

MCCAIN, JOHNETTE ATKINSON, Ph.D. "You've Got to Want to Do!": An Examination of the Construction of Academic Identity among High-Achieving African American High School Adolescents. (2012)  
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The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how eight high-achieving African American high school adolescents who participated in an early college academy program at a historically Black high school constructed their academic identity. Using the interpretive lens of sociocultural theory and racial identity development, the negotiations of these adolescents were explored as they navigated their own identities, which ultimately revealed their beliefs about their academic achievement.

Through the use of an instrumental case study, data were collected from individual interviews, focus groups, observations, archival document reviews, and researcher's field notes. A content analysis was conducted.

Findings of this study revealed that participants demonstrated strong academic identities. All eight participants enjoyed school and believed that schooling was a non-negotiable necessary for a successful future in the world. They chose to attend the early college program, in part, because of the historic legacy and traditions of the high school, even though society's views of the school were oftentimes contradictory to what they believed to be true. Though the participants acknowledged the benefits and the drawbacks of being in their high school and particularly the early college program, they described some of their peers who attended the traditional school within the same high school in similar stereotypical ways they sought hard to negate about themselves. Participants' families positively influenced their academic identity development and

served as motivation for them to achieve. While the participants recalled experiences where racial discrimination was exposed through the societal curriculum, they “put race aside” when thinking about their own academic achievement, for they considered race having no bearing on their educational successes; however, they used their academic achievement as a form of resistance to how society deemed them to be.

Implications for school administrators, educational policy makers, and classroom teachers are provided. Suggestions for future research are also shared.

“YOU’VE GOT TO WANT TO DO!”: AN EXAMINATION OF THE  
CONSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC IDENTITY AMONG  
HIGH-ACHIEVING AFRICAN AMERICAN  
HIGH SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS

by

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Approved by

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In honor of my father's continued guidance  
and to the precious memory of my beloved mother

APPROVAL PAGE

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Previous research on African American adolescents' educational experiences has primarily focused on factors related to low academic achievement (Graham & Anderson, 2008; Lee, Winfield, & Wilson, 1991; Nichols, Berliner, & Glass, 2005; Wiggan, 2007b). These factors often overemphasize individual traits rather than the lack of institutional responsiveness to social inequalities. In contrast, recent studies have concentrated on school systems' ineffectiveness to address the lack of engagement of underperforming students, racialized differences in achievement, educational inequalities, and socioeconomic status (Graham & Anderson, 2008; Wiggan, 2007b). By shifting the focus away from blaming individuals to reforming structural arrangements, these examinations provide a more holistic perspective on the challenges facing African American adolescents in United States (U.S.) educational institutions. The identification of sociocultural factors that contribute to the high academic achievement of African American adolescents is critical to increasing academic attainment.

A major structural flaw present within the current U.S. educational system related to African American adolescents is the practice of academic tracking. In this process, African American students are often stigmatized as academically deficient and thus placed in lower level academic courses. According to Howard and Solberg (2006), several factors may contribute to the existing achievement disparities to include

educational processes such as tracking, cultural and personal factors such as stereotype threat, and social influences such as poverty and access, family involvement or the lack thereof, and racism. Consequently, the presence of these factors disparately affects African American students and contributes to the racial achievement gap. The awareness of this issue has heightened in recent years due to the emphasis that has been placed on the utilization of accountability mandates to increase academic performance standards (Chambers, 2009).

Discussions concerning the achievement gap date back as far as 1966 with the release of the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966), which initiated explanations for *performance gaps* between Black and White students. Initial reasons for the gap were often attributed to what was explained as a cultural deficit between ethnic groups (Chambers, 2009; Coleman et al., 1966; Ladson-Billings, 2006). In years to follow, the achievement gap discussions were rephrased as *academic achievement gap* issues after the publication of the book, *The Black-White Test Score Gap* (1998), edited by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips. In a collection of essays, Jencks and Phillips described contributing factors associated with the academic achievement gap such as racial bias, acting White (Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), family composition (Phillip, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Crane, 1998) and stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1998).

With the passage of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation in 2001 and the launching of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards, the inequities present within school systems throughout the U.S. became much more apparent, thereby narrowing the

focus of reform on achievement and academic attainment. Prior to the implementation of *No Child Left Behind*, the achievement gap discourse was limited to the discussion of how well ethnic minority groups such as African Americans performed compared to White students on standardized tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) (Anderson, Medrich, & Fowler, 2007). Since then, attention has shifted to the comparison between achievement of specific subgroups which are established based on socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, ability or disability and language, and their White or otherwise privileged students from the same school (Bruce, Getch, & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009). This disaggregation unveils patterns of inequality and gaps in academic achievement. Most recently, the term achievement gap and its implications have been challenged and scholars such as Chambers (2009) are forcing the debate that advocates for the deconstruction of the term's name and meaning. Chambers (2009) suggested the term "receivement gap" as an alternative that focuses on structural factors and not students and inputs or influences instead of outputs such as the hallmark evaluative tool of testing.

### **The Need to Study High-Achieving African American Students**

More often than not, academic scholarship as it concerns African American adolescents deals with negative outcomes and underachievement rather than the experiences of high achieving students (Cunningham, Corprew, & Becker, 2009). Many empirical and theoretical accounts have examined the noticeable disparities between African Americans and Whites as relates to academic achievement and success (Lynn, 2006). Reasons for these disparities have been noted in a variety of explanations such as

deficits in genetics, lack of sufficient parental support, and failure of the African American community to shield its children from the disparaging influences known as “pathological ghetto culture” (McWhorter, 2000, as cited in Lynn, 2006, p. 107). Moreover, African Americans have been homogeneously grouped in many instances, however varying viewpoints, to include positive aspects of African American achievement (Lynn, 2006). Despite the literature that often covers African American achievement as low and commonplace with socioeconomic status and lack of support as cited blame, there are anthropological and sociocultural examinations worthy of being mentioned.

As a counterintuitive response to the notion that minority students (Black in particular) are incapable of competing with their White counterparts, John Ogbu, an anthropologist, espoused that the answer lies in the examination of culture. He argued that culture was a “context-specific and socially sanctioned phenomenon” noting the linkage between agency and structure (Lynn, 2006, p. 108). This explanation is known as the cultural-ecological theoretical model that states that differences in community forces are primarily to blame for differences in school performance among African American students. It also forces one to consider how much, to what extent, or if African American adolescents contribute to their own oppressive behavior as it relates to academic attainment. In addition, in opposition to the homogenous group of underachieving African Americans, there are many who choose to seize opportunistic experiences to better their chances to maximize academic potential with participation in enrichment activities.

The characterization of being high achieving is not a commonly used identifier for school children in the United States (Ford & Harris, 1999). While Black students are heavily tracked or placed in special education programs, a conspicuously low number are found in gifted programs when compared to their White counterparts. Ford (1996) described the overarching issue as it relates to the Black-White academic achievement gap:

. . . Black students, particularly males, are three times as likely as White males to be in a class for the educable mentally retarded, but only half as likely to be placed in a class for the gifted. Not only are Black students under enrolled in gifted education programs . . . [but] Black students are overrepresented in special education, in the lowest ability groups and tracks, and among high school and college dropouts. (p. 5)

A significant amount of current literature on African American student achievement focuses on the impact of socioeconomic factors (e.g. poverty) on academic performance (Ford, 1996; Ford & Harris, 1999). Consistent across all grade levels (K-12), African American students lag behind European American students, but the complexity of this disparity is a confluence of various factors. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) asserted:

Although both class and gender can and do intersect race, as stand-alone variables they do not explain all of the educational achievement differences apparent between Whites and students of color. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that even when we hold constant for class, middle-class African-American students do not achieve at the same level as their White counterparts. (p. 51)

In addition, some theories have suggested the underachievement of African American adolescents is also attributed to sociocultural factors. An example of this is the cultural incompatibility theory (Whaley & Noel, 2011). According to this theory, when African

Americans identify with the academic domain which is inundated with European American influence a conflict manifests between Black adolescents and their cultural community by implying that their culture is subpar or fostering the notion that their cultural allegiance makes them susceptible to negative stereotypes (Whaley & Noel, 2011).

Although empirical support for theories such as the aforementioned one is scarce, it is evident from the literature that research on African American students tends to focus on low achievement instead of the high achievement. Hence, the affective and social experiences of high achieving African American students remain significantly overlooked (Milner, 2002). Cognitive studies, more often than not, mask the benefit of utilizing affective and social issues to help retain and increase the number of high-achieving African American students (Milner, 2002). Moreover, there is a dearth of studies on the influence of non-cognitive factors such as social influences and identity development, which could contribute to increased academic achievement outcomes. Furthermore, these studies lack explanatory criteria such as racial identity, academic identity, and social identity that can undergird the high-achievement of African American students. Thus, a more in-depth examination of the development and impact of these multiple identities is necessary to ascertain better insight into the academic achievement gap.

