performing African American high school girls a voice and to describe the ways in which a safe environment might be developed for them.

The experiences of my daughter further incited my desire to research this topic. As a participant in a white-dominated magnet program, she constantly faced the racial and social pressures of being a high achieving African American girl. My daughter struggled with being rejected and ridiculed by her African American peers who were in regular educational programs. These girls ostracized her for being part of what they considered to be a “White program.” In addition, she frequently questioned the attitudes and actions of teachers and other school personnel who she viewed as being patronizing or condescending. In classes, she always felt the need to prove that her academic abilities exceeded that of her non-African American peers. On numerous occasions, she felt that some of her teachers overlooked and ignored her during class activities and discussions. My daughter’s experiences caused me to question the validity of the school’s curriculum and its ability to simultaneously meet the social and academic needs of high-achieving African American girls.

The participants’ experiences were vivid reminders of the challenges that she faced. She too had been held to low expectations by some of her teachers; however, she had defied their odds and upon graduation attended a reputable college, later graduated, and is currently enrolled

in a masters' level program. As I read the responses of the study participants, I was reminded of how grotesque the school experiences of many high-achieving African American girls can be if they are placed within a school environment that devalues their individual talents and their identity.

As an educator, I have worked individually with many African American girls to find particular methods that would increase their chances of achieving success. Although numerous theories have been posited regarding why African American students, and in particular African American girls academic performance lags behind other groups, I wonder why educators do not give high achieving African American girls a safe environment to voice their views regarding their high school experiences. This is clearly my bias. Providing an opportunity for these students to have a voice could shed new light on their experiences, and assist educators in creating an infrastructure that might increase their chances for academic performance.

As a doctoral student, I received formal training in using qualitative research methods and participant observation. As a peer evaluator I have been involved in assessing the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) funded programs. I also conducted studies in the qualitative research and evaluation classes that I have taken during my graduate program of study. These experiences have given me an understanding of what constitutes the use of effective qualitative research methods. I have also conducted field-based evaluation of teachers during classroom instruction. As an educator, I have developed an understanding of the factors that affect students' academic performance. As an experienced educator and peer evaluator for alternative educational programs funded by the DJJ, I feel qualified to conduct this study.

My experiences and the results of the study solidified my belief that more research must be conducted on the school experiences of African American girls. Although this study focuses on

the experiences of high-achieving African American high school girls, it does demonstrate that more research needs to be done about the school experiences of African American girls across all levels of the educational system. The results of this study provide a truncated view about some of the issues that need to be addressed and open the door for a more global examination of this very important issue. I am aware of my subjectivity in relationship to the topic of this study and realize that this can affect the interpretation of the data collected. My role as a researcher was to provide the participants a voice to speak openly about their high school experiences and to ensure that I was not unduly influenced by preconceived theories, in my interpretation of the data.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an important component of the qualitative research process. Here the researcher seeks to ensure that the data collected represents the participants' voices and experiences as closely as possible (Ely, et al., 1999). Lincoln and Guba's (2000) model for trustworthiness will be utilized to ensure the validity of the study. They propose four criteria for promoting trustworthiness: (a) credibility, (b) confirmability, (c) dependability and (d) transferability. Trustworthiness will be promoted by ensuring that all four criteria have been met throughout the study.

Credibility was established through the use of at least two member checks per individual to ensure that the participants' voices were not distorted by my personal biases, and that reconstructed meanings represented those of the participants and not my own. I also used a field journal to document my behaviors and feelings (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

To assess confirmability, I remained immersed in the study to ascertain whether the findings were grounded in the data. A peer debriefer, a fellow doctoral student in the College of Education with two years of experience in qualitative methods and research was also used to

assess for confirmability. The use of a peer debriefer allowed me to share the results with another doctoral student and to have my data analyzed from another perspective (Ely et al., 1999).

Lincoln and Guba (2000) suggested the use of “inquiry audit” (p. 317) to enhance the dependability of the study. In “inquiry audit,” reviewers examine both the process and the product of the research for consistency. The peer debriefer examined consistency as it related to data collection and data analysis. Triangulation of data gathered during individual interview, focus groups, and the participant’s journal entries was used to enhance dependability. A peer was not available to assess my focus group meetings or serve as another set of eyes and ears.

In qualitative research the transferability of findings depends on the degree of similarity between the original situation and the situation to which it is transferred (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Patton (2001) asserted that “extrapolation” (p. 584) is an appropriate term for this process. “Extrapolations are modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical conditions” (Patton, 2002, p. 584). A socioeconomically diverse selection of African American high school girls in 11 and 12 grade with GPAs of 3.5 and above was chosen for the study. The transferability of this study is assumed to be limited to the context where the study was performed

I utilized continuous peer debriefings and member checks to ensure that the constructed meanings were that of the participants and not my own. Throughout the study, I used a personal journal to document my thoughts related to the interviews and elaboration of those areas where I had difficulty maintaining an “exterior of neutrality” (Ely et al., 1999, p. 61).

Table 3-1. Ethnicity of student population

Ethnicity	This School
Black	57%
White	30%
Asian/Pacific Islander	8%
Hispanic	3%
Multiracial	2%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	<1%

Source: Jamdung High (pseudonym) database 2006-2007

Table 3-2. Ethnicity of students in school's Academy Program

Ethnicity	This School
White	90%
Asian/Pacific Islander	8%
Black	1%
Hispanic	1%

Source: Jamdung High (pseudonym) database 2006-2007

Table 3-3. Descriptive statistics of the participants* (n=8).

Participants*	Grade Level	Cumulative GPA	Program of Study
Beyonce	12	4.0	Academy/AP/Honors
Erika	11	3.58	Honors/Regular Ed
Aaliyah	11	3.84	AP/Honors/Regular Ed
Cassie	11	3.54	AP/Honors/Regular Ed
Ciera	11	3.97	AP/Honors/Regular Ed
Brandy	11	4.0	AP/Honors/Regular Ed
Trina	11	3.81	AP/Honors/Regular Ed
Veronica	11	3.72	AP/Honors/Regular Ed

* = denotes that all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity

Table 3-4. Dates and lengths of first interviews

DATES	PARTICIPANTS*	LENGTH OF INTERVIEWS
November 27, 2006	Erika	45 minutes
November 27, 2006	Veronica	55 minutes
November 30, 2006	Brandy	60 minutes
December 1, 2006	Beyonce	60 minutes
December 4, 2006	Ciera	45 minutes
December 5, 2006	Aaliyah	50 minutes
December 5, 2006	Trina	65 minutes
December 6, 2006	Cassie	35 minutes

* = denotes that all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity

Table 3-5. Dates and lengths of second interviews

DATES	PARTICIPANTS*	LENGTH OF INTERVIEWS
January 4, 2007	Veronica	50 minutes
January 4, 2007	Aaliyah	50 minutes
January 4, 2007	Brandy	45 minutes
January 5, 2007	Cassie	40 minutes
January 5, 2007	Erika	50 minutes
January 5, 2007	Beyonce	45 minutes
January 8, 2007	Trina	45 minutes
January 8, 2007	Ciera	50 minutes

* = denotes that all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity

Table 3-6. Frequency of participants* (n=7) journal entries

Participants	Number of Journal Entries
Beyonce	9
Erika	7
Aaliyah	9
Cassie	4
Brandy)	9
Trina	9
Veronica	9

* = denotes that all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity

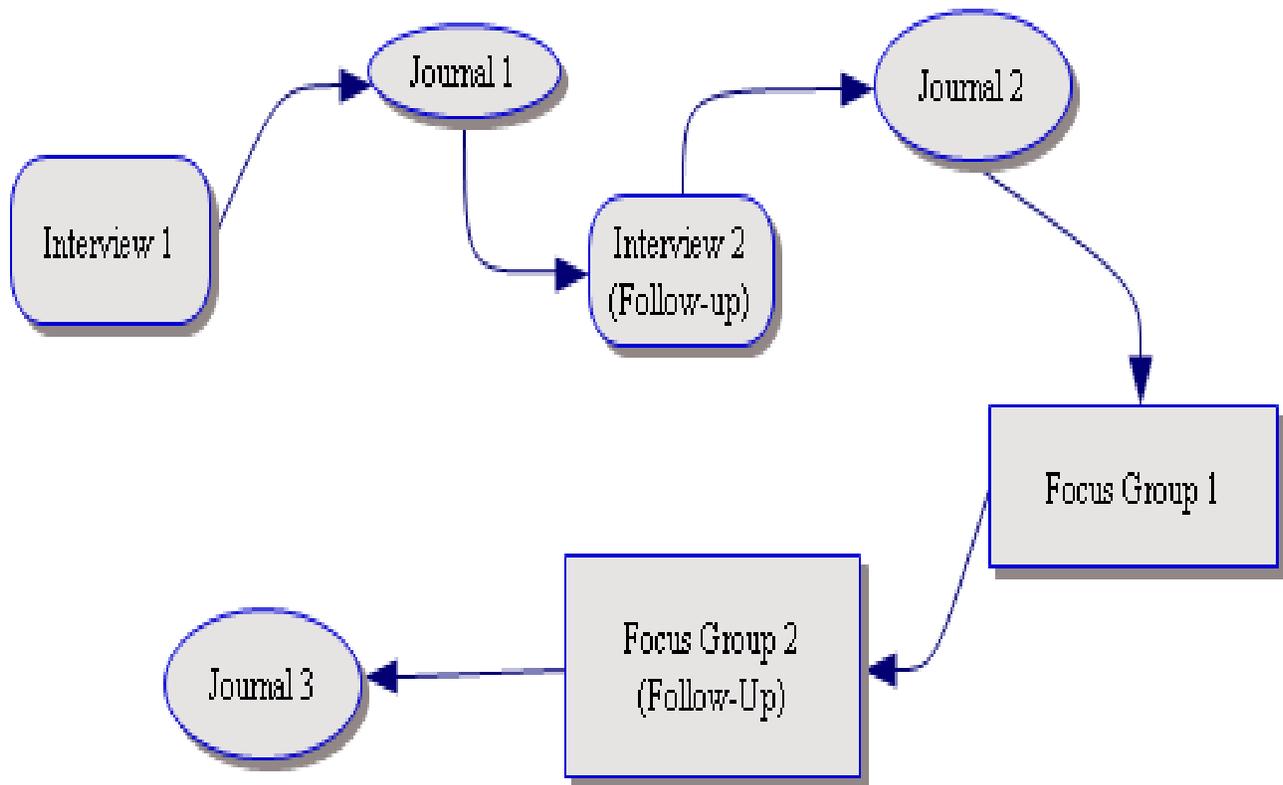


Figure 3-1. Sequence of data collection

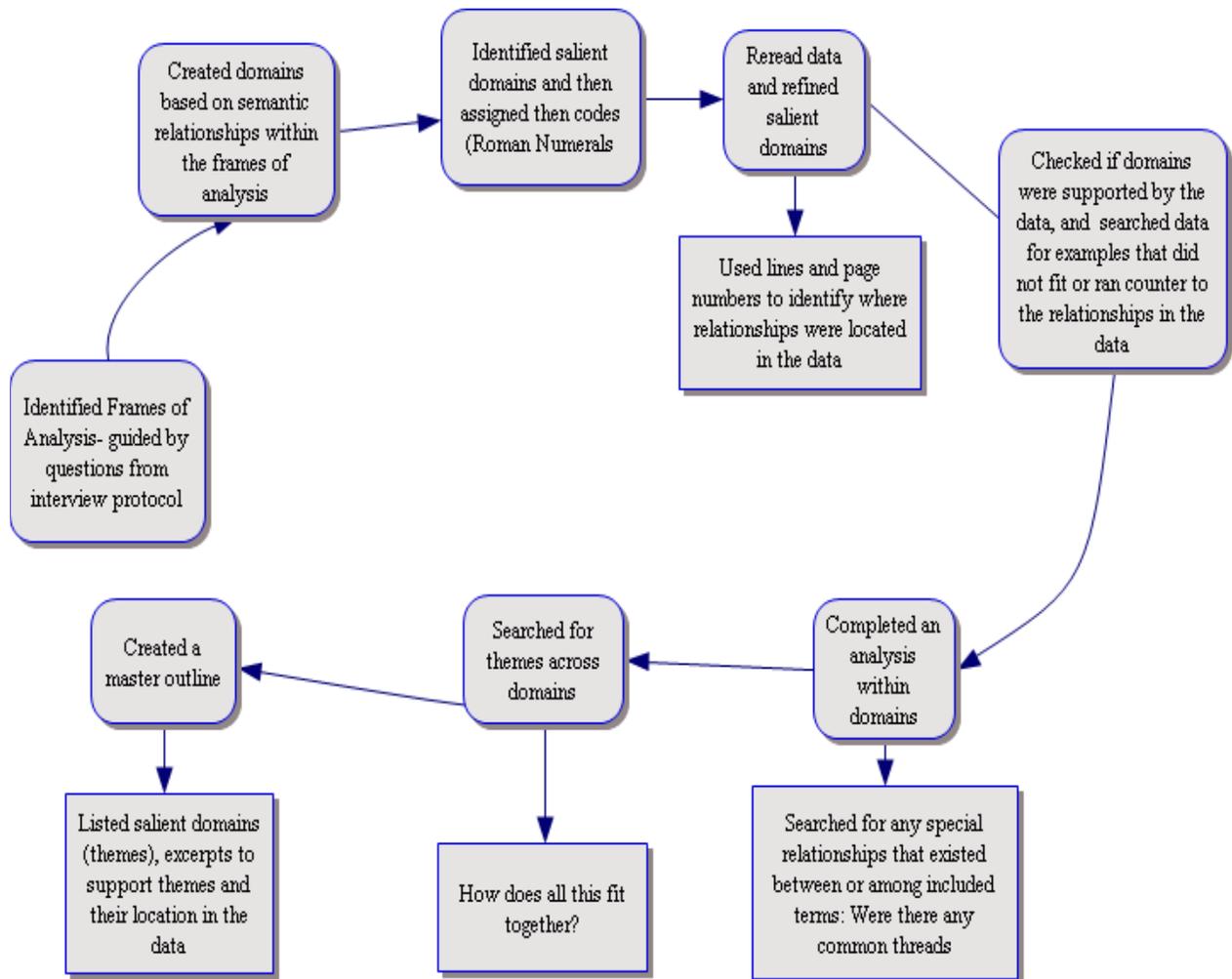


Figure 3-2. Data analysis process

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

The findings obtained from student interviews, focus groups, and journal entries are described in this chapter. These findings address the following research questions:

1. How do high school African American girls view their school experience?
2. How do they describe factors that motivate/discourage academic success?
3. From the African American girls' perspective:
 - a. How do they think teachers influence their academic success?
 - b. How are teachers' expectations for academic success for participants and other students similar/different?
 - c. How does identity influence their academic performance?
 - d. How do race and gender influence their school experience?
 - e. How do parents influence their academic performance?

Five major themes emerged from an inductive analysis of the data from the individual interview, focus groups, journal entries and the researcher's reflective notes. All the data relate to the participants' perceptions of academic success. The themes included: (a) school experiences (b) bridges to academic excellence (c) student engagement (d) family influence (e) intersections of race, gender, and school experiences. (Figure 4-1) These themes will be used to report findings of the study.

Research Question 1: How Do High School African American Girls View Their School Experience?

Types of School Experiences

The participants reported varied school experiences. These experiences were described as polar opposites, positive and negative. Positive experiences were occurrences that promoted engagement within the classroom, while negative experiences were depicted as occurrences that caused students to disengage from learning.

Positive school experiences

Participants reported numerous positive school experiences that contributed to their high school academic success. Those experiences included supportive learning environments, peer associations, award recognition, a rigorous curriculum, and teachers' addressing the needs of students' individual.

Participants agreed that a supportive learning environment enhanced their ability to achieve high grades. In these situations, teachers ensured that students fully understood the concepts that were taught, provided tutoring opportunities when students needed extra help, and demonstrated a caring attitude. The participants stated that supportive learning environments fostered stronger relationships between themselves and teachers and increased their beliefs that teachers and other school personnel cared about their overall well-being. For example, Erika, an 11 grader, stated:

They try to find out if you are okay, . . . know when you don't understand something and . . . take time to help us understand it or show us another way that might help us to better understand the idea. Some teachers and counselors also take the time to talk to me about my plans for college . . . , and offer advice on ways to . . . get into the college I desire. . .

The participants seemed appreciative that the teachers and other school personnel provided tutoring opportunities when needed. They suggested that these extended learning opportunities created a sense of a nurturing environment and helped to ensure that their individual academic needs were met. Many of the participants viewed tutoring opportunities as extremely important, because they helped them maintain high grades and achieve future goals. For example Ciera, an 11 grader, noted that:

If I need tutoring, they provide [it]. . . . Some teachers will even stay after school to help me . . . this shows me that they care about my future. . .

Participants commented about the rigor of their Advanced Placement (AP) and Academy (pseudonym) courses. They stated that although their AP and Academy courses were more

challenging than regular education classes, they recognized that such courses increased their academic skills. Although many stated that they preferred to not take challenging courses, they were also cognizant of the skills that they needed to attend college. Challenging courses were seen as conduits to college acceptance. Beyonce, a 12 grader, offered this viewpoint:

. . . I think I will be fully prepared for . . . the first two years of college. . . .Some classes challenge you but I want to be successful in college. . . .It's good that they are preparing us to be OK in college.

The participants praised having been recognized for their accomplishment at the school's award ceremony. They linked teacher recognition to their ability and desire to remain engaged in the classroom. All of the participants pointed out that these recognition ceremonies reinforced a strong sense of self, and allowed school personnel and other students to view African American girls more positively. Others suggested that these ceremonies were beneficial because it allowed African American girls to realize that being a good athlete was not the only way to get recognized in school. Brandy, an 11 grader, stated:

. . . when teachers . . . tell you that you are doing well in their class, and then nominate you to receive an award, you always try to participate in their class. It's . . . good to get recognized. . . it's not just the athletes, no one goes untouched. . .

Several participants commented about the effectiveness of particular classroom group activities. They suggested that group projects and activities offered them opportunities to form new relationships and also increased their ability to learn concepts that were sometimes very challenging. This discussion about group related class activities is important for many reasons. First, it highlights the importance that they placed on establishing peer relationships in their classes. Second, these findings reiterate the strengths that are inherent in peer-teaching and cooperative learning activities that used engagement, and increased learning among African American girls (Booker, 2006; Slavin, & Madden, 2006; Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers & Smith, 2000,). Veronica offered this comment:

I like when everybody is working together in group activities. I think we learn more when we work in groups. . . somehow it's easier to understand a topic when your classmates explain it to you.

Negative school experience

Conversely, participants reported several school experiences that did not foster their academic growth and development. These events include ridicule, fights and arguments, gang-related activities, and the lack of qualified and committed teachers.

Several participants described their fear of being ridiculed in class when providing incorrect responses. Although they claimed that this did not discourage them from excelling, these peer reactions caused some discomfort. Several participants stated that this frequently happened in their Spanish class. This type of experience may signify that some teachers were unable to create an emotionally safe learning environment for these African American girls. In an era where the speech patterns of African Americans are under considerable scrutiny from society as well as from educators at all levels, the girls' fears of active participation in a language learning environment is critically important. Such events can retard their chances of successful performance and nullify their dreams of attending those colleges that require two to three years of foreign language study. Aaliyah offered this perspective:

If people like pick on you [when] you do something wrong, well that will [discourage my participation] because I don't want to say the wrong answer. . . like . . . Spanish class they will like say "OOOH" (laughs) so I will be like scared to answer or ask questions. I have to pass Spanish because all the colleges want you to have two credits in Spanish or some other language.

Participants explicated that fights and arguments contributed to their negative experiences. In many cases, these fights involved other African American girls. The participants suggested that many fights were related to the increased gang-related violence and activities on the school's campus. They offered several accounts of incidents where African American girls engaged in fights that created unnecessary disruptions in the classroom. They also expressed concern that

the fights perpetuated school personnel's negative perceptions of African American girls. Trina explained it this way:

I hate that some African American girls keep getting into fights. . . . I don't feel safe. . . . It just makes the teachers and other people in school continue to believe that African American girls are all ghetto and give us all a bad reputation.

Several participants emphasized that school administrators need to hire dedicated and qualified teachers. They described instances in which teachers provided little or no classroom instruction. Other participants talked about being enrolled in classes where teachers were not certified in the subject areas they were teaching and displayed limited content-based knowledge. In one situation, they reported that the substitute teacher was actually a certified counselor who had replaced their Advanced Placement teacher who was leave for the remainder of the school year. Some students complained that they were told to purchase an AP Preparatory text. Brandy reported that:

I know she is only a substitute, [but] they have someone [in] counseling teaching an AP ____ class. Now our AP exams are in May. The foundation of that class is notes so if we don't have a teacher to break it down . . . and help us to understand it, how can we pass?

Other participants talked about being enrolled in reading classes with certified art or music teachers. They stated that this should not occur because passing FCAT reading was required for graduation. Many participants believed that this was the school administrators' lack of interest in their academic future:

There are some teachers who teach subjects they know nothing Mr. ____ he teaches reading, and he said he is certified in _____. Many of us need help on FCAT [and] we really need to get people who know what they are doing so that we can get good grades on the FCAT.

Several participants also complained about teachers who offered little or no classroom instruction. They stated that, in some cases, this caused frustration and decreased confidence in

their abilities. Other participants reported that these teachers lacked the care and dedication needed to assist students to excel. Erika recounted the following experience:

Some of the teachers . . . will give you work . . . don't talk about the lesson they just let you read it. Some students understand it that way and some don't, so you can't think that everybody learns the same way.

Veronica concurred and shared how this reduced her self confidence:

. . .in most of my classes I am teaching myself what to do. . .They don't make me feel confident, they make me feel dumb.

Research Question 2: How Do They Describe Factors That Motivate/Discourage Academic Success?

Bridges to Academic Excellence

Participants described numerous events or experiences that prompted their decision to achieve academic success. Their responses were categorized as (a) rationale for pursuing academic excellence and (b) achieving academic excellence.

Rationale for pursuing academic excellence

All of the participants cited the desire to attend college as the primary reason for pursuing academic excellence. In their view, excelling in high school created more opportunities for them to attend college. The participants viewed going to college as the panacea to socioeconomic challenges. Other participants' stated that family expectations promoted their desires to work hard and attend college. Aaliyah, for example, shared:

I have a lot of pressure on me to excel and go to college. . . everybody in my life, they haven't succeeded, so my whole family is constantly on me to succeed and go to college.

Likewise, Beyonce suggested that maintaining a high GPA and later attending a prestigious college was mandatory in her family. She also explained the opportunities that a college education could guarantee:

My mom and dad, but especially my mom, are very strict when it comes to school work, so I don't have a choice but to do well. . . In my house, it's not about if you are going to

college but when, (laughs) plus you can do so many different things when you have a degree.