According to research, the notion of racial identity or ideals concerning self and race are often directly connected to how much or whether formal education is valued (Wright, Weekes, & McGlaughlin, 1999). In addition, some African American students

may “reject the forms of knowledge available within schools and embrace alternative forms of knowledge available within their communities” (Wright et al., 1999, p. 297). These alternative forms are often associated with negative perceptions and stereotypical categorizations of African American culture. These negotiations are particularly relevant among adolescents (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012). Similarly, Milner (2002) described the consequences of African American adolescents being labeled as high achieving:

Quite often, instead of high achieving students being marveled at in the school, those who put forth effort to reach their highest potentials are looked upon as “sell outs” and as “acting White.” Consequently, many high achieving students find themselves disguising their aptitudes and yielding to those who are revered and in control (e.g., drug dealers, gang bangers). (p. 82)

We must understand “the how” and “the why” in reference to what influences the high achievement of African American high school adolescents in order to foster their continued development as well as to assist those who are low performing.

Understanding the power of social dynamics in relation to the academic success of African Americans is pivotal in exploring their academic identities and ultimately eradicating achievement gaps. It is important to explore how African American high school adolescents are socialized to think about or conceptualize academic attainment. Such a conceptualization of academic attainment is often referred to as academic identity (Osborne, 1997). When dealing with the formation of academic identity of African American adolescents, one must take into account other influential aspects that determine how such an identity is constructed. Identity is a complex phenomenon that is negotiated

by the intersection of social, cultural, psychological, historical, and personal influences that govern who we were, who we are now, and who we might become. The impact of racial identity coupled with general identity on achievement is inextricably linked.

Rowley and Moore (2002) posited that:

The discourse in the literature regarding the influence of racial identity on academic achievement has been relatively narrow, often ignoring such important conceptual issues as the fact that racial identity is dynamic across situations; that race is not important to all African Americans; that the individual's assessment of what is African American is most important; and that racial identity cannot be understood without examining the social context. (p. 63)

Furthermore, as stated in the quote, we also cannot separate perspectives in sociocultural theory as they provide greater understanding of the multifaceted associations between the histories of certain groups of people such as African Americans. Examining these histories and their impact on how African American adolescents navigate through societal activities is essential to improving learning outcomes and educational attainment.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine how a group of high-achieving African American high school adolescents who participated in an early college academy program constructed their academic identity. In doing so, I gave careful consideration to school perspectives, racial perspectives, and sociocultural perspectives such as family structure and peer associations. More specifically, through the interpretive lenses of sociocultural theory and racial identity development, I sought to explore the negotiations these adolescents made as they navigated their own identities and ultimately revealed their ideals of academic identity and attainment.

### **Research Questions**

The following two research questions guided this study:

1. How do African American high school adolescents construct their academic identity?
2. What impact do sociocultural, sociohistorical and psychological contexts have on academic identity development of African American high school adolescents?

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study can reveal important information for researchers, educators, parents, and community stakeholders in an effort to foster the development of healthy and positive academic identities among African American adolescents. The use of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) as a theoretical framework provides a critical lens for examining the impact of various factors on identity development. As a result of this study, educational researchers and practitioners will be better equipped to assist African American high school adolescents in promoting the development of racial, social, and personal identities, which in turn, could yield greater cognitive outcomes.

Other school-related personnel, parents, and community members can benefit from the results of this study. Administrators and school board members can implement policies and secure fiscal support to ensure that programs be established to undergird academic rigor, provide sociocultural relevance, and foster relationships that are academically and socially beneficial to students who are not only often marginalized, but also to the greater school-aged student population as a whole. Knowledge and

understanding of identity development will assist teacher educators in providing better opportunities and designing meaningful lessons that encourage students to explore their own philosophies, assumptions, and realities as they concern race and the racialization of academic achievement for African American adolescents. Regarding parents, this study can justify the need for positive support and reinforcement as students' "first teachers" and further validate that active parental involvement results in upward achievement mobility. Community stakeholders may gain a greater understanding of how to most effectively cultivate an environment that provides programs and social networks that complement and supplement school activities to educate families about the triangulation of race, identity, and academic achievement. Moreover, all stakeholders must become aware that school contexts (socially and structurally), familial and communal influences, and the complexities of our larger society determine the ways in which we think concerning race and achievement (Andrews, 2009). This study can be used to inform them of such linkages.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Academic Identity*: the degree to which a person exhibits a personal commitment to excelling academically. It is analogous to achievement motivation and is defined as "the personal commitment to a standard of excellence, the willingness to persist in the challenge, struggle, excitement, and disappointment intrinsic in the learning process" (Welch & Hodges, 1997, p. 37).

*Adolescence*: a complex period of human development between the ages of 10 and 22. Beginning with the start of puberty and ending with the assumption of adult

responsibilities, adolescence is characterized as a period of multi-faceted physical, social, moral, cognitive, sexual, and emotional transformations that are constantly negotiated and restructured as adolescents discover and rediscover their positions in society (Kovacs, 2008).

*Culture*: a perspective that consists of standards for deciding what is, what can be, how one feels about it, what to do about it, and how to go about doing it (Goodenough, 1981).

*Double consciousness*: A term created by W. E. B. DuBois (1903/2008) and referring specifically to the Negro (the descriptor DuBois used in his initial edition), double consciousness is:

a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBois, 1903/2008, p. 12)

A more recent definition I consider that can be used for double consciousness was authored by Fordham (1996) which states that it is a method in which Black males are taught

to embrace a two-fold contradictory formula: to concurrently accept subordination and the attendant humiliation (for survival in the larger society) and preserve gender domination (for survival in the Black community). (Fordham, 1996, p. 148)

*Early College Academy Program:* a program in which secondary school students enroll in a prescribed rigorous curriculum during their first three years in high school and then are eligible to take first year college courses, thereby earning dual credit as a high school senior and a college student at local institutions of higher education (School System website, 2010).

*Ethnicity/Ethnic Identity:* “a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and share segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients” (Yinger, 1976, p. 200).

*Figured Worlds:* Social and cultural practices that are molded by a societal set of expectations and norms that regulate participation in social activities (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998).

*Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs):* Historically Black colleges and universities or HBCUs are institutions of higher education that were founded after the Civil War for the principal purpose of educating Black Americans (Lovett, 2011).

*Identity:* a multi-dimensional phenomenon and a derivative of the fields of psychology, anthropology, and sociology. It is fluid, complex, and socially marked (Tatum, 1997). Additionally,

people tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities . . . Identities are the key means by which people care about and care for what is going on around them. . . . Identities are hard-won

standpoints that, however, dependent upon social support and however vulnerable to change, make at least a modicum of self-direction possible. They are possibilities for mediating agency. (Holland et al., 1998, pp. 3-4)

*Identity Development*: a triangulation of three conflict periods: one's physical and biological strengths and weaknesses; life's familial experiences; and an individual's historical, cultural, and social encounters (Erikson, 1968).

*Race*: a classifier based on superiority and inferiority making it a socially constructed concept (Mukhopadhyay & Henze, 2003).

*Racelessness*: a conscious or unconscious effort to disassociate with Black racial identity (Fordham, 1988, p. 149).

*Racial identity*: a social construction, which "refers to a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group" (Helms, 1993, p. 3). Racial identity is also "a surface-level manifestation based on what we look like yet has deep implications in how we are treated" (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999, p. 40).

*Societal curriculum*: an ongoing informal curriculum of family, peer groups, neighborhoods, mass media and other socializing forces (Cortes, 1979).

Finally, while I acknowledge the terms, "Black" and "African American" signal different meanings to different people, especially noting geographic origins and distinctions, throughout this dissertation, I and the participants use both terms interchangeably to refer to people of African descent through North American slavery.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study posed some limitations. One limitation in particular is that this study focused on a single high school with an early college academy program in the southeastern United States. Therefore, findings from the study may not be indicative of implications at all early college high school programs and/or historically Black high schools in general. In addition, all participants in the study were a part of “the academy” cohort, taught by the same teachers and mentored by the same director. Half the cohort consisted of juniors and half seniors. In addition, these halves were further divided by gender. Although each group was evenly distributed on the basis of gender and classification, there are no participants from the traditional high school to enhance comparability. Therefore, findings do not represent the encounters, understandings, and experiences of all African American students at this particular southeastern high school, especially those who may not have the support that such academies afford to African American students.

### **Summary**

Chapter I is an introduction to the research study. The introduction highlights information concerning intragroup disparities that exist within the context of the study spawning the rationale for which the study is being conducted. Key definitions are included as well as limitations and the significance of the study. In addition, this chapter also discussed the purpose of the study and the research questions. Chapter II highlights previous literature on identity development, racial identity development and related considerations and studies, academic identity and the theoretical framework that supports

this study. Chapter III describes the research methodology and includes assumptions and rationale for the paradigm, role of researcher, researcher bias, ethics, context, participants, data collection procedures, data analysis, and trustworthiness. Chapter IV provides the analysis of the data. Chapter V provides greater discussion of the implications for policy and practice.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

Adolescence is one of the most complex periods in human development. Beginning with the start of puberty and ending with the assumption of adult responsibilities, adolescence is characterized as a period of multi-faceted physical, social, moral, cognitive, sexual, and emotional transformations (Kovacs, 2008) that are constantly negotiated and restructured (Beyers & Cok, 2008). Early adolescence, also known as the pubescence years, usually covers ages 10 through 14. Ages 15 through 17 are considered the era in which self is defined or the middle adolescent period. The late adolescent/early adult years or time between ages 18 and 22 is considered the period in which emphasis is placed on careers and belief systems (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Kroger, 2006; Ormrod, 2010). Physically, the growth of various body parts and the manifestation of changes such as hygiene attentiveness, voice modulation, and acne which can result in self-conscious feelings and uneasiness (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Mizelle 2005; Strahan, 1997) are evident during the adolescent period.

These physical changes also trigger hormones that produce such behaviors as mood swings, yielding challenging and complicated emotional states. These emotional states may include struggles between independence and belongingness. Independence lends itself to an adolescent negotiating a sense of self which fosters their development of

an identity. It is further marked by the milestone accomplishments of moving from dependence upon parents to independence, childhood to adulthood, and from the safeguard of parents to self-regulation (Kovacs, 2008).

In addition, adolescents must navigate physical and emotional changes with dynamic changes and challenges of social development to include relationships and social interactions. During the adolescent period, relationships with adults (including parents) and peers become complex and dynamic and can also be overwhelming. The evidence of friends serves as a factor of social acceptance. Overall, adolescents utilize many resources such as peers', parents', and teachers' expectations coupled with their own experiential knowledge (particularly their past successes and failures) (Reynolds & Gill, 1994) to continue their journey of becoming an adult. Moreover, it is during this time of emotional, social, and psychological changes in adolescents that their recognition of self as a racial being can emerge as well.

### **Racial Identity Development**

In its primitive state, race was a concept that anthropologists used to classify humans by their distinguishable physical characteristics using the classification schemes of Blumenbach and Linnaeus (American Anthropological Association, 2011). Race has now transitioned into a classifier based on superiority and inferiority making it a socially-constructed concept (Mukhopadhyay & Henze, 2003). Even though in an anthropological sense, race does not exist, in reality, it still exists and it still matters (Mukhopadhyay & Henze, 2003; West, 1994). As such, race and racial identity are essential in the development of identity. Historically, racial descriptors have been defined by the U.S.

government as a means to separate and penalize non-White individuals and for the purpose of uplifting and privileging political dominance and superiority (Williams & Land, 2006). Although race is not a biological construct, the reality of racism and its consequences is very much an authentic entity and commonplace in the lives of many (Brown & Cooper, 2011).

Rosalyn Mickelson (2003) explained the concept of racial identity:

Racial identity is not simply about being black, biracial, white, Latino, Asian, or Native American in a white world but about being so in a white, media- and technology-saturated, capitalist and information driven globalizing world of relations between youths and adults, boys and girls, and men and women. (p. 1055)

Along the same lines, Sellers, Chavous, and Cooke (1998) asserted that no attitudes in particular define racial identity, yet one decides if they will identify with it based on three aspects: (a) centrality, (b) regard, and (c) ideology. The linkage between self-concept and race indicates centrality. Regard, which is two-fold, describes how an individual feels about his or her racial group (private) and how others perceive them in public (Sellers et al., 1998). Finally, ideological beliefs consider what is appropriate for one's racial group in terms of actions within and with society. Therefore, racial identity is not a mere categorical way to distinguish individuals phenotypically, but it serves as a mitigating factor in the determination of successes and failures of ethnic minorities as it relates to the dominance of ethnic majority ideals and values.

Attention to racial identity among Blacks dates back to the initial studies of Kenneth Clark who used Black and White dolls to examine the extent of how Black

children identified, recognized, and perceived themselves in terms of being Black or ethnic and how they felt about it (Franklin, 2000). Race as a social construct creates a bond and feelings associated with peoplehood, meaning that racial membership in a particular group helps them define themselves, thereby making healthy regard for racial status psychologically important within these groups (Smith, 1989). According to Grantham and Ford (2003), racial identity concerns the extent to which people of color are familiar with, understand, and appreciate or value their racial background and heritage. Moreover, although a myriad of common definitions have been constructed to explain racial identity, these explanations do not come without criticism. For instance, Ford (1996) argued that theories and definitions of racial identity have failed to consider it in the context of self-concept to include self-esteem and other self-perceptions.

Perhaps the most renowned theory of racial identity belongs to psychologist William Cross, author of *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity* and racial identity development expert. He first introduced the model, “Psychology of Nigrescence on Becoming Black” in 1971, and over a 30-year period has since revised it three times. The revised model is referred to as “Nigrescence Theory.” Nigrescence refers to becoming Black. The original model described five stages of racial identity development: (a) pre-encounter, (b) encounter, (c) immersion/emersion, (d) internalization, and (e) internalization-commitment. However, there is a revised model of racial identity in which Cross presents eight types of identities “clustered” into the three stages of pre-encounter, immersion-emersion and internalization (Cross, Parkham, & Helms, 1991). A description of the three stages follows.

### **Pre-encounter Stage**

The pre-encounter stage has three types within it. Type I is *Pre-encounter-assimilation*, which describes the Black person whose social identity is embodied around being American, therefore placing minimum emphasis on racial group identity (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Consequently, this may cause disengagement with the Black community and all it may represent. Type II is *pre-encounter miseducation*, which depicts Black people who accept without hesitation negative, historical, and stereotypical information about Blacks (Cross et al., 1991). They recognize more weaknesses in the Black community than strengths and choose not to affiliate with it (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Type III is *pre-encounter racial hatred*. The person who exemplifies Type III experiences deep, severe feelings of self-loathing attributed to being Black.

### **Immersion-Emersion**

Cross (1991) declared this stage to be the most significant aspect of Black identity development. In earlier models, it encompassed a merge of separate identities noting that everything Black or Afrocentric is good and everything White or Eurocentric is bad or evil. Two identity types characterize the later model of the immersion-emersion stage. The *immersion-emersion anti-White* type possesses hatred for all Whites and anything that White society represents (Grantham & Ford, 2003). According to Cross (1991), anti-White attitudes are a part of immersing oneself in Blackness and becoming fully enamored with Black people, culture, and history. The *immersion-emersion intense Black involvement* type originally described everything of importance to be relevant to Blackness. Its most positive aspect is that it unapologetically demonstrates enthusiasm

and concern for African and African American information. In the revised model, the person in this type indulges in an obsession and dedication to all related to Blackness. This creates a cult-like attitude and negative social interaction with other Blacks assuming themselves to be “Blacker than thou.”

### **Internalization**

In the early Nigrescence models, the final stage of Black racial identity was called Black self-actualization, a term used to infer acceptance of Black identity coupled with improvements in self-concept (Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, & Worrell, 2001). In the revised model, in lieu of Black-Self-Actualization, Cross (1991) underscored the importance of Black acceptance and pride with the Internalization stage. Three clusters exist here: (a) *internalization nationalism*, (b) *internalization biculturalism*, and (c) *internalization multiculturalism*. The internalization nationalist stresses an Afrocentric perspective about him or herself and other African Americans thereby participating in the activities of the Black community (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Giving equal importance to being African American and American by engaging in both cultures without conflict or resentment is the internalization biculturalist. Lastly, the internalization multiculturalist is a Black person whose identity fuses in two or more social groups, is interested in resolving issues and addressing multiple oppressions, and can do so comfortably within multiple groups.

Cross (1991) posited that regression, progression and affixation can occur at any given stage, yet is determined by a person’s experiences, support systems, resources and personality. Cross gives no age specificities concerning these stages, but racial

encounters, which may spawn the development of racial identity, can occur at any age. Tatum (1997) mentioned that two of the five original Nigrescence stages may be of greater significance to Black adolescents. In the pre-encounter stage, the African American adolescent is surrounded and socialized by a Eurocentric culture causing him/her to ascribe, whether positive or negative, to images and lifestyles of Whites and in some cases abandon their own. However, racially conscientious parents reduce this ascription by providing positive cultural images and messages about being Black (Tatum, 1997).