In addition to the pressure that family members placed upon them to succeed academically, several participants stated that they pursued academic excellence to achieve their personal goals. In each of these cases, social and economic mobility was a key motivator. For Erika, excelling in school would give her an opportunity to pursue her dream of having a more affluent life. Aaliyah linked academic success to a better life for herself and her mother. Brandy and Trina discussed their fears of remaining impoverished and perpetuating the cycle of poverty that existed in their families and communities. They reported that seeing the plight among individuals who depended on government assistance motivated them to always achieve above-average grades. Similarly, Veronica viewed academic excellence as a precursor to doing something positive with her life and excelling in a world that she thought was filled with social and racial inequity. She offered this viewpoint:

In order for me to do something good with my life, I am gonna have to excel and go to college. As an African American female, I know I have to work two, three, four times harder than the average White female to do well, so I am working hard now.

In a similar way, Erika offered the following comments:

If I don't do well in school, I am holding myself back from college and a good job. Plus many people already think that African American girls just want to have babies and be on welfare, so I have to prove them wrong.

Several participants reported receiving extrinsic rewards from their parents and family that also motivated them to continuously excel in school. They viewed these rewards as compensation for hard work and diligence. These rewards were usually accompanied by encouraging words which they seemed to value greatly. Aaliyah shared the following experience:

Today, my mom said she had a surprise for me. . . She had bought me a pretty necklace with a bracelet to match it. She bought it for me because I got a good report card which was all “As” and “Bs”. This makes me more driven, because I know I can do this.

Participants’ responses suggested that they were conscious of the social challenges as well as racial and gender inequity that African American women had to face daily. They all viewed college as a place where they could change the trajectory of their failures and ensure realizing their goals.

Pathways to academic success

Participants discussed the numerous strategies that they used to maintain high academic success such as (a) being assertive (b) making better personal choices, and (c) working hard and remaining determined.

Many participants stressed the need for African American girls to be assertive if they are to excel in school. In this instance, assertiveness was described as the ability to take full responsibility for learning. Part of this responsibility involved a willingness and ability to seek assistance when it was needed. The participants suggested that many African American girls did not excel academically because they were afraid or unwilling to ask for help in their classes.

Beyonce offered this advice:

You can’t be afraid to ask for help, because . . . your grades could suffer a lot. . . Some teachers don’t realize that they have to teach a certain way . . . so you have to ask questions and seek that extra help if you need it.

The participants’ self-determination and high self-esteem were clearly reflected in many of their responses. They acknowledged the challenges that existed, yet all of them believed that they had the ability to overcome these challenges. Several participants stated that many African American girls were not achieving in school because they lacked self determination. They cited instances where African American girls were not successful even though they had a lot of support. For example, Veronica stated:

I think it revolves around that person. Like . . . you can have the best . . . but it's up to you to make that decision . . . to apply yourself or not. I know one girl, her parents push her to the limit, like she could have had a 4.0 GPA, but she chose not to do it and that's your decision.

Trina echoed these sentiments:

I don't think that because you have a bad home life, you have to fail. . . you can overcome where you came from. You just have to want it real bad, be determined.

Participants emphasized the need for African American girls to make better choices.

While recognizing that many of their peers lived in challenging situations, they believed that the choices they made had a significant impact on their ability to do well in school. They frequently mentioned that it was important for many African American girls to place their school work above their male friends. Some participants suggested that too many African American girls decided to repeatedly "skip school." Others reported "the bad attitudes" demonstrated by other African American girls toward their peers and teachers. They discussed the negative ramifications of these choices and adamantly stated that school should always be a "first priority." Beyonce offered this comment:

Many of the African American girls on campus also need . . . different priorities . . . and [to] realize that skipping, bad attitudes, fighting, and boys are not going to help them in later life. Too many African American girls get caught up all this negative drama.

In addition, Erika stated:

Too many African American girls are getting pregnant and putting their boyfriends before their school work. . . school should be our first priority.

Self-determination was also a common theme. All of the participants discussed instances where they were tempted to make less valuable choices such as skipping and not completing class assignments. However, for them the prize of a college education helped them to refocus and pursue their goals.

The participants talked about the hard work and commitment that they devoted to academic excellence. Each participant was enrolled in two or more Advanced Placement, Academy or Honors classes. Interestingly half of the girls also had after school jobs which required them to work 20 to 25 hours per week. This meant that they had to complete challenging work across several subjects and also fulfill their job responsibilities. The participants reported that they achieved this by sacrificing such things as “hanging out with friends,” and “talking on the phone or watching television.” For example Brandy and Ciera talked about developing a study schedule to ensure that they did not have to “cram” and become overly stressed during their final exams. Other participants talked about staying up late to complete homework assignments, and preparing study guides and notes for each of their classes. The participants asserted that school was their first priority and that they dedicated the time and effort needed to ensure academic success. Collectively, they expressed a desire to do well in each of their classes yet they wanted to create a system that would not place too much pressure on them. For example, Brandy, an 11 grader who is currently enrolled in three Advanced Placement courses, an honors course and two regular education courses wrote:

There is one week until midterms. I have figured out my study schedule and see that my history class needs the most attention. . . . I don't have time for anything else but school. Television, friends and going out is out of the question. Education is very valuable to me and I know that my exam grades will be very pleasing to me when it's time for report cards

Another 12 grader, Beyonce who is enrolled in three Advanced Placement, two Academy and one honors class expressed similar sentiments:

You just have to work hard everyday and stay focused. I rarely watch TV or talk to my friends. . . There is just so much work to do that I really don't have a lot of time . . . during the week. I want to get into a good college . . . it's worth the sacrifice (laughs).

Clearly articulated within these responses was their commitment to defy the odds that were stacked against them and to chart new courses for themselves. Their responses juxtaposed with research depict the social, cultural and ethnic pressure that confronts some high-performing African American students (Ford & Harris, 1999; Mathews-Armstead, 2002). Such insight allows us to become more familiarized with the realities that high-performing African American high school girls are likely to face.

Research Question 3(a): From The African American Girls' Perspective, How Do Teachers Influence Their Academic Success?

Student engagement. The participants discussed the various teachers' attitudes and practices that influenced student engagement. These included caring teachers, the willingness of teachers to reteach concepts, and teachers' ability to remain unbiased in the classroom.

Teachers' attitudes and practices that influence student engagement. Several of the participants stated that caring teachers fostered their decision to remain engaged in the classroom. They posited that the teachers who cared were passionate about their learning, and offered assistance to them both inside and outside of the classroom context. Caring teachers provided "optimal learning environments" (Howard, 2001, p. 137), held high expectations for them, (Howard, 2001) and encouraged them to stay focused on their goals. The participants pointed out that they felt obligated to do well in those classes where teachers demonstrated a commitment to their personal growth and development. They recounted several behaviors that were characteristic of teachers care and concern. For example Beyonce stated:

Some teachers, especially my history teacher, take the time to make sure that I am OK and to talk to me about my plans for college and things like that. He also offers advice on things that I can do to ensure that I get into the college I want to get into. He never allows me to give up, so that motivates me to work hard in his class.

Brandy talked about the interest that all her teachers demonstrated toward her and other students.

All of my teachers that I have . . . or have had, they show interest in promoting not only myself, but other students to [become educated], become something, get your diploma, because we basically can't do anything without it. This motivates you to work hard in their classes.

Aaliyah talked about teachers' willingness of to offer extra assistance when needed.

You work hard in classes where teachers, like, care about you and if you are . . . falling behind, they will tell you what you need to improve on and give you extra help.

Effective teaching involves the ability to ensure that students fully comprehend the concepts being taught (Howard, 2001). This skill fosters student engagement and academic success. Many participants commented that it was these characteristics that contributed to their academic success. They suggested that these teachers were always willing to provide examples and/or reteach topics to ensure that they fully understood concepts being taught. Participants described the nurturing learning environments that these teachers created. In these environments, teachers valued student questions and provided varied opportunities for students to practice their skills. The participants suggested that "learning was easy," because "you were never afraid to ask for help" in these classrooms. Veronica offered this viewpoint:

If we are going over something new, they will probably give me three or four examples and then they do them in depth so that you can see step by step how to do it . . . they make sure that everybody is understanding it before they move on.

Erica made a similar comment as she described the actions of those teachers who she characterized as caring and concerned:

They are open for questions all the time. So if there is something that I don't understand, I can ask and they will clarify it for me. They make you want to learn. . .

Other participants described the attitudes and practices that caused many of them to become disengaged in the classroom. Several participants reported that teachers showed preference by interacting with non-African American girls, "preppy" African American girls and African American girls of African and Caribbean descent. One participant defined "preppy" as

African American girls who were “uppity,” always on task, well-spoken, quiet and polite.

Veronica offered this perspective:

It seems like there are certain African American girls that they might favor and the rest of them they couldn't care less for by their attitude. . . some of them treat you differently according to whether you are like preppy acting or whether you act all thuggish.

“Thuggish” girls were characterized as being argumentative, unwilling to participate in class, and always quick to fight their peers.

Trina expressed similar beliefs. She stated that teachers demonstrated less interest and respect toward those African American girls who they perceived as being “loud” and argumentative:

It depends . . . If the African American girls are loud and like to argue, then I think they are treated different than those girls who are doing their work, [and are] quiet, and polite. I think teachers respect them more, and show more interest for them in the classroom.

Some participants also reported that they sometimes felt ignored and disrespected in the classroom. They believed that some teachers' held stereotypical beliefs about African American girls, and as a result devalued their contributions to class discussions. Beyonce cited the case of one teacher who consistently ignored her remarks, but praised similar contributions offered by other non-African American students. She suggested that this occurred because the teachers doubted the academic abilities of African American girls:

Sometimes I will say things, especially in one class, but the teacher ignores what I say and then another girl who might be white says the same thing and they [teachers] will say that's right. . . I think they believe that African American girls are dumb or something.

One other teacher behavior that several participants commented on was not providing enough “wait time” during class discussions. They stated that they sometimes knew the answers and were thinking of how best to respond to the questions asked. Participants stated that it was important that teachers always provide students with adequate time to formulate their responses before moving on to the next student. Aaliyah commented that:

Some teachers will, . . . wait when they ask a question and let us think about it or give us hints before they go on to the next person. But there are others who will just say “no” [uses a stern voice] and move on. So that makes you scared to participate.

Research Question 3(b): How are teachers’ expectations for academic success for African American and other students similar/different?

Perceptions of teacher expectations. Research suggests that teacher expectation greatly impacts student performance and motivation (Russell, 2005). Several participants suggested that the academic expectations that several teachers held for them were congruent with society’s negative perceptions of African American girls. They suggested that these perceptions seem to have been conceived prior to their entering the class and were deeply entrenched in the numerous interactions that they had with several teachers. These perceptions created estranged relationships between some teachers and some African American girls. Aaliyah offered this viewpoint

I don’t think the teachers have the same expectations. I guess it’s the race thing. . . Like for years and years, many African American girls have not been motivated, and I guess they expect, . . . more out of like the white girls than us.

Some participants mentioned instances where teachers blatantly expressed that they held low academic expectation for African American girls. This behavior discouraged many of their peers from remaining engaged in the classroom.

Some of them tell you straight up that they don’t have the same expectations. . . They will tell us that they know that some of us are not going to graduate . . . that some of us are going to be in prison, or pregnant. . . Many girls believe these things and drop out.

Several participants talked about some teachers’ practice of making offensive remarks about students’ academic abilities. Cassie discussed how this impacted her:

One of my teachers, she is always putting our class down, telling us we come in stupid and we are going to leave stupid. Telling us no one will pass the AP exam in class. Sometimes this discourages you and makes you want to give up. . .