Furthermore, it is important to note that racial identity itself still has not been fully realized or examined at this stage. It is, however, an experience or series of occurrences that imposes and triggers personal contact with racism and in turn hastens the transition to the encounter stage, the second stage to which Tatum (1997) referred. It is during this stage that racial consciousness is heightened and adolescents begin to wrestle with the consequences of racial group membership. Although Cross alluded to this stage occurring in late adolescence and early adulthood, actual racial and ethnic identity self-analyses may begin as early as junior high and/or middle school (Tatum, 1997).

### **Historical Factors**

Multiple and competing accounts of African American historical experiences in this country mask the identity of African Americans, which ultimately may be manifested in the distortion or construction of their academic identities. In the *Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. DuBois (1903) described the historical experience of African Americans as a

double identity or dual consciousness involving the conflict between their African or Black identity and their American identity. Referring to the Negro, he defined double consciousness as

a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBois, 1903/2008, p. 12)

A more recent definition I consider for double consciousness was used by Fordham (1996) which states that it is a method in which Black males are taught “to embrace a two-fold contradictory formula: to concurrently accept subordination and the attendant humiliation (for survival in the larger society) and preserve gender domination (for survival in the Black community)” (Fordham, 1996, p. 148).

W. E. B. DuBois considered the difficulty of duality in the history of the American Negro. According to him, this history is one riddled with strife including a longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging, he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of White Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face (DuBois, 1903/2008).

The double consciousness and inequality about which DuBois spoke could perhaps have led to another psychological coping mechanism for the Negro in that he may have become (un)consciously “mis-educated.”

In the *Mis-Education of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson (1990) described the Negro as a “mis-educated” soul, whose functioning within the system does not deviate much from that of the White man. Therefore, Negroes who are in charge would still be mere imitations of a White dominated system and would show no more imminent grasp and understanding of the task than do the Whites who exploit the Negro institutions that educate them. Referring to Negro teachers, Woodson further explains,

Taught from books of the same bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by Negroes of enslaved minds, one generation of Negro teachers after another has served no higher purpose than to do what they are told to do. (p. 33)

In other words, a Negro teacher instructing Negro children is in many respects operationalized to think just as a White teacher would.

Today, our nation’s school children are still being taught from textbooks written, more often than not, by persons within the culture of power (Banks, 2010; Delpit 1995; Hilliard, 1991). Current curriculum is not multiculturally reflective of the lives and experiences of African American students (Banks, 2010). Additional core values that schools should transmit include implementing equity pedagogy and content integration in an effort to engage teachers to go beyond their comfort zones and integrate cultural content in their lessons (Banks & Banks, 1995). Indeed this will motivate students to make cultural connections, increase engagement, foster relatedness, and belonging,

increase academic achievement, and in turn promote positive relationships and correlations between racial and academic identities. Lack of culturally relevant pedagogy sends a direct message to African Americans that their culture is devalued in turn serving as a reflection of devaluing of society (Gay, 2000; Hilliard, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1997).

While there is still more work to do in making U.S. school districts' curricula more culturally relevant and responsive, it is even more imperative that we do so if we truly desire to connect with our students in a historical, yet generational sense. More specifically, we can identify the African American adolescents within this study by their generational identity. Individuals born from 1982 to the present are known as Generation Y or the Millennial Generation (Howe & Strauss, 2003). Immediate descendants of the Baby Boomer generation or Generation X, this group is the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in the history of the U.S. According to Howe and Strauss (2003), members of this generation are identified by seven characteristics. First of all, millennials are quite aware of global issues. They come to the conclusion that "their problems are the nation's problems, that their future is the nation's future, and that, by extension, the American people will be inclined to help them solve those problems" (p. 2). Second, millennials are sheltered or safeguarded to some degree from external forces and influences. For example, school uniforms and identification cards are security measures used more often than not these days for safety reasons. Third, millennials possess a high level of assurance and confidence. They want to be more successful than their parents; however, they seek a certain balance in their lives. While making lots of money is still a driving force for them, more importantly, the need to make an impact or contribution to

the community is more valued. Fourth, this generation's members value team work, group orientation, and socialization much more than individualism. Fifth, millennials are conventional; thus, they believe that standards, policies, and rules are required to eliminate chaos for the purpose of navigating through life. Sixth, although these students are under more pressure than ever in the history of the U.S. to perform well on standardized tests in an effort to gain post-secondary entry to institutions of higher education, they are focused and channeled. They have a great need to plan their activities, to be highly organized, and they value time management. Finally, millennials truly desire to achieve (Howe & Strauss, 2003). They want to be successful and they acknowledge their success, whether that success is derived from academic, extracurricular, or social efforts.

### **Psychological Factors**

Fieldwork by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) revealed a pattern that is psychologically vested in terms of identity among African American high school students. Their observations indicated anger and resentment that adolescents felt in response to an increased awareness of the systemic exclusion of Black people from full participation and advantageous opportunities of American society leading to the development of oppositional social identity. This oppositional stance is dually purposed by psychologically safeguarding Black identity from racism and maintains a considerable distance from the dominant group (Tatum, 1997). This same oppositional stance which may filter into the classroom as doing well in school may be considered rejecting the racial identity of African American students, as many of these students do not trust

educators or the school system. On the other hand, some students adopt a “raceless” persona in which they avoid those of their race who are disengaged from learning (Fordham, 1988).

Racelessness is considered to be a conscious or unconscious effort to disassociate with Black racial identity (Fordham, 1998). Fordham (1988, 1996) contended that many African American students reject their racial identity primarily because they struggle with the idea of school and academic success. Fordham (1988) asserted that:

Despite the growing acceptance of ethnicity and strong ethnic identification in the larger American society, school officials appear to disapprove of a strong ethnic identity among Black adolescents, and these contradictory messages produce conflict and ambivalence in the adolescents, both toward developing strong racial and ethnic identities and toward performing well in school. (p. 55)

Fordham (1988) substantiated her argument by further describing the relationship of racelessness to the concept of fictive kinship. She posited that *kinship* is defined as “a kinship-like connection between and among persons in a society, not related by blood or marriage who have maintained essential reciprocal social or economic relationships” (p. 56). She cited examples of fictive kinship as relationships that can be social or economic and are reciprocal in nature.

Moreover, Fordham (1996) identified a Black collective identity within the African American community that is depicted by specific cultural symbols, thus validating the relationships within a fictive kinship. Such symbols are words that describe community relationships such as “sister,” or “brother.” Fordham (1996) went on to explain that community members of the Black collective identity create their own cultural

standards and develop cultural norms in juxtaposition to standards that represent the norms of White America. Resisting academic success can be regarded as a component of the Black collective identity that is used in opposition to the White identity.

In a study of high-achieving African American female students, Fordham (1988) discovered that they undeniably were devoted to and internalized the values and belief systems of White culture that they learned in school and exhibited within their communities. In addition, these students detached and dissociated themselves from their peers who were not considered high achieving. This disassociation occurred in part because of the internalization of a raceless persona, which is a significant contrast to the Black collective identity. Through this act of assimilation, Fordham (1988) contended that this dissociation from the Black collective was required as these females felt these actions, “appear to be mandated by the school-the price they pay if they desire to achieve vertical mobility” (p. 74).

Fordham (1988) also studied high-achieving African American males who also were considered “raceless” and internalized the belief systems of what is considered White or the culture of the majority. Contrary to the female participants, the male students were “much more victimized in the school context by the ‘double consciousness’” (p. 74). Further, in a study of gifted Black students, Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008) explored the notion of “acting White.” Data analysis of the responses indicated that most all of the participants related “acting White” with being intelligent, intellectual, smart, taking honors classes and caring about school. These accusers of “acting White” were called “stuck up,” “uppity,” and labeled ones who reject Black

culture. Another prevalent issue concerning gifted education and Black students is the phenomenon of “acting Black” (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004). Contrary to “acting White,” “acting Black,” describes actions in which students are deemed dumb and ignorant. Once again, regarding African American adolescents, race is inseparable from aspects concerning overall identity to include identities that demonstrate how and what determines their cognitive abilities or learning identity.

### **Sociocultural Factors**

One of the most influential factors on the concept of identity and the schooling experiences of African American students has been racial identity development (Kozol, 2005). Therefore, the definition of racial identity and the attempt to deconstruct how African American students view schooling and academic attainment deem that appropriate consideration be given to acknowledging the impact of critical race theory (CRT) as a sociocultural factor. CRT has been used by many educational scholars to examine and evaluate the influence of structural barriers and racial injustices imparted upon students of color with regard to academic achievement (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). The basic principles of CRT include the following: (a) one must acknowledge that racism has a normal presence in American society and there justifiably are strategies for exposing it; (b) one must know there is significance in experiential knowledge and utilizing storytelling to “analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down” (Delgado, 1995, p. 14); (c)

one must realize that traditional and dominant discourse and concepts of race, gender, and class must be confronted by showing how these social constructs overlap and affect people of color; (d) one must commit to the ideals of social justice; and (e) one must understand the transdisciplinary perspective. It is important to reference CRT in this study as it demonstrates how racism may denounce Black students' achievement ideology and school behaviors. Furthermore, it refutes the hegemonic belief of meritocracy that causes individuals to believe that racism, as a structural barrier, does not exist (Carter, 2008a).

Awareness of racism is a part of critical race consciousness that must be deconstructed daily. The development of this consciousness in African American adolescents must be cultivated and nurtured in order to convey what Perry (2003) considered to be a counter-narrative because it "stands in opposition to the dominant society's notions about the intellectual capacity of African Americans, the role of learning in their lives, the meaning and purpose of school, and the power of their intellect" (p. 49).

Perry (2003) further contended that these narratives--oral and written--are foundational and symbolize the historical significance of education with regard to freedom and how it has always been the core of identity formation of Blacks as intellectuals. When the significance of counter-narratives is altogether recognized and supported by all stakeholders within the African American community, we can begin to fully comprehend racial caste-group positioning and its relationship with academic

achievement of African American adolescents. Concerning CRT and high achievement Carter (2008b) asserted,

It is not the end-all, be-all to high academic achievement, but the connectedness to one's racial group, awareness of racial discrimination, and self-perspective as a succeeding member of the racial group can certainly buffer Black students' experiences with structural barriers that they face in achieving their life goals. (p. 24)

Examination of these counter-narratives depends solely upon how one interprets his or her understanding or misunderstanding, conception or misconception, valuation or devaluation, and significance or insignificance with regard to positionality in society. Therefore, like racial identity of African American adolescents, one cannot dissociate the influence of greater society, its norms, and how that which is social affects learning as well as living.

Given the millennial generation status of the participants in this study and the recognition of the influence of the American society in which we live, schools and their curricula, equitable or not, are not the sole educators of our youth. Coupled with formal school curriculum is the informal "societal curriculum" complete with socializing forces that "educate" us throughout life. Societal curriculum is an ongoing informal curriculum of family, peer groups, neighborhoods, mass media, and other socializing forces. Citizenship, career, law-related, medical, environmental, global, and consumer education—these are examples of various societal curriculums (Cortes, 1979). Negative or positive, schools need to come to terms with the fact that this type of curriculum inevitably affects children, perhaps even more so than formalized ones. To teach without

societal curriculum is to teach in the land of make-believe (Cortes, 1979). While understanding the sociocultural contexts in which Black students learn enables us to meet their academic needs, equally in-depth examinations of how they construct aspects of their identities can serve the same purpose (Carter, 2008a). How students interpret societal curriculum has a direct and potent impact on affecting formal education. How does it affect perceptions of ethnic groups? Examining what is being taught about culture and ethnicity in societal curriculum must occur. Although its contents are responsible for many prejudices and stereotypes of marginalized groups, becoming aware of societal curriculum, comprehending it, and analyzing it, can indeed make it an educational ally (Cortes, 1979). In short, societal curriculum may provide greater insight into non-cognitive identities, which in turn, may help in fostering greater development of students' cognitive identities.

The characterization of societal pressure, such as economic disadvantage and gender roles of specific, marginalized groups, can frustrate identification with school and consequently impede academic success which can ultimately affect academic identity. It is through societal curriculum that Cortes (1979) noted one's own culture is acquired as well as learning about others' cultures. For example, the relationship between racial identity, coupled with racial socialization, to the educational achievement of stereotyped groups such as African Americans needs greater consideration. African American children in urban settings encounter stress and environmental disadvantage, which may promote behavioral and psychological problems, and perhaps a negative racial identity. Therefore, racial socialization facilitates racial identity. Societal curriculum or the

socializing forces of family curricula, peer groups, neighborhoods, institutions, and mass media can and does influence this socialization as well. Cortes (1979) more implicitly reiterated how media multicultural education heavily influences the social construction of race (which classifies those deemed inferior and superior), ethnicity (group identification), and, in turn, affects personal identity and perceptions.

Researchers have chosen to examine the independent operation of each of these factors (sociocultural, historical, etc.). For example, Erikson's (1968) identity work examines identity psychologically. In addition, in some of his psychological studies, he marginalizes the sociocultural aspect of identity. Because it is influenced by the interaction of sociocultural, historical, and psychological factors perhaps within a social psychological perspective, mere emphasis on cognition concerning identity is insufficient. Could perhaps ethnic minorities (African Americans in particular) interpret all of these factors through the perspective lens of racial identity? Greater consideration should be given to examine how these components interact with one another iteratively, eventually influencing the development of one's conceptualization of academic attainment.

### **Support Systems and Racial Identity Development**

Black parents socialize their children to establish racial identity based upon the historical significance and effect of racism in this country, for African Americans as well as their (parents) own personal encounters with discrimination. Janie Victoria Ward (2000) suggested how parents socialize their children is based upon their own cultural and political analyses and norms of what it means to be Black in White America. She

described Black parenting as a political act and further asserted that the psychological survival of the Black child is primarily determined not only by how well he or she learns to navigate and negotiate the roles and demands of society, but also by the family's ability to withstand economic and racial discrimination.

Additionally, Ward (2000) described Black parenting as difficult largely due to the fact that Black parents must teach their children to familiarize themselves with and adjust to a social system within which they are devalued. She further distinguished the fine line of racial victimization by saying: "We must teach our children that they may be victimized by racism, yet we must also be careful not to allow our children to adopt a victim mentality" (p. 35). The responsibility of assisting Black children with developing a healthy racial identity and resistance does not rest with parents alone. Teachers can also be agents of change and quite influential in socializing Black adolescents to develop positive racial identities. Carter (2008b) challenged the notion that this is the responsibility of Black teachers, and affirmed that all teachers, regardless of race, are accountable.

According to research, Black high school students have acknowledged both Black and White teachers as being very reliable in reiterating the counter-narrative of Black achievement that fosters the development of positive, academic achievement beliefs (Carter, 2005). These teachers are vital to the achievement motivation of African American adolescents. Nieto (2004) posited that teachers who dare to express the barriers that can inhibit their social and economic vertical movement are practicing what is considered a form of communal nurturing. Likewise, support from Black and non-Black

adults in school has proven to be a significant source of academic achievement among high-achieving Black students (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Nieto, 2004).

These adults are referred to as cultural brokers, who provide Black adolescents with the competencies they need to be successful in school and who can become vertically or upwardly mobile. When parents and teachers collaboratively cultivate positive racial socialization for Black students, they help these students maintain sustainability in high achievement and positive racial self-concepts (Carter, 2005). Additionally, Black parents must be race-conscious in their parenting traditions (Tatum, 1997; Ward, 2000), and teachers (Black and non-Black) must be committed to social justice within the realm of education by applying instructional strategies and integrating pedagogy that incites a critical consciousness to question and contest society's structural barriers (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### **Identity Development**

Identity is a concept that emerged from psychological studies carried out by Sigmund Freud. Freud referred to identity as the "individual's link with the unique values fostered by a unique history of his people" (Freud, as cited in Burt & Halpin, 1998, p. 1). He believed that identity dealt with how an individual integrates and interacts within a particular group as well as the integration and interaction of that individual with other groups. True identity formation is a process that spans throughout life, characterized by a continuum of changes and the amount of exploration resulting in commitment to ideologies in particular (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980).

Building upon the work of Freud, Erikson (1968) posited that identity could be interchangeably used with the term healthy personality, which is established because of a succession of significant developmental stages and interactions that may vary in number and value from culture to culture. Erikson posited that identity development spawns from a triangulation of three conflict periods: (a) one's physical and biological strengths and weaknesses; (b) life's familial experiences; and (c) an individual's historical, cultural, and social encounters. He operationalized these three periods through eight states of psychosocial development. His fifth stage—Identity vs. role confusion—occurs during adolescence. Further, Erikson emphasized the significant role of society and societal encounters or contexts (i.e., poor access to quality education, politics, and low socioeconomic status) that foster, challenge, and help to sculpt adolescents' identity.

More recently, Holland et al. (1998) noted the importance of identity in individuals believing who they are and how they want to appear to others. They explained:

People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities . . . Identities are the key means by which people care about and care for what is going on around them. . . . Identities are hard-won standpoints that, however, dependent upon social support and however vulnerable to change, make at least a modicum of self-direction possible. They are possibilities for mediating agency. (pp. 3-4)

Additionally, Holland et al. (1998) asserted that one's viewpoint [identity] is constantly formed by “the dialect we speak, the degree of formality we adopt in our speech, the deeds we do, the places we go, the emotions we express, and the clothes we wear” (p.