These incidents generally occurred in classes that had a disproportionate low number of African American students and many participants felt that these comments were directed at them. Although each of the participants felt wronged by these incidents, none however, felt comfortable enough to report these incidents to the school administrators. This is reminiscent of underlying distrust that many African American girls have for some teachers and school administrators (Hubbard, 2005; Pugh-Lilly, et al., 2001).

Overall the participants valued teachers who demonstrated care and concern and berated teacher behaviors that demonstrated oblivion to their needs and challenges or blatant discouragement. The participants knew the great impact that teacher expectations had on their academic future and spoke highly of those teachers who set high expectations for all students and scaffolded their instruction to meet the individualized needs of their students.

Research Question 3(c): How does African American identity influence the academic performance among African American high school girls?

Several participants reported that they chose to excel in school to dispel the stereotypical myths that society had about African American girls' academic abilities. In their view, African American girls had to work harder than non-African American girls to acquire certain jobs and recognitions. Veronica stated:

I have to prove society wrong, so I am gonna have to excel. As a black female I have to work harder . . . because many people think that black girls have lower skills. . .

Assertiveness was also embedded in the conviction that the participants had regarding their academic identity and performance. Veronica stated that although she believed that many individuals would always hold negative perceptions of African American girls' academic abilities, they should not embrace these perceptions. She offered this comment:

People will always think that African American girls are not as smart as other girls, but you have to have [belief] in yourself and don't give up. Just . . .keep asking for help wherever you can It's on you.

Likewise Ciera added:

A lot of girls know they are not doing well, but they don't go ask for help. It's our education . . . but we have to want it, to get it.

Conchas and Clark (2002) maintained that students were “more comfortable in settings where they belonged socially and academically” (p. 302). The participants echoed this sentiment and stated that having African American peers in their classes created a strong support system that they believed contributed to their high academic performance. Associating with other high performing African American girls fostered a sense of belonging that encouraged them to continuously strive for perfection. The participants' responses seem to convey that they placed a lot of importance on establishing mutually-cooperative peer relationships. Many participants stated that having other African American in their advanced placement classes made these learning environments less intimidating. Ciera summed it up by stating:

I like that while I am learning I can also be with my African American friends which . . . makes learning more easier. . . It just makes life much better when you are in classes with other students who look and think like you. . .

Several participants reported that Black Entertainment Television (BET) and other media outlets created unrealistic images of success for many African American girls. They reported that some of these stations showed images of stardom that prompted many African American girls to place less emphasis on school. They also stated that these images seemed more appealing to those girls who lack positive role models of who they were and could become, and who were seeking an easy way to achieve socioeconomic status. Ciera offered this viewpoint:

A lot of girls look on BET and see other Black girls singing and dancing with all this jewelry and things and that becomes their goal. So instead of focusing on school, they are thinking about getting into some music video, or on American Idol . . . because they believe that this is an easy way to become rich.

They suggested that school personnel should continuously invite influential and talented African American females to school related functions and meetings to provide them with positive role models.

I don't really think the media shows black women in positions like doctors and acceptable careers, so I think they need more exposure . . .

Other participants suggested that career planning should be an integral part of the school curriculum. In their view, more girls would choose to excel in school if they were to become knowledgeable about available career choices. For example, Ciera stated:

They can bring more African American women professionals on campus, and not just set up meetings for certain people. Also the counselors should start having classes about career planning.

Research Question 3(d): How do race and gender influence African American girls' school experience?

Intersections of race, gender and school experiences. Race and gender greatly impact how individuals construct their social realities (Lopez, 2002). These influences were evident in the much of the participants' discourse related to their school experiences. Several participants stated that race and gender played a major role in how the school's policies were implemented. They described issues as the school's Academy program, the implementation of the school's behavior management system and type and quality of information that was provided to students.

The participants were very critical of how segregated the school's Academy program was. Several participants viewed the Academy program as being a "White domain." They reported that race, rather than gender played a major role in how students were placed in this program. The participants suggested that although many girls were enrolled in the program, only four of these were African American girls. They articulated that that more emphasis should be placed on referring and retaining more African American girls in this program. Other participants berated the school personnel's decision to not include them or to remove them from the Academy. For

example Veronica suggested that the school personnel's decision to remove her from the Academy program was racially motivated.

They took me out because they told me I was more for AP which honestly, . . . my opinion is I think it is all racially issued . . . but when you look at it, they are not going to let just any ole black person into an Academy class.

Participants also reported that there was a marked disparity concerning the amount and type of college related information that was provided for students in regular education programs and the students in the Academy program. They suggested that students enrolled in the Academy program received more information about colleges. Many participants viewed this practice as prejudicial and emphasized the importance of ensuring all students were afforded the same opportunities. Others suggested that these policies and practices created a distinct division between students in the Academy and regular education programs. They emphasized the importance that many participants placed on fairness. They recognized the inherent values in providing quality information to all students and thought that this should be mandated by the school administrators. For example Erika stated:

There is lot of stuff in the guidance office that relates to college, but they are not giving us any of that stuff. Like, the Academy students they are, like, fully prepared . . .but we are sitting here without the information. They should give us all the same information.

Participants were highly critical of the school personnel's implementation of the school's behavior management plan. In their view, African American girls were singled out for dress code violations more than non-African American girls. They suggested that they sometimes felt penalized because their bodies did not ascribe to the media-portrayed body images. Others suggested that many school personnel had negative perceptions of their physical attributes (Turnage, 2004). Despite feeling targeted for characteristic physical attributes, the participants expressed strong self-perceptions. This is significant in light of the increasing research of higher incidences of eating disorders among African females who seek to achieve media portrayed body

images (Striegel-Moore, Wilfley, Pike, Dohm, & Fairburn, 2000; Walcott, Pratt & Patel, 2003).

Beyonce summarized this perspective:

A dean will see a group of white girls in the same outfit that an African American girl might be wearing and not say anything. But an African American girl will get written up or sent to ISD [In-School Detention] for it. It's not fair! We cannot change how our bodies are made. . . Not that I would want to.

As suggested by Frazier-Kouassi (2002), several participants reported that African American girls typically received more discipline referrals than their non-African American peers. According to the participants this occurred because many teachers viewed them as being loud and aggressive. Several participants offered a different perspective. They suggested that whereas many school personnel viewed loudness as being disrespectful and argumentative, they viewed it as being assertive. For example Aaliyah and Brandy stated that they did not consider themselves loud when it meant being disrespectful, however they embraced this characterization when it meant that they were willing to voice their opinions. Other participants stated that teachers based their perception on the actions of certain subgroups within their communities. Despite different interpretations, each participant however embraced the characterization of being loud. Trina offered this comment:

I think they are just looking at, like, the African American girls that live in the ghetto and they are just looking at them type of people. But there are other people who are African Americans who are not like that . . . I don't think I am loud, not in the way many people view it, but I do speak up for myself and, in that way, I am loud.

Several participants reported that the stereotypical portrayals of African American females by media influenced the behaviors and beliefs of some school personnel. They suggested that the interactions between many teachers, school personnel and African American girls were based on their negative images. Although they held these beliefs, many participants could not provide concrete examples to support their claims. These conjectural claims however were riveted in how they perceived many school personnel. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

They [teachers and school personnel] don't necessarily express it or tell you verbally, but . . . some teachers and counselors who work on or live by statistics and . . . They think certain or believe certain things about African American girls, but they won't necessarily tell you, they just act a certain way. It's kind of hard to explain. . .

Erika reported that these stereotypical perceptions influenced how teachers responded to African American girls. She suggested that this has caused many African American girls to become confrontational with some teachers in the classroom.

It's like they are scared of us I think because they have a negative view about black folks, they approach everyone with a negative view and that's not always true. It depends on how the teacher approaches that person. So if a teacher approaches you negative, you will probably approach her negative also.

The impact of race and gender was always present in the participants' discussion regarding school policies and procedures. These participants described obstacles that race and gender created for them in school with respect to school policies and procedures. However, they reported that this did not dissuade them from striving to achieve their goals.

Research Question 3(e): How do does family influence African American girls' academic performance?

Research suggests that family influence and involvement play a key role in academic performance among African American students (Epstein, 2001; Matthews-Armstead, 2002; Hill & Craft, 2003). In this study, all the participants suggested that parents and family greatly influenced their ability to excel in school. They discussed the implications of supportive and unsupportive home environments on African American girls' school experiences. Several participants reported that African American girls were more apt to excel when they had a supportive family network. They described supportive families as those that offered physical, moral and emotional support. All of the participants emphasized the importance of parental involvement. Cassie's comments reflect the views of all of the participants:

If parents are not involved, then students don't have the motivation to do good in school and graduate. When our parents are involved it's harder for us to mess up and not do well in school.

Some participants also stressed the need for more paternal parental involvement. In their view, more African American girls would excel in class, if fathers were more actively involved in their lives. Trina's comment highlights this point:

I think the fathers need to be more involved. I think more African American girls would do well in school if the fathers were more involved and pushed them. It's kinda like a father-daughter thing.

Several participants articulated that parents and other family members were major motivational forces behind their academic success. Although many of the participants' parents and other family members did not have college degrees, each of the participants described how family experiences influenced them to do well in school. For one participant seeing her mother receive her high school diploma motivated her to stay focused. Other participants stated that the financial success of family members who had college diplomas also encouraged them to strive for excellence. Others reported that seeing their parents and other family members struggle financially, actually inspired them to do well in school. For example Veronica stated:

Both my parents influence me to do well. Neither of them had the chance to go to college. Like my daddy, he had a very poor family so he had to drop out and go to work. And my mama, she had to come to another state just to like get some money. . . . So to me they are like a motivation to become something better.

Each of the participants attributed their high academic performance to the support they received from their parents and other family members. Although many of their parents and family members did not have college degrees, they continually gave them the moral, physical and financial support they needed to excel. Some of the participants talked about the role that their mothers played in monitoring their academic progress, applying for college scholarships, and overseeing the application process for college. Other participants reported that through

words and actions their parents and, in some cases, their grandparents encouraged them to do well and persevere against the obstacles that they faced. Similar to what researchers report (Turnage, 2004; Kerpelman, Shoffner, & Ross-Griffin, 2002), most participants shared that their mothers were their primary influence and support. Aaliyah described her mother's support:

I am able to do well in school because of my mom. She checks everyday to see what's going on with me in school, and if I have homework and anything like that She doesn't know how to go about helping me to apply for college, but she will ask other people . . . or my guidance counselor about stuff that I have to do. Sometimes I am, like, forgetting to meet deadlines, . . . so she keeps reminding me of what I have to do (laughs).

Veronica stated that her mother's diligence and support helped her to acquire a college scholarship. She recounted how her mom's persistence encouraged her to not give up.

One thing is this scholarship thing She was, like, you're not going to give up, you are gonna stay up and you're gonna write the essay. . . . In the end I got the scholarship.

The participants also discussed the numerous ways in which their parents and family influenced their decisions regarding their school experiences. Some participants reported that their parents directed decisions they made regarding extracurricular activities and subjects they enrolled in. Others stated that their parents gave them the autonomy to choose their subjects and extracurricular activities. Beyonce stated that, whereas her mom directed decisions she made regarding school, her dad gave her the autonomy to choose her activities and subjects. Some participants also reported that their parents and family members strongly influenced what subjects they took. In most cases, they were encouraged to enroll in rigorous courses such as honors, Academy and Advanced Placement. Other participants stated that their parents encouraged them to participate in extracurricular activities such as the Pre-collegiate, student government, cheerleading and other clubs. For example, Ciera stated:

This year both my parents insisted that I had to participate in student government, Precollegiate and the Spanish club. My mom . . . wants to ensure that I get a rounded education (gestures with hand, and laughs). . . so she is always pushing me to enroll in Advanced Placement and Academy courses.