127). The environments in which our identities are shaped are “figured worlds.” Holland et al. (1998) defined “figured worlds” as “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52).

Furthermore, the method by which people are situated in relation to their historical background, cultural practices, and beliefs often determines their global perspectives and viewpoints which can be situated in various “figured worlds” of their lives.

Tatum (1997) characterized the concept of identity as one of great complexity shaped by individual characteristics, historical factors, family dynamics and socio-political contexts. When asked the question, “Who am I?,” rather than engaging in the abyss of thinking concerning self, the greater explanation may depend on whom the world or surrounding environment says I am. For students, the answer may lie in the question, what do those who are in the educational power elite think that I am capable of? In response to this question, those in power and who have privilege may consider race and ethnicity, in part, as a deciding factor. Thus, the inseparability of social life and culture as well as race and ethnicity cannot go unnoticed or ignored when dealing with any aspect of African American outlooks on life to include how one conceptualizes identity and/or academic attainment.

### **Learning and Identity**

Today’s students acquire knowledge and learn in a myriad of ways and situations (Oguz, 2007). To complement their multiple intelligences, students acquire knowledge by using technological devices, reading books, listening to lectures, participating in

discussion groups, performing laboratory experiments, and doing research. Constructivist teaching emphasizes that children have to build their own scientific knowledge of societal interpretations. In turn, it is the responsibility of the teacher to assist in helping children to construct this knowledge and concurrently guide them in altering their scientific misconceptions and teaching them how to think (Oguz, 2007). Using the constructivist approach, teachers are urged to create circumstances or situations where students construct their own meanings and apply those meanings to curricular areas. Different methods to accommodate various learning styles may aid students in their meaning-making.

According to Oguz (2007), three methods have been developed by teachers to better serve learning styles: (a) provide strategies for recognizing and focusing student interest, (b) find appropriate channels for students' creations, and (c) provide a positive learning environment. Yet, before exercising these methods, we must recognize that children learn differently from each other based upon a multiplicity of things that are not limited to intelligences but due in part to culture, background, and experiences as well. Moreover, learning is not just cognitive, progressive and social. Knowledge must be relevant and meaningful for children to acquire it and to put it to use (Ladson-Billings, 1997).

Over the last thirty years, the process of learning has evolved from the exclusivity of being a cognitive process into a sociocultural process or a process that is essentially bound to the social and cultural environments within which they occur (Nasir & Cook, 2009). Like learning, identity shares this same conceptualization of being a characteristic

of social and cultural practice. The practice-based theories of learning have now been expanded to include matters concerning identity (Wenger, 1998). Identity in this case is dependent upon learning and vice versa.

As it relates to both concepts, Wenger (1998) believed that the shifting of relationships to people and objects in a specific setting mediates their existence. More specifically, from an ontological perspective, learning is entangled with social identification (Wortham, 2004). Recent studies referring to cognition and learning have shifted from describing learning as an individual attribute to one of collective practice (Wortham, 2004). In other words, “instead of individuals developing their own representations of reality, many now conceptualize knowledge as created and justified in collective practice” (Wortham, 2004, p. 724). As such, learning accomplishments are often the product of mental, social, and physical processes as well as symbolic components (Greeno, 1997; Latour, 1993; Rogoff, 1995; Wertsch, 1998) that are described by situated or sociocultural accounts (Wortham, 2004). Such accounts illustrate how learning success is dependent upon a multicomponent system that includes cultural tools and artifacts, the physical settings, and the distribution of knowledge among surrounding persons, etc. (Hutchins, 1995; Lave, 1988; Lemke, 2000; Wortham, 2001). In short, learning is not limited to the developing and evolving representation of an individual, but rather the integration of “intramental components with intermental and social-historical ones in a system” (Wortham, 2004, p. 724) that is not bound by levels. After all, “because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity” (Wenger, 1998, p. 215).

Learning and identity have been described as interacting as well as identical processes. As an interacting process, Wenger (1998) claimed that learning transforms our identities. “It transforms our ability to participate in the world by changing all at once who we are, our practices, and our communities” (p. 226). With reference to being identical processes, Wenger (1998) went on to say, “It [learning] is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but also a process of becoming—to become a certain person or, conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person” (p. 215). One of the most important factors found to be associated with academic success is the level of identity development (Marshall, 1995; Streitmatter, 1989) or the definition of one’s self in terms of roles, attitudes, beliefs, and aspirations (Erikson, 1968). Therefore, the influence of identity development goes beyond mere mediation of learning processes and eventually determines one’s confidence in attaining academic goals.

### **Academic Identity**

Although academic identity is a familiar term in some educational settings, only a few researchers have thoroughly explored the concept. Due to its scarcity in the literature, there are competing themes as it relates to the rightful definition of academic identity. Welch and Hodges (1997) described it as analogous to achievement motivation, which is defined as “the personal commitment to a standard of excellence, the willingness to persist in the challenge, struggle, excitement, and disappointment intrinsic in the learning process” (p. 37). Osborne (1997) defined academic identity as “the extent to which one’s self-evaluation in a particular academic area affects one’s overall self-evaluation which distinguishes academic identity from self-esteem and self-concept” (p. 728).

In a study conducted by Burke and Hoelter (1988), they explained academic identity as “academically, the kind of person I am” (p. 33). Using a survey distributed to all 12th graders in the Louisville Public School System, Burke and Hoelter examined academic identity in White males, White females, Black males, and Black females. They concluded academic identity operated similarly across each group and factors such as teacher’s influence, past school performance and family background were closely related to how one identifies him/herself academically. The most significant impact of these variables on academic identity was seen in White students. Teacher influence was the most significant for Black females. According to the survey, these variables had no substantial effect on the Black males’ academic identities. The unifying theme with the above definitions is their identification with academic; however, what becomes paramount is how and why students develop this identification with excelling academically. According to Burke and Hoelter (1988), academic identity begins to develop when a student perceives himself capable of doing academic tasks.

When identity is described in terms of being an all-or-none scheme, it totally contradicts “the situation-by-situation evaluations of self-worth” that students encounter as a result of daily interactions with others in schools (Murrell, 2009, p. 95). Therefore, we must realize that academic identity is a dynamic construct that is continuously shaped, reshaped and shaped again by one’s “positionality” in classrooms (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012). Many factors influence the development of academic identity such as: presentation and diversity of curricular materials, teacher perceptions, and classroom interactions. These factors are also influential in fostering how well students

engage proactively in sociocultural discourses and maintain the integrity their social identities (Murrell, 2009).

Equally important as it is to recognize how adolescents develop a positive academic identity, it is perhaps just as significant to understand how they dis-identify with academic attainment. For example, studies that showed a correlation between ethnic minority groups such as Hispanics and African American students and academic dis-identification deemed it necessary that future research be conducted to explore varying factors that affect their academic identities. In particular, two National Center for Educational Longitudinal Studies (1990, 1992) of 24,599 eighth-grade students yielded results that showed academic dis-identification to be substantially higher among African American high school students (NELS, 1992).

### **Racial Identity and High Achieving Black Adolescents**

While a majority of the research related to academic achievement in African American adolescents concerns low performance, there exist some studies that highlight high achieving African American students. While previous studies on racial identity and high-achieving African American adolescents have been shared earlier in this chapter, there is another more recent study that calls for our attention. Henfield et al. (2008) found a noticeable difference in the encounters and experiences of Black students who were identified in the gifted and talented education program than those who were not. These students reported that they constantly had to prove their African American identity as being “real” and were accused of “acting White” because they took Advanced Placement courses. Participants in the study who were enrolled in gifted programs and attended

majority Black schools appeared to be better skilled in dealing with their distress with this form of stereotyping (Henfield et al., 2008). Therefore, the authors asserted that racial identity development has an even more pronounced impact on high-achieving African American adolescents who confront a barrage of stereotypes associated with race and intelligence as an inevitable aspect of their schooling.

An increased understanding of Black students' attitudes about race, awareness of racism in society, and understanding of the structural effect of schooling on social, political, and economic mobility can help educators utilize pedagogical practices that dually perpetuate high academic achievement and a positive racial identity (Carter, 2008a). This is also known as the positive African American Identity Schema which incorporates three facets: (a) connectedness with racial group membership, (b) awareness of structural barriers and stereotypes that threaten one's present and future social and economic outcomes; and (c) developing a self-concept that promotes success within racial group membership. More specifically Perry (2003) concluded,

For African-American students to achieve, they need to be sufficiently grounded in their identity as members of a racial caste group, such that they have a way to interpret and make sense of instances when they experience discrimination, especially in school. (p. 106)

### **Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Theory**

Sociocultural theory is the theoretical framework that has been selected for this study. Sociocultural theory was developed by Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, in the early 1900s (Vygotsky, 1978). He believed that culture was not a static agent, but one that was dynamically created and reproduced in local milieu. Sociocultural theory posits

that mental action is situated in cultural, historical, and institutional settings (Wertsch, 1998). In recognizing the importance of social influence on reasoning and thought processes, it is clear that these forces significantly affect cognition, learning, and achievement of individuals in school. The level of cognition can be determined by the multiple integrative social influences that catalyze or obstruct the process of learning (Wertsch, 1998).

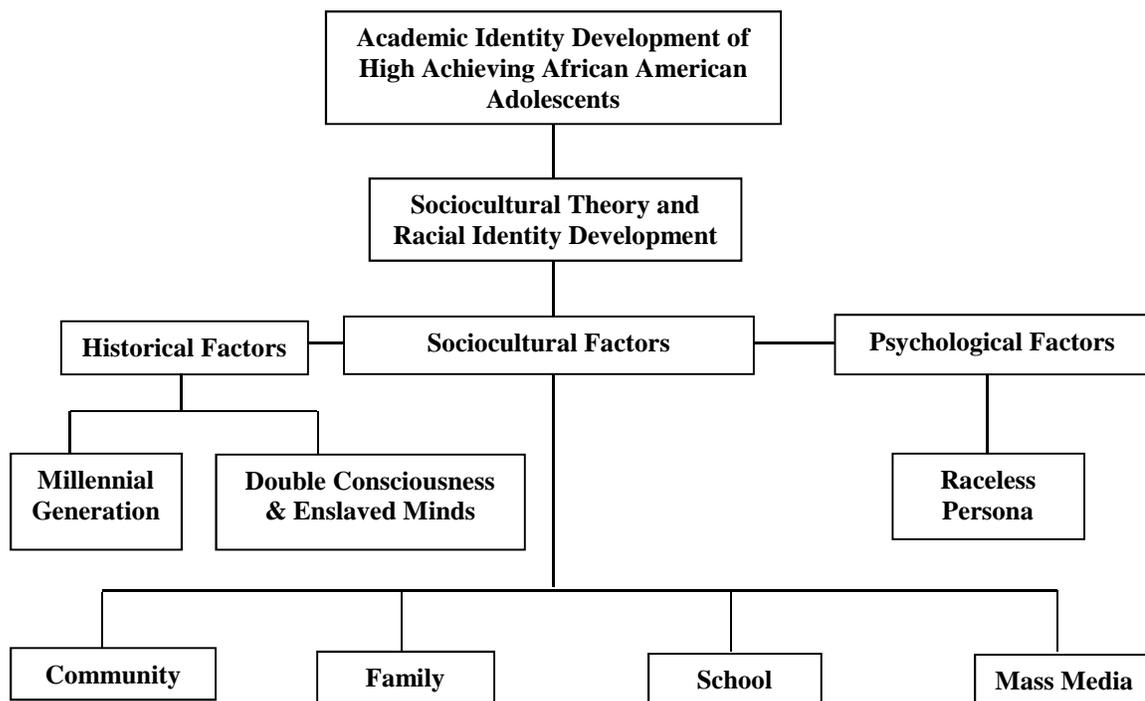
In contrast to many psychological perspectives that focus on individual cognition and behavioral issues, sociocultural theory emphasizes the underlying analytic element for the examination of human behavior as activity, or cultural practices (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Generally speaking, sociocultural theories (all of which are foundationally rooted in the Vygotskian principles) maintain the following core principles: (a) areas of development within an individual as a result of culture, (b) the cultural, social, and historical practices mediation of thinking, (c) the use of cultural tools and artifacts (such as language) and their impact learning and development, and (d) the recognition of interpersonal processes or the social role of others fostering the link between sociocultural theory and identity (Nasir & Hand, 2006).

Many scholars ascribe to the Vygotskian theory (Vygotsky, 1993) which suggests that social understanding of the world determines how people come to know and navigate it. Additionally, Vygotsky defined the word “social” to mean all cultural influences being an inseparable component of man’s social life from man’s interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1993). He further defined culture as “the product of man’s social life and his public activity” (Vygotsky, 1993, p.

164). As such, culture is another significant aspect of social interactions and behaviors. Goodenough (1981) described culture and its impact on individuals:

Culture consists of standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it. (p. 102)

It is important here to emphasize the relationship or connectedness between sociocultural theory and identity as changes in social roles and the development of relationships directly affect self-perceptions and identification or dis-identification with aspects of the social world (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). Considering identity trajectories, learning has often been characterized as shifts in roles and social relationships in cultural practices (Greeno, 1997; Wenger, 1998). As such, the change in social roles and relationships that impact learning also influences a person's self-concept and how he or she identifies with or disassociates themselves from the social world (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). Thus, the figured world of school and in the case of this study, the early college academy, becomes an environment where social roles and relationships affect how the participants view themselves academically. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of how sociocultural theory and racial identity development links to historical, sociocultural factors and psychological factors that collectively affect the academic identity development of high achieving African American adolescents.



**Figure 1. Theoretical Concept Map: Identity Development of High Achieving Black Adolescents**

### Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to review the literature and theories that relate to the research study I conducted. An introduction on adolescence was shared. A review of racial identity development, replete with considerations of historical, psychological, and sociocultural factors that may affect how racial identity development is enacted, followed. Information on supports for racial identity development was given. Further, definitions for general identity development were included. Learning and identity, as well as the definition of academic identity and how students associate or disassociate themselves with schooling, was also provided. Additionally, a review of studies on racial identity and high achieving adolescents was covered. Finally, an explanation of the

sociocultural theory, the theoretical lens by which I used to guide me in the study is highlighted.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This chapter begins with an explanation of the qualitative methodology that was chosen for this study—the instrumental case study. The first section provides a description of the study’s research design. The next section includes a description of the context of the study and its participants, followed by a description of the data collection and data analysis procedures. The role of the researcher and ethics are also addressed. Finally, I explain the establishment of trustworthiness.

#### **Design of the Study**

In an effort to build upon the literature and to investigate how a group of high-achieving African American adolescents gave meaning to their academic identities, I chose the qualitative research paradigm for this study. Qualitative research design provides the optimal vehicle for understanding how the identities of these students are “situated” in its “uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there” (Patton, 1985, as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 6). As such, in an effort to answer the research questions, a description of the participants, places, events, memories, etc. are necessary. These descriptions become the “cornerstone of qualitative research” (Janesick, 2000, p. 393). More specifically, I employed an instrumental case study approach as my qualitative methodology chiefly because I desired to provide insight into an issue—the construction of academic identity among a particular group of adolescents.

Case studies are optimal for capturing experiences and insights of individuals within their natural environments (Graham & Anderson, 2008). Case studies also allow the researcher to incorporate various methodologies while maintaining the case study as a bounded integrated system with functioning parts (Stake, 1995); they lend themselves to investigating various perspectives of people. This challenges the researcher to not only exclusively consider the voice and perspective of each actor (or participant), but also of the groups of participants and the interaction between them, thus allowing the amplification of voice to those who perceive themselves as having no power or having no opportunity to be heard (Creswell, 2004; Stake, 1995).

Stake (1995) posited that “the case is a specific, complex, functioning thing” and “an integrated system” (p. 2). Furthermore, he declared that, “the use of case study is to understand something else” (p. 3). Relative to this study in particular, I endeavored to seek narrative explanations beyond that of mere numerical data to explain how African American adolescents develop their identities related to academic attainment. My bounded system consisted of eight adolescents who were participants in an early college academy program. Furthermore, the case is bounded by the fact that these students are of African American descent and attend a historically and predominantly Black high school. Although the setting of the historically Black school is not of primary interest, it constitutes what Stake (2005) referred to as a “supportive role” (p. 445) and provided a greater understanding of something else, or in this case, the situated “figured world” (Holland et al., 1998) of these adolescents.

A viable case study design must include the following components: (a) the nature of the case; (b) the case's historical background; (c) its physical location; (d) its economic, political, legal, social, and cultural contexts; (e) other cases through which this case is recognized and established; and (f) those informants through whom the case can be identified (Stouffer, 1941, as cited in Stake, 2000). I was able to observe and engage in discourse with high-achieving participants of an early college academy program. In addition, I became aware of the historical significance and legacy of their high school and the reasons for their participation in such a program. I gave great consideration to the historical, social, psychological, and cultural agents of influence and how they affected the meaning the participants gave concerning their academic success and failure. With limited research available about the experiences of high-achieving African American students, this study can potentially enhance the body of research on students' experiences that facilitate or impede academic success. Perhaps more significantly, this study amplified the voices of a marginalized, disenfranchised, and often exploited group of people within the literature.