The participants also discussed the increasing incidents of non-supportive and absent parents in African American families. They recounted how non-supportive or absent parents caused many African American girls to fail school. Many African American girls had one or both of their parents in jail, or addicted to drugs, or they were forced to become caretakers of their younger siblings and in some cases care for their own children as well. Participants reported that it was very difficult for these girls to achieve academic excellence when they had no one to support their academic endeavors. Trina offered this explanation:

There is like nobody supporting them, and then some girls can't put a lot a time into their school work because they have to be parents to their younger siblings at home, and some have to be parents to their own kids. So they feel stressed and can't put much effort in their school work.

All the participants shared that family and parental involvement was integral to their academic success. According to them, managing their academic success became more challenging when there was no family or parental support.

Summary of Results

Participants reported that self-determination, teacher efficacy, parental influence and support, and coping strategies were integral to having successful school experiences. Each of the participants used self-determination, assertiveness and striving for excellence in each of their classes.

In addition all of the participants reported experiencing challenges and inequities in school. In each of these circumstances, they were able to maintain high academic performance because one or more school personnel encouraged them. Although the participants did not always share common experiences at school and home, they all shared the same goal - the desire to attend college, and create better lives for themselves.

Individual interviews, focus groups and journal entries demonstrated that the participants' school and home experiences solidified their self perceptions and provided the impetus they needed to excel academically. An analysis of the emergent themes across all modes of data collection – individual interviews, focus groups and journal entries showed that participants held similar views related to parental influence and involvement, their motivations to excel academically, their perception of school personnel and particular teachers' attitudes and perceptions, and the factors that promoted or deterred academic success.

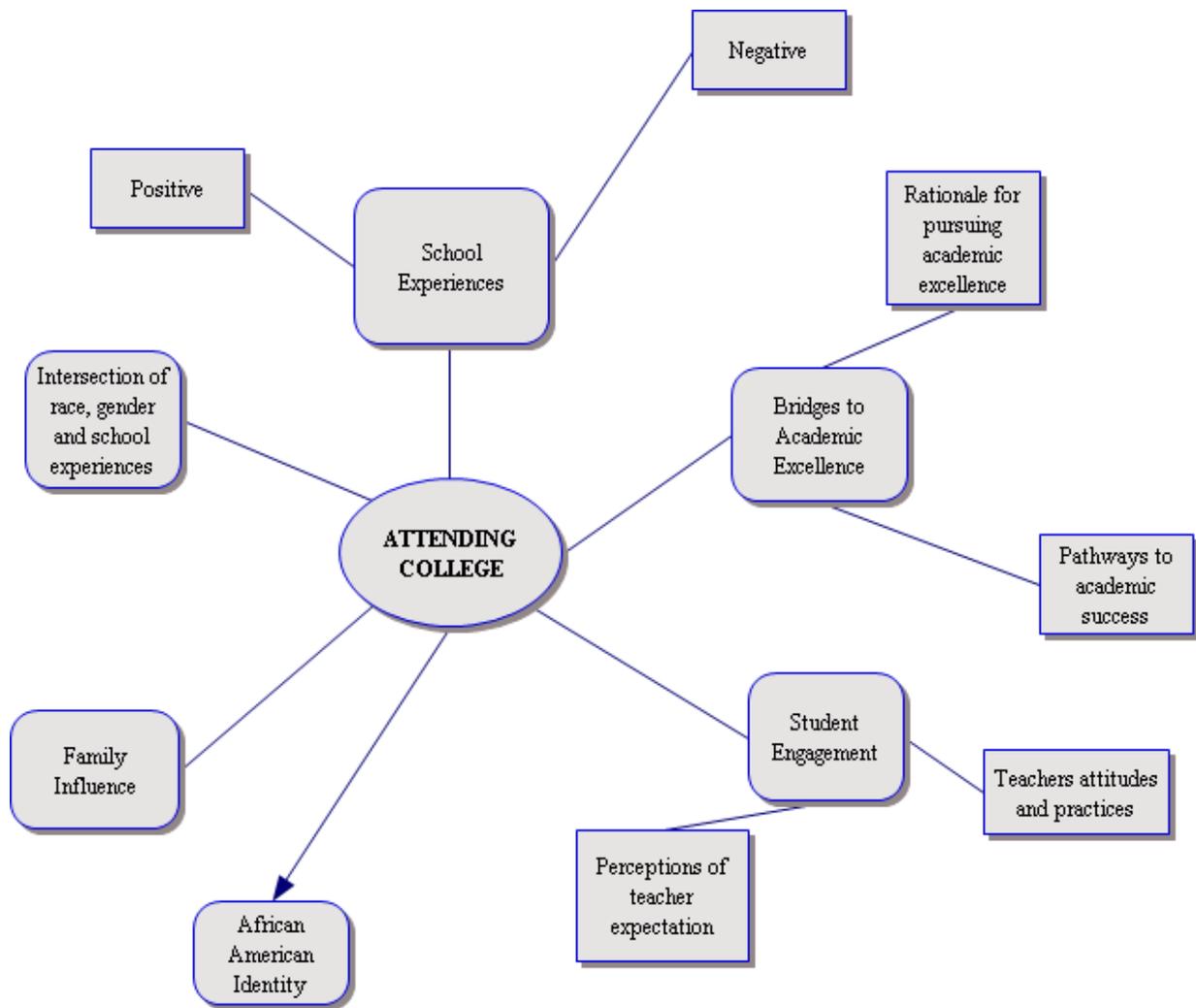


Figure 4-1. Major themes and categories from data analysis

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to understand the factors that affected the school experiences of high-performing African American high school girls. This chapter provides a summary of the findings and implications of the study. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research, and a summary.

Research Question 1: How do high school African American girls view their school experience?

Types of School Experiences

The participants' responses suggest that school experiences had a great impact on their ability to excel in school. The participants' descriptions of their school experiences fell into two major categories: positive and negative.

Positive school experiences

Positive school experiences included supportive learning environments, peer associations, student recognition, the rigor of the curriculum and the teachers' willingness to meet students' individual needs. As suggested by Howard (2001) and Ladson-Billings (2001), the participants stated that a supportive learning environment enabled them to excel. In such an environment, the teachers utilized various strategies to ensure that students achieved academic excellence. These included the reteaching of topics, offering after-school tutoring, peer instruction, group work and periodically talking to the students about other areas of their lives. Each of these strategies helped the students to better understand the concepts taught, and also provided a safe environment for them to establish new friendships while simultaneously increasing their academic and cognitive skills (Hubbard, 2005; Reis & Diaz, 1999). Two vital points that were embedded in the various responses of the participants were (a) the great value that these

participants placed on relationships, and (b) they considered caring teachers essential to their academic growth (Booker, 2004; Howard, 2000).

Participants attributed their high academic performance to their involvement in Honors, Advanced Placement and Academy courses. These students were grateful for the opportunity to be enrolled in courses that increased their academic skills and subsequently increased their chances of attending college (Hubbard, 2005; Matthews-Armstead, 2002). A high point of the participants' discussion was the recognition they received from school personnel for their high academic performance. They posited that these awards provided an extra impetus for them to succeed academically (Cohen & Loan, 1997; Tyson, Darity & Castellino, 2005). Recognition also reinforced a strong sense of self in all the participants.

Negative school experiences

Participants noted various negative experiences such as peer ridicule, students' fights and arguments, and the increasing presence of gang related activities. Each of these situations provided an unsafe learning environment for the students. The participants were concerned that students' fights and arguments coupled with the increased presence of gang-related activities frequently involved African American girls. They reported that these events perpetuated the negative perceptions that the community had about them. This finding is especially significant since it supports Holcomb-McCoy & Moore-Thomas' (2001) and Tatum's (2003) theories that African American girls have to consistently contend with society's negative perception of them.

Most of the participants also voiced their concerns about the ineffectiveness of some teachers. They suggested that these teachers were not certified in the subjects they taught, and thus lacked the expert knowledge needed to provide effective classroom instruction. This was significant for the participants who hoped to attend college after graduation.

Research Question 2: How do they describe factors that motivate/discourage academic success?

Bridges to Academic Excellence

The participants discussed the various individuals and events that they encountered in their pursuit of academic excellence. Embedded in these discussions were their reasons for pursuing academic excellence and the steps that they took to achieve this lifelong goal.

Rationale for pursuing academic excellence

In both the individual and focus group interviews, the participants stated that going to college was the overarching reason for their pursuit of academic excellence. For these participants, attending college offered them the opportunity to establish a better livelihood than some of their immediate family members (Erkut, Marvy, Fields & Sing, 1997; Saunders et al., 2004). Many participants also embarked on this journey to fulfill their longstanding personal goals to acquire economic and social prominence in a society which they viewed as inequitable. For many the need to fulfill the family's aspirations was also prominent in their decisions. Because many of them came from homes where no one had attended college, they felt responsible for erasing a trend of low socio-economic status (Matthews-Armstead, 2002).

Pathways to academic success

All of the participants suggested that African American girls had to demonstrate certain tendencies in order to excel in high school. These included assertiveness, good decision making skills, hard work, and a commitment to excellence. The participants espoused the value of hard work and the determination to excel in school. Although many of the African American girls came from disadvantaged home environments, they did not believe that this dictated their future socio-economic status. In their view, excelling in school offered more choices and was likely to guarantee them a future consistent with that of the dominant society (Matthews-Armstead, 2002).

Research Question 3(a): From the African American girls' perspective: how do teachers influence their academic success?

Teachers play a vital role in fostering student engagement (Booker, 2004; Ladson-Billing, 2001). The participants echoed this sentiment by describing the actions of teachers who demonstrated in varying degrees that they were interested in their success. For most of the participants, this was evidenced by teachers' willingness to meet their individual needs both inside and outside of the school context. Participants reported that these actions increased their willingness to participate in class activities and attain high grades. The participants all suggested that caring teachers were integral to their academic success and were highly appreciative of those teachers who demonstrated these tendencies.

Conversely, the participants commented about teacher attitudes and practices that dissuaded their engagement in school. These included: (a) some teachers' tendencies to make offensive remarks regarding students abilities, (b) teachers' unwillingness to provide ample "wait time" during class discussions, and (c) participants feeling that their contributions to class discussions were not valued (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2003). In keeping with Ladson-Billings' (2001) recommendation for culturally relevant pedagogy, their viewpoints offer pertinent advice for teachers and school administrators who grapple with identifying effective strategies to meet the unique needs of African American girls.

Participants also complained about some teachers' ineffectiveness. For example, they described instances where teachers were responsible for subject areas that they were unqualified to teach. The participants stated that this created additional challenges for them and reduced their chances of performing successfully in these classes (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Haycock, 1998).

Research Question 3(b): How are teachers' expectations for academic success for African American and other students similar/different?

“As students immerse themselves in the routine of school, both perceptions and expectations reflect and determine the goals both students and teachers set for performance, the strategies they use to pursue the goals, the skills, energy, and other resources they use to implement the strategies, and the rewards they expect from making the effort” (Ferguson, 2003, p. 461).

This was very evident in the participants' viewpoints regarding their perceptions of teacher expectation. Although holistically the participants felt that many teachers held high expectations of them, they also suggested the presence of subtle and sometimes overt forms of low teacher expectation. These expectations usually manifested themselves in both teachers' comments and practices, and as suggested by the participants, resulted in many African American girls disengaging themselves from the classroom (Graybill, 1997; Landsman, 2004). It is therefore critical that teachers recognize the negative consequences that are implicit to their actions, reactions and comments to students in their classrooms, but more so to African American girls (Howard, 2002; Hubbard, 2005).

Research Question 3(c): How does African American identity influence the academic performance among African American high school girls?

“Adolescents become increasingly aware of their identities along racial, gender and academic lines as they enter high school. Thus for African Americans students academic identities are difficult to separate from gender and racial identities” (Howard, 2003, p. 3). Although the participants were aware of the numerous barriers that their identity created, they were all determined to dismantle these perceptions by excelling in school (Hubbard, 2005). They decried the negative identity that such media outlets as BET transferred to African American girls and emphasized the need for the media and other agencies to provide more positive images of their identity. The participants stated that many African American girls disengaged from school, because they believed that completing school was irrelevant to their

aspirations to become “rich and famous” (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Moody, 2004). They also suggested that schools could contradict these images and simultaneously increase their academic performance by creating continuous opportunities for them to interact with professional African American women (Grant, Battle, Murphy, & Heggoy, 1999; Kao, 2000).

None of the participants talked about being ostracized by their friends because of their academic success, (Bergin & Cook, 2002), or having to relinquish their identities to achieve their academic goals. In fact, they embraced their African American identity and viewed it as an asset (Saunders, et al., 2004). In their view, being black and female in a society which devalued them for both their race and gender increased their determination to excel.

Research Question 3(d): How do race and gender influence African American girls’ school experience?

Intersection race, gender and school experiences. Race and gender impacts the experiences that individuals have both inside and outside the school context (Foster, 1997, Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Participants were highly critical of the inherent disparities in school personnel’s policies and practices. They berated the school’s practice of singling out African American girls for dress code violations, and also suggested that African American girls received more discipline referrals than non-African American girls. These findings are consistent with research which indicates that African American girls are more likely to be penalized for dress code violations and other behavior issues than non-African American girls (Morris 2005; Pugh-Lilly, et al., 2001; Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). Research suggests that African American females received unequal information regarding college admissions (Hubbard, 2005; Matthews-Armstead, 2002). This was demonstrated in participants’ concerns regarding the amount and type of college information that was provided to them. In their view, school personnel placed more emphasis on providing college related information to students who were

enrolled in the Academy program (Hubbard, 2005). They stressed the need for equal access to college related information.

Many of the participants believed that teachers and other school personnel held low expectations for them. They suggested that teachers' beliefs regarding them were based on how African American girls were portrayed in the media. The participants lambasted the tendency of teachers to interact with them based on their negative perceptions of African American girls (Matthews-Armstead, 2002). They suggested that how teachers' interacted with them greatly influenced how they responded to them (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002). The participants' views were also consistent with the research regarding teachers' perceptions and stereotypes of African American girls (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Scott, 2002; Tatum, 2003).

The participants also discussed school personnel's perception that African American girls were loud. Interestingly, whereas many school personnel viewed being loud as a negative characteristic, the participants viewed this as a positive attribute. They suggested that being loud meant being assertive and outspoken. However, they did acknowledge that it could also be viewed as a negative trait (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002; Scott, 2002).

Research Question 3(e): How do parents influence African American girls' academic performance?

Parental involvement is a critical to children's success at all grade levels (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Interestingly, in all three forms of data collection the participants mentioned that a parent or family member influenced or motivated them to excel. Therefore they stressed the need for parents to be involved in their daughter's school experiences (Turnage, 2004). The participants also discussed the ways in which a supportive home environment impacted the school experiences of African American girls. They described the ways that their parents have assisted them. This finding is consistent with research which has shown that family support creates an

empowering environment for African American students to excel (Cribbs, Cronen, Davis, & Johnson, 2002; Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998).

Conversely participants also stated that non-supportive and absent parents created difficulties. Becoming caretakers for their younger siblings and having other adult responsibilities caused many African American girls to disengage from school (Grant, et al., 1999). Although they did not endorse this decision, they acknowledged that such realities made it difficult for African American girls to excel in school.

All of the participants shared the viewpoint that family and parental involvement was integral to African American girls' academic success. They reported that managing their academics became more challenging when there was no family or parental support (Hill & Craft, 2003; Epstein, 2001).

Theoretical Implications

Social context greatly impacts students' learning experiences and self perception (Ogbu, 1999, 2004). Numerous findings of the study illustrate the ways in which the school and external environments such as the participants' parents and family impact the school experiences of African American girls. See Figure 5-1. Research suggests that student learning is maximized when there is connection between both these environments (Osterman, 2000, Becker & Luther, 2002). The findings however point to the discontinuities that exist between the two cultures.

Internal Environment (School)

Schools have the ultimate goals of providing a safe environment in which students may grow, academically, socially and emotionally (Horvat & Antonio, 1999). Schools are responsible for providing quality instruction, holding high expectations for all students and working collaboratively with parents to ensure that students' needs are met. Much of what happens in schools however, is dependent on the leadership that exists within schools

(Christenson, 2004; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). School administrators by virtue of their position are responsible for ensuring that their institution's policies and practices are devoid of discriminatory tendencies that force African American girls to disengage from the school environment. Teachers and counselors also play a major role in creating supportive learning environments within our schools (Booker, 2004). Although African American girls consider school valuable, negative interactions with school personnel such as unfair practices, perceived stereotypes and low teacher expectation can create feelings of resentment among them, and result in many of them disengaging from the school environment (Chavous, et al., 2003; Ferguson, 2003).

Several factors within the school influenced the participants' perceptions of their school experiences. These included peer associations, teacher expectation, teacher instruction, and implementation of the school's policies and practices and other school personnel. The findings of the study show that many participants were unhappy with the dissonance that existed between the school's regular education and Academy program. The data suggest that participants believed that students enrolled in the white-dominated Academy program (a) received more and better quality information and services regarding college preparation from the school's guidance counselors and (b) were exposed to better classroom instruction (Hubbard, 2005). As suggested by the research, African American girls were underrepresented in Academy and Advanced Placement classes (Matthews-Armstead, 2002; Norman, et al. 2002; Russell, 2005). Within the school, only 11 African American girls in 11 and 12 grade were enrolled in two or more Academy and/or Advanced level courses or had GPA's of 3.5 and above on a 4.0 scale.

A major finding of this study relates to students' some of the school personnel's negative perceptions of African American girls. The participants reported that these perceptions resulted

in unfair administrative practices such as being singled for dress code violations, and discipline referrals (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002; Pugh-Lilly, et al., 2001) and suggested that these actions caused many African American girls to disengage from the school environment. The quality of instruction provided by teachers also influenced participants' ability to excel. The findings suggest that teachers who cared for their students' holistic development provided quality instruction and held high expectations for them, whereas teachers who held low expectations provided poor quality instruction. This practice perpetuated the participants' distrust for the system (Ogbu, 2004, Stinson, 2006).

External Environment

External environment such as the home and the community influences students' ability to excel in school (Epstein, 2001; Hill & Craft 2003) and applies to both parents and family. The findings suggest that supportive parents and family members positively influenced the participants' ability to excel academically. Parents provided a physically and emotionally safe environment for their daughters to grow. Many parents also schooled their children on how to navigate the inequities that they had to face both in school and the larger society. Others parents actively participated in all their daughter's school decisions. This supportive environment enabled these participants to successfully negotiate the numerous challenges of the larger society and school, and to excel.

Conversely, the findings also revealed that many African American girls had to cope with bad decisions made by one or both of their parents. Past decisions in some cases, resulted in their becoming caretakers of their siblings. African American girls placed in these positions found it very challenging to do well in school. The findings also suggest that the absence of parents in African American homes created the need for more positive role models for African American girls.

Individuals

All of the participants knew the value of attending college, and articulated self-confidence in their abilities to excel and achieve this goal (Grant, et al., 1999; Hubbard, 1999, 2005). They all valued education because they viewed it as a means of reversing the negative social and economic trends of their families and communities (Matthews-Armstead, 2002). Each participant experienced personal, social and/or economic barriers such as the absence of a parent, limited social and economic resources, and negative peer and adult role models. However, they were determined to not allow these circumstances to prevent them from excelling in school (Zirkel, 2005). Thus they made the necessary sacrifices and worked hard and remained determined to achieve academic excellence.

Several participants also expressed a general distrust for school personnel. They recounted incidents of discrimination against them and their peers. However, they did not report these instances to school administrators because they had no faith in the system (Hubbard, 2005). Instead the participants managed these experiences by creating strong relationships with peers and school personnel who supported their goals (Lareau & Horvat, 2003).

The findings of this study in many ways refuted the claims of Ogbu's (1999) cultural-ecological theory. Whereas Ogbu (1999) claimed that African Americans were reluctant to relinquish their cultural identity and viewed academic success as "acting White," and that this hindered their ability to achieve academic success, the participants at no time mentioned feeling that they had to relinquish their identity to achieve their academic goals. In addition, they all reported that being an African American female gave them the self-determination that they needed to excel.

Contrary to Ogbu's theory that African Americans did not believe that hard work guaranteed them a better socioeconomic future, the participants all believed that hard work

guaranteed them upward social mobility, and so they worked hard in all their classes to achieve this goal. All of the he participants demonstrated the same tendencies that successful students from other cultures used to achieve academic success namely -- hard work, self-determination and strong self-belief. Ogbu's claim that social context influenced African American students academic performance was confirmed, as all the participants reported various school and home experiences that positively impacted their academic performance. These include supportive learning environments, caring teachers and supportive parents and family members.

The tenets of other competing theoretical perspectives were confirmed in this study namely: Freire's (1992) critical consciousness theory, and Sue & Sue's (1999) racial/cultural identity theory. That the participants felt inept at instigating any actions that might change the various inequities relative to the school's policies and practices confirms one tenet of Freire's critical consciousness theory. With regard to this tenet, Freire (1992) states that although individuals recognize inequities that exist in their conditions, their reactions are primarily emotional. These participants were able to critically analyze the various personal, social and economic barriers that existed within their lives. Nonetheless they all worked hard at reversing these personal, social and economic trends in their lives and ultimately the lives of their immediate family members.

Finally, participants' positive perceptions of their negatively portrayed physical and social attributes confirmed Sue & Sue's theory that individuals develop an inner security that allows them to appreciate the unique and positive aspects of their culture. Table 5-1 lists the key points of the theoretical perspectives discussed in Chapter 2, the findings of this study and whether the results confirmed or refuted the various theoretical perspectives.

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest issues for policymakers, school personnel and educators to consider. The participants' voices draw attention to the factors that contribute to the school experiences of high-achieving African American high school girls and those factors that they believed prevented other African American high school girls from excelling in school. Several of the participants made reference to the importance of caring and supportive learning environments, the teachers' attitudes and practices that influence engagement, the impact of the school's policies and practices, and the impact that race/gender had on their school experience. In addition the participants discussed the roles that parents and family members played in assisting them in maintaining high academic performance. While the findings from the study highlighted the important role that parents and family members played in developing students' abilities to excel, the home situations that students are exposed to are beyond the school's control. This does not, however, relieve schools of the responsibilities that they have to ensure that marginalized students are given an equitable opportunity to achieve their fullest academic potential. The participants' responses offer some insight into how African American high school girls perceive their academic environment, and the forces within the school that influence them. Their responses also offer suggestions for ways that high schools can restructure their environment's policies and practices. The following suggestions are based on the findings of the study.

Create Safe School Environments.

Many participants mentioned that the presence of gang-related activities coupled with student fights made them feel unsafe. A commitment on the part of school personnel to reduce these incidents will create an environment where students feel both emotionally and physically safe. This will also create a healthier school climate. This could be achieved through increased staff training on issues related to gang violence and the strategies to counter their presence.

Since most of these gangs are connected to neighborhoods where many students reside, soliciting the assistance of community leaders and the sheriff/police department could be beneficial.

Set Higher Expectations For African American Girls.

The students continually commented of the negative perceptions that many school personnel held for African American girls. Students' self-perception influences their academic performance (Saunders et al., 2004). Negative perceptions of self prevent many African American females from realizing their potential. Many of these perceptions are based on the interactions that they have with teachers and other school personnel (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). Establishing higher expectations for African American girls is integral because it helps in building their self-perception and also motivates them to remain fully engaged in their school experience (Russell, 2004).

Hire Highly Qualified And Caring Teachers.

The diverse nature of today's classroom requires teachers who are experts in their subject areas and sensitive to the unique needs of their students (Gay, 2000). Many participants articulated that several of their teachers lacked the expert knowledge for the subjects they taught (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Some participants complained that the teaching methods used were incongruent with their method of learning. In many ways this reduced the students' ability to fully learn the concepts being taught in these classes. Implicit in these suggestions is the need for more culturally relevant teaching strategies to be used within these classes (Ladson-Billing, 2001). Thus school administrators should be fully committed to hiring the most qualified and best fit for each subject area (Andrews, 2004). In addition, they should also create learning communities that encourage collaboration among its teachers. An emphasis on training teachers in methods that are consistent with culturally relevant teaching is also recommended.

Culturally relevant pedagogy posits “that students’ prospects for improved academic performance are greatly enhanced when there is greater cultural continuity (Howard, 2002). This includes educating teachers on the value of utilizing teaching models that promote a major tenet of communalism namely, increased classroom group activities that promote interaction among students, and also reinforce the value of shared responsibility. Communalism also emphasizes social relationships and an awareness of interconnections among individuals. The importance that the participants placed on caring, teachers highlights the need for teachers to exude a caring personality during their interactions with all students, but in particular African American girls. Incorporating these teaching models and characteristics in the classroom will guarantee that African American girls are given an optimal opportunity to excel.

College Preparation For All Students.

“All students should be provided with the opportunity, or at the very least, encouraged to consider college” (Howard, 2003, p. 15). A number of participants mentioned that they did not have equal access to some college preparation courses and to college related information. High schools should therefore make a concerted effort to ensure that students have equal access to Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate courses, other college preparation courses, and relevant college preparation information (Norman, et al., 2002). Providing quality instruction to all students will increase their chances of successfully participating in advanced academic courses and programs. Placing college related-information in all classrooms, and providing frequent information sessions for all students will ensure that they have equal access to college related information. The participants also stressed the need for school personnel to provide them with career-related information. Providing students with information regarding college requirements, career-related information, and assisting them to locate college funding

opportunities will encourage more African American girls to see the viability of attending college (Grantham & Ford, 2003; Russell, 2005).

Establish Clearly Delineated Rules And Regulations.

Research suggests that African American girls are often singled out for dress code violations (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002). Many participants berated school personnel for these incidents. Participants also suggested that African American girls received more referrals than non-white African American girls. In many cases these referrals were a result of teacher's misperceptions of their behaviors and social practices. Familiarizing school personnel about the unique social characteristics of African American girls will help to reduce the negative stereotypes that African American girls have to contend with in school, reduce the tension that exists between African American girls and some school personnel, and ultimately reduce the number of referrals that they receive. Establishing and equally implementing clearly delineated rules regarding dress code and other student behaviors could encourage African American girls to feel more connected to a school system that they believe targets them (Holcomb-McCoy, 2001).

These recommendations highlight key issues that were expressed by the participants. Providing them a voice holds us responsible for ensuring that their cries do not go unheard. Therefore, it is imperative that practitioners and researchers provide viable opportunities to gain insight into the school experiences of African American girls and create learning environments that adequately respond to the needs of these students. To ignore this issue would create devastating effects on their lives and the future of our society.

Implications for Research

The results of the study suggest that numerous factors intertwine to influence high performance among African American girls. Recommendations for further research include:

1. Examine the school experiences that encourage African American girls at different levels of the K-12 educational system to excel.
2. Explore the policies and practices of school personnel that influence academic performance among African American girls at different levels of the K-12 educational system, and encourage them to excel.
3. Describe how teacher efficacy impacts the engagement among African American girls at different levels of the K-12 educational system to excel.
4. Study school personnel's perceptions of the school experiences of African American girls, and the factors that they believe influence their academic performance.
5. Explore teacher's perceptions of African American girls and how these expectations impact their academic performance.
6. Examine the impact that high-stakes testing has on the educational aspirations of African American girls.
7. Explore African American parents' perceptions of how they influence their children's academic performance.
8. Describe African American students' peer relationships and academic performance.
9. Explain the intersection between community involvement and African American student performance.

Summary

The impact that school and family context have on participants' academic performance was evident throughout the study. Participants reported that positive schooling experiences such as supportive learning environments, peer associations, student recognition and teachers' willingness to meet students' individual needs contributed their high academic performance. Conversely, they indicated negative experiences such as peer ridicule, students' fights and arguments and the increasing presence of gang-related activities created unsafe learning environments. Each of the participants stated that their desire to attend college motivated them to excel in school. It is interesting that although these participants encountered challenges both at school and home, they did not allow these situations to thwart their academic goals.

The participants' responses highlight the shortcomings of many K-12 institutions in creating safe and empowering learning environments for African American girls. All of the participants related instances of school personnel's bias/negative perceptions toward their group. In an era where emphasis is being placed on schools to become agents of change, more attention needs to be directed at establishing school policies and practices that support the college aspirations of African American girls. This includes providing equal access to college-related information, setting higher expectations for African American girls, hiring highly qualified and caring teachers, and establishing clearly delineated rules and regulations. Schools programs that provide African American girls with information about the benefits of attending college, and ways to gain college access will not only develop a desire to attend college, but also assist them to view college attendance as being realistic.

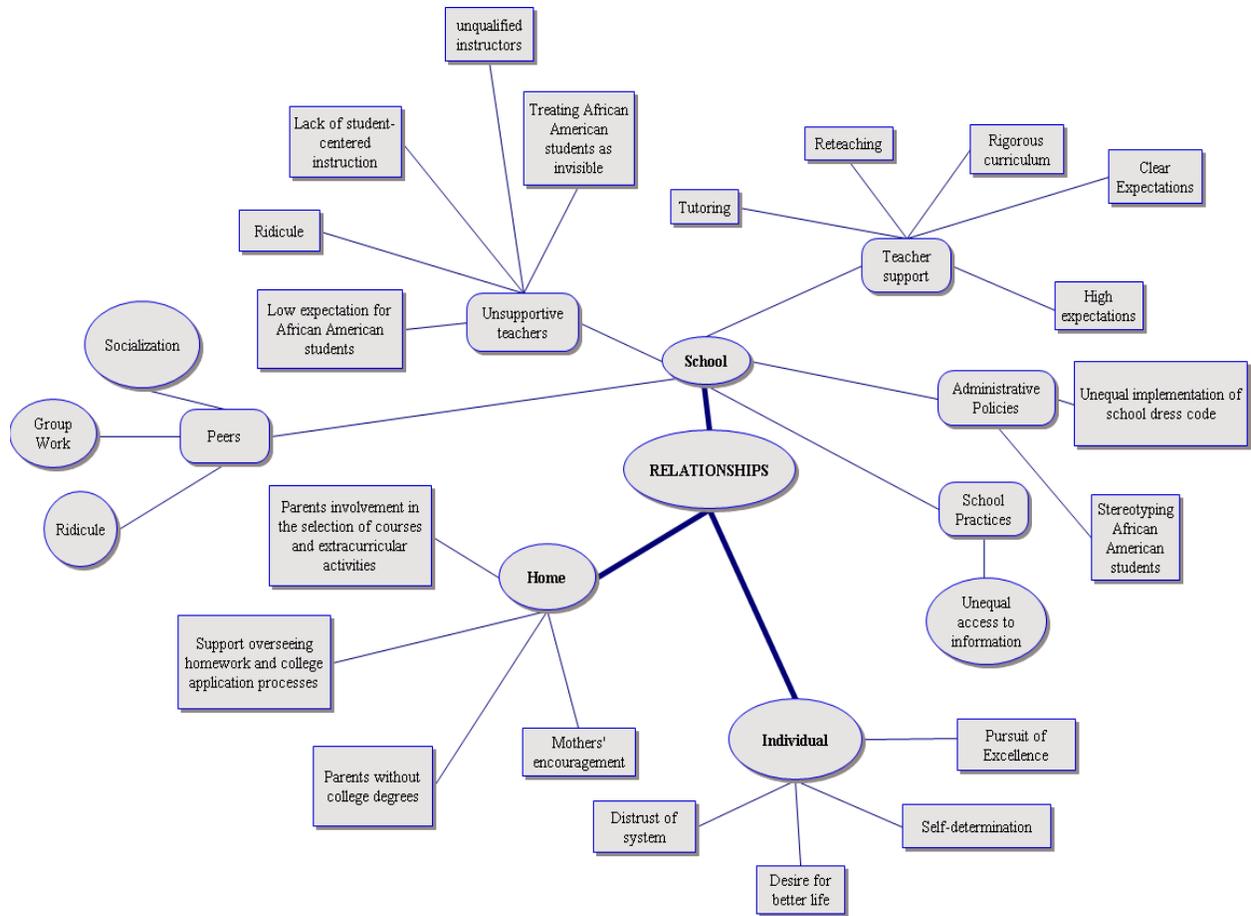


Figure 5-1. Social contexts influencing participants' academic success

Table 5-1. : Findings of study based on theoretical framework/perspective

Key Points of Theory	Findings	Theory confirmed or refuted
<i>Cultural-ecological theory (Ogbu, 1999)</i>		
African American were reluctant to relinquish their cultural identity.	None of the participants talked about having to relinquish their identity to achieve their academic goals	Refuted
African American and African American viewed academic success as “acting White.,” and this hindered their ability to achieve academic success	Being black and female increased their determination to excel	confirmed
African Americans lack the belief that hard work guarantees a better financial future	Participants believed that working hard and excelling in school offered more choices and guaranteed them a future that was consistent with that of the dominant society	Refuted
African Americans lack instrumental factors that motivate non African American students to succeed.	Participants believed that attending college offered them the opportunity to establish better livelihoods for themselves and their immediate family members.	Refuted
<i>Critical consciousness theory (Freire, 1992)</i>		
Individuals recognize the various inequities that exist in their conditions, however, their reactions are primarily emotional	Participants were aware of the various inequities that existed in the school personnel’s policies and practices. However, they never felt empowered to instigate any actions that might lead to changes.	Refuted
Individuals are empowered to critically analyze the conditions that shape their life experiences and work collectively to change these conditions	Participants were aware of the various personal, social and economic barriers that existed within their lives; however, they were determined to change these environmental trends.	Confirmed

Table 5-1. Continued

Key Points of Theory	Findings	Theory confirmed or refuted
Social context influences African American students' academic performance	Positive schooling experiences enhanced their ability to achieve high grades. Supportive home environment assisted them to excel	Confirmed
Individuals recognize the various inequities that exist in their conditions, however, their reactions are primarily emotional	Participants were aware of the various inequities that existed in the school personnel's policies and practices, however, they never felt empowered to instigate any actions that might lead to changes.	Confirmed
Individuals are empowered to critically analyze the conditions that shape their life experiences and work collectively to change these conditions	Participants were aware of the various personal, social and economic barriers that existed within their lives, however, they were determined to change these environmental trends.	Confirmed
<i>Stereotype Threat Theory (Steele, 1997)</i>		
Negative stereotypes about certain stigmatized group's intellectual and academic ability on any given domain can lead to high levels of anxiety and so impact their academic performance	Participants were aware of the low expectations that many teachers had for them, however this did not negatively impact their academic performance	Refuted
<i>Racial/Cultural Identity Theory (Sue & Sue, 1999)</i>		
Individuals develop an inner security that allows them to appreciate the unique and positive aspects of their culture and other minority cultures.	Participants held strong perceptions of their negatively-portrayed physical and social attributes.	Confirmed

APPENDIX A
INDIVIDUAL STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- What grade are you currently in?
- How long have you attended this school?
- What do you like most about your school experiences?
- What do you like least about your school experiences?
- What motivates you the most to participate in class activities?
- What discourages you the most from participating in class activities?
- When do you feel most comfortable participating in class activities? Why?
- Do you believe that teachers in this school are interested in your academic performance? How do they demonstrate this interest/disinterest?
- What steps do teachers take to ensure that you get a good understanding of the topics they teach?
- Do you believe that the teachers treat all students equally in the classroom? How do they demonstrate this?
- Do you believe that teachers have the same expectations for all students in their classes? How is this demonstrated in the classroom?
- How involved are your parents in your school?
- How much do your parents influence the decisions that you make regarding your school experiences?
- How important is it for parents to be involved in their child's school.
- What do you plan to do after graduating from school?
- How does the class instruction you receive prepare you for college?

APPENDIX B
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Who has had the greatest influence on your academic success?
2. What influences you the most to achieve academic success?
3. Do you think race/gender impacts how African American girls are viewed by school personnel (teachers, counselors, administrators and other staff? Is so how?
4. Do you think race/gender impacts how African American girls are treated in the classroom? Is so how?
5. How satisfied are you with the teaching/instruction that you receive in each of your class? Explain.
6. Do you have confidence in your teachers? Why?
7. Why do you think more African American high school girls are not achieving GPAs of 3.5 and above?
 - a. Is there any thing that teachers could do differently to ensure that more African American girls achieve higher grades in their classes?
 - b. Is there anything that parents could do differently to improve this situation?
8. Is there any way in which the school could improve:
 - a. The information they provide to African American girls regarding colleges and careers?
 - b. The instruction that you receive in class?

APPENDIX C FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT

Good afternoon everyone let me first and foremost thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to be here today. Just to recap, my name is Diane Archer-Banks and I am a doctoral student at the University of Florida. So during the next hour and half to two hours I will be asking you a number of questions related your high school experiences. I will be seeking your views on how your cultural identity, beliefs, parents influence and involvement, and teachers' beliefs/expectations impact your high school experiences. With your permission I would like to audiotape the interview. Please note however that all the information collected today will be confidential in regards to who said what aahm This means that I will at no time disclose who participated in the group or attribute any quote to any specific individual basically the pseudonyms that you have chosen will be used in my final report and I would like everyone to participate so please if you could just wait until you are identified to begin speaking and this will also assist me later on when I have to transcribe what was said here in the in the focus group. Please feel safe to express your views related to the topic freely. Like I said before your identity will be kept confidential to the full extent of the law. The information you provide today will be presented in a written study and submitted to educational journals for possible publication or for presentation. Remember also that as stated on the informed consent that you signed prior to this that you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence you do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer any questions before we start.

Does everyone still want to participate?

Are there any questions?

APPENDIX D
JOURNAL PROMPTS

1. School related events that assisted me to achieve/maintain academic excellence include. . . .
(please note that this includes any type of school-related event whether it occurred in the classroom, hallway or off-campus)
2. What would you like to achieve in the next 5-10 years? What steps will you take to achieve this goal?
3. How have individuals such as peer, teachers, parents, family and community members influenced your decision to maintain high GPA's? Who would you say have influenced you most on this decision?

You may also write about any event or other related topic that affects your school experience.

APPENDIX E
EXAMPLES OF FRAMES OF ANALYSIS

FRAMES OF ANALYSIS	Participant 1 (VR)	Participant 2 (TL)
Most-liked school experiences	I like it that I get to be with my friends and I get to hang out with them and that I learn a lot. (Lines 15-16)	The kids the school, the spirit of the school (Line 386). . . They have a good spirit is like there is nothing negative going on like when we have pep rally. The whole school is like we are there to support them just because we don't go to the game but we are there in the pep rally showing that we support them (lines 400-404)
Motivation for class participation	Attention (chuckles). I like to get the attention from the teachers (lines 40-41) . . . Well I want to go to college and I know that I have to do well in class if this is to happen. My mom and dad but especially my mom is also very strict when it come to school work, so I don't have a choice but to do well (smiles and chuckles) (lines 45-49)	Myself, I have to be like if I don't participate I know that I am holding myself back from going to where I want to go (lines 413-414 . . .To college and to get a good job (lines 416

APPENDIX F
DOMAIN EXAMPLES

Included Terms	Semantic Relationships	Cover Terms
Going to college Strict parents Supporting family Achieving personal goal	is reason for	excelling in school
Treating students differently Disregarding students' response Stereotyping	is a form of	Teacher bias
Assisting with homework Acquiring a tutor Attending school functions Helping child to choose extracurricular activities	is a form of	Parental Involvement

APPENDIX G
EXAMPLE OF MASTER OUTLINE

Salient Domains	Excerpts	Location		
		Pg.	Li.	DS
Parental Involvement and Support	My mom because she pushes me to do more and I don't settle for less because of her and I am in the classes I am because of her because I am like scared to, but she like pushes me to do what I have to do/.	1	8-11	FG
	She helps me when she can ..or when she remember the concepts she tries helps me with my homework, especially my papers she helps because she likes to write and if it's a topic that she is not good at, she finds me a tutor. She is on top of everything that I do in school – my grades, the activities I get into just everything and she is so supportive	10	232-237	I
	..Today after school my mom said she had a surprise for me. When I got home she had bought me a pretty necklace with a bracelet to match it. She bought it for me because I got a good report card which was all "As" and "Bs". This makes me more driven to work harder . . .	4	65-70	J

FG – Focus Group

J – Journal

I – Individual Interview

Li – Line Number

Pg. Page Number

DS – Data Source

APPENDIX H
PARENTAL CONSENT LETTER

Department of Educational Administration and Policy
University of Florida
P.O. Box 117049
351 Norman Hall,
Gainesville, FL 32611-7049

Parental Consent

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Administration and Policy at the University of Florida, conducting research the high school experiences of high achieving African American girls. The purpose of this study is to examine how cultural identity, student beliefs, teachers' beliefs/expectations, and parents influence and involvement impact their high school experiences. The results of the study may help educators and policymakers to better understand the various factors that influence high performance among African American girls. These findings could also assist schools to develop systems that will be beneficial to the future academic success of African American girls. With your permission, I would like to ask your child to volunteer for this research. The students participating in this study will participate in individual and group interviews lasting 1 to 1½ hour. They will also be asked to complete journal entries on topics specified by the researcher. These topics will be related to issues that emerged during the interviews. To ensure the confidentiality of your child, we will replace her name with a pseudonym. Results will only be reported in the form of group data. Participation or non- participation in this study will not affect your daughter's grades or placement in any programs.

You and your child have the right to withdraw consent for your child's participation at any time without consequence. There are no known risks or immediate benefits to the participants. No compensation is offered for participation. Group results of this study will be available in July 2007. If you have any questions about this research protocol, please contact me at (386) 951-1684 or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Behar-Horenstein at (352) 392-2391, Ext. 299 Questions or concerns about your child's rights as research participant may be directed to the UFIRB office, University of Florida, Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611, (352) 392-0433.

Diane Archer-Banks
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Educational Administration and Policy
University of Florida

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily give my consent for my child, _____, to participate in Diane Archer-Banks' study of high achieving African American high school girls. I have received a copy of this description.

Parent / Guardian

Date

2nd Parent / Witness

Date

APPENDIX I
PARTICIPANT CONSENT LETTER

Department of Educational Administration and Policy

University of Florida
P.O. Box 117049
351 Norman Hall,
Gainesville, FL 32611-7049

Participant Consent

Dear Student:

I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Administration and Policy at the University of Florida. As part of my coursework I am conducting an individual interview and two group interviews. The purpose of these interviews is to learn about how cultural identity, student beliefs, parents influence and involvement, and teachers' beliefs/expectations impact the high school experiences of high-achieving African American girls. I am asking you to participate in this interview because you have been identified as a high-achieving African high school girl. Interviewees will be asked to participate in three interviews lasting no longer than 1 to 1½ hour. The schedule of questions is enclosed with this letter. You will not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer. Your interview will be conducted at a location that is convenient to both of us after I have received a copy of this signed consent from you in the mail. With your permission I would like to audiotape this interview. You will also be asked to complete at least three journal entries on topics that are specified by the researcher. Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law and your identity will not be revealed in the final manuscript. There are no anticipated risks, compensation or other direct benefits to you as a participant in this interview. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate and may discontinue your participation in the interview at any time without consequence.

If you have any questions about this research protocol, please contact me at (386) 951-1684 or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Behar-Horenstein at (352) 392-2391, Ext. 299. Questions or concerns about your child's rights as research participant may be directed to the UFIRB office, University of Florida, Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611, (352) 392-0433.

Please sign and return this copy of the letter in the enclosed envelope. A second copy is provided for your records. By signing this letter, you give me permission to report your responses anonymously in the final manuscript to be submitted to my faculty supervisor as part of my course work, and to education journals for possible publication.

Diane Archer-Banks
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Educational Administration and Policy
University of Florida

I have read the procedure described above for Diane Archer-Banks' study of high achieving African American high school girls. I voluntarily agree to participate in the interview and journal writing activities and I have received a copy of this description.

Signature of participant

Date

I would like to receive a copy of the final "interview" manuscript submitted.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Diane Alice Marie Archer-Banks was born in Clarendon, Jamaica W. I. and spent her childhood and part of her adult life in Jamaica. She worked as a teacher in Jamaica and during this tenure also served as a dance instructor. In 1990, her senior dance group comprised of primarily at-risk girls was awarded the “Best Rural Dance Championship” title in the island’s annual Festival of Arts competition.

In September 1990, she along with her daughter immigrated to the United States to join her mother Elfreda Veronica Creary-Archer and eldest brother Everton Archer. She married Sim Hugh Banks III in 1993. Diane attended the University of Florida where she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in public relations. As an undergraduate student, she served as the president of the University of Florida’s Caribbean Student Association from 1994 -1995. Upon graduating from UF, she taught in the Downtown Learning Lab of Santa Fe Community College during the period 1997 -1998. Her passion for teaching marginalized students motivated her to accept a teaching position at the newly established PACE Center for Girls, Alachua in 1998, and she was promoted one year later to program manager, a position she held from April 1999 to June 2004. During this period, she also achieved a master’s degree in social science education from Nova Southeastern University, and a Specialist in Education degree in educational leadership from the University of Florida. Diane also taught American History at Eastside High School in Gainesville, Florida from August 2004 to June 2005.

Diane has one daughter who also graduated from the University of Florida. She currently resides in Gainesville with her husband Sim Hugh Banks III.