### **Context**

The setting for this study was a historically Black high school in the southeastern United States. DuBois High School is its pseudonym. I selected this school for several reasons. First of all, it is a Title I school populated with more than 94 percent African American students and one that houses a school-within-a-school early college academy as well as three career academies within the academy itself. Often masking its noteworthy academic feats, low academic performance has characterized the school according to the

state education public school report card. For example, over the past three years noteworthy commendations were acknowledged for DuBois High's senior classes as they led their entire school district in academic scholarship awards totaling close to 22 million dollars (School System Website, 2010). Over 11 million dollars of the scholarship awards were earned by early college academy seniors who made-up about five percent of the senior class (School System Website, 2010).

The school system implemented this Early College Academy program as an initiative that allows accelerated, highly-motivated students to pursue college credit while attending high school. Students in the program enroll in a prescribed rigorous high school curriculum during their first three years in high school and then become eligible to take freshmen college courses while earning dual credit as a high school senior and a college student at one of six local institutions of higher education. Students in the Early College Academy program attend classes on a specified college campus during their traditional senior year in high school. In order to gain admittance into this accelerated program, students must complete the application process during the eighth grade year, prior to their transition to high school. This process includes completing demographic information, submitting an essay using one of four assigned prompts, sitting for an interview with the school's academy interview team, submitting two letters of teacher recommendations, and submitting documents that provide evidence of the student's past and current academic performance (i.e. report cards, state assessments/tests, copies of awards received, etc.).

At the time of the study, there were approximately 240 students in all three early college academies within DuBois out of approximately 1,500 students. Sixty-five percent of the school's total population was on free and reduced lunch. For my study, I chose to focus on the junior class and senior class academy participants since the students had attended DuBois for almost two and one half to three years, were in the early college academy program, and were preparing for college dual-enrollment matriculation or already taking college classes. Optimally, juniors and seniors may have reached particular maturity levels to determine what motivated them extrinsically and intrinsically to be successful in school.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study included eight African American high school students (four males, four females), all members of the early college academy program. Four participants from each gender group from both classification groups (juniors and seniors) made up the eight participants. I requested and received names randomly from the school's junior/senior guidance counselor, as she had access to data showing students meeting specified criteria for being and remaining in the early college academy program. I reviewed transcripts and other pertinent information on each participant selected. Appendices C and D contain the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct the study. Included in the approval are both parental and student consent forms. While most of the participants required parental consent because they were of minor age, one participant was 18 years old.

I employed what Maxwell (2005) referred to as purposeful sampling, in which “particular settings, persons and activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 88). Creswell (2004) stated that the rationale for purposeful selection is to best aid the researcher in obtaining a greater understanding of the research problem and question. As juniors and seniors in the early college academy program, these students have had much exposure to the program’s curriculum, the context of the school, and they have established a rapport with the researcher, which could potentially yield robust results. The small sample size allowed me to have a full picture of the special characteristics of the academy and traditional students’ experiences and perspectives. In addition, having contact with juniors and seniors (those at the high school and those dually enrolled in high school and college—to be explained in context section) provided greater insights on how academic identity is developed and socially constructed. Descriptions of the eight participants follow.

**Seniors.**

*Bishop.* Bishop, who is ranked second in his senior class, lives outside the DuBois attendance zone with his father, mother, and his younger sister. Both his father and mother graduated from Harvard/Stanford and Georgia Tech, respectively. His father is a trauma surgeon and his mother has a Bachelor’s degree in engineering. Before attending DuBois, Bishop lived on both coasts of the U.S. and attended predominately White public and private schools. Bishop calls home a three-story, all-brick house with six bedrooms and five bathrooms nestled in an upper class, upscale neighborhood. Considered by his friends and teachers as a quiet, humble, laid-back, friendly young man, his humility

believes his privilege. In addition, he is the school's star point guard on the basketball team and is headed to one of the country's most prestigious military schools to study pre-law.

**Taylor.** Taylor is a 17-year-old female who entered DuBois High School in ninth grade after attending a charter school. Prior to attending there, Taylor was home-schooled during her early elementary years. She lives outside the school attendance zone with both parents and is the second oldest of six children—three brothers, two sisters. Her oldest sister is a teacher and her youngest sister has Down Syndrome. Taylor is a quiet, studious, and respectful young woman who is ranked number one in her senior class and has been since her ninth grade year. Her father is a disc jockey and her mother is a chemist who was recently laid-off after the company she worked for was downsized. Admitting that she comes from a close-knit family, Taylor is very close to and protective of each of her siblings. Furthermore, she considers herself someone who is a devout Christian and has a deep love and appreciation for the Lord. Taylor believes she is friendly to everyone but she cautions she has to observe a person for a considerable amount of time before she genuinely befriends him or her. Taylor plans to attend a four-year university and major in health and exercise science.

**Wesley.** Wesley is an 18-year-old senior who is in the top ten of his class. Residing outside the DuBois attendance zone, Wesley lives with his mother, stepfather, and brother who is autistic. Wesley knows his biological father who lives with his grandmother but does not see him very often. Additionally, Wesley does not see his stepfather as much as he does his mother because his stepfather works second and third shift in his effort to be the major financial provider of the home. His parents, who never

married each other, gave birth to him while they were in high school. Upon graduation, Wesley desires to become a biomedical engineer. A driving force in his academic pursuit of excellence is the incarceration of his father when Wesley was in high school.

According to his teachers, Wesley is a very respectful and polite young man who values basic principles and morals. He believes in so-called “Southern hospitality and old school rules.” Wesley considers himself a spiritual person who is working on becoming a better Christian. A demonstration of his Christianity is that he does not believe in pre-marital sex.

*Jessica.* A part of the DuBois school family is Jessica, the reigning Miss DuBois High School. A member of the top ten in her graduating class, Jessica was also a graduation marshal during her junior year. Having aspirations of becoming an engineer, Jessica had already decided to continue her post-secondary education at an HBCU in the southeastern part of the United States. Her “figured world” has always consisted, in part, of predominantly Black schools. In fact, she quite candidly expresses her appreciation for what she considers HBCUs’ historical significance and nurturing environments. Her mother is a graduate of DuBois, and her younger brother is a sophomore in the early college academy program as well. Jessica’s family lives within the DuBois attendance zone. As someone who prefers being called African American as opposed to Black by others outside of her race, Jessica draws inspiration from her grandfather who attended college at age 16 and later became an electrical engineer.

**Juniors.**

*Adam.* Adam is a 16-year-old junior who is in the top twenty of his class. He lives with his paternal grandmother, an educator. Both of them live inside the DuBois school zone. He witnessed his father go to prison when he was younger. His sister spent most of her life in the juvenile system. She also became a teenage mother. Adam attended predominantly Black schools until coming to DuBois High. Additionally, he is an excellent baseball player and plays on the local, state, and national levels. One of his most notable attributes is that he is bilingual and speaks Spanish as fluently as he does English. Adam's fluency in Spanish is credited to his elementary school attendance in a Spanish immersion program. He began speaking Spanish at age five when he was in Kindergarten.

*Felicia.* Felicia is a 16-year-old junior who is in the top ten of her class. Felicia is the older of two children and her sister is a sophomore in the early college as well. Residing outside the school attendance zone, Felicia lives with her mother and sister. Her parents were divorced when she was three years old; however, her father, who recently re-located to the western part of the U.S., is very much involved in her life. Felicia is the great granddaughter of a former president of a historically Black university and a civil rights leader. During the time of the study, she ran for and was chosen/voted by her peers to be crowned Miss DuBois High for the next academic year. In addition, Felicia is in the school band and active in many extracurricular activities at school. Though she excels academically and is a participant in various school organizations, she is undecided about

her major in post-secondary education. She is interested, however, in the field of health sciences.

*Sally.* Sally is a 17-year-old student who considers herself a “nerd.” One who has a great sense of curiosity and an outspoken liveliness about her, Sally believes that gaining knowledge empowers you. Calling home in a location outside the DuBois attendance zone, Sally lives with her mother, stepfather, and brother. She considers her stepfather her “Dad” because he married her mother when she was very young. By her own admission, Sally does not have a relationship with her biological father. She is a self-motivated individual who prefers to avoid being idle. Sally describes herself as very independent and readily acknowledges that she has worked for the things she has (i.e., a laptop, car, etc.). She is quite involved in extracurricular activities and volunteers in many capacities within the community. Sally feels that it is easier to get along with boys than girls, yet the girlfriends she does have are goal-oriented and have similar interests as she does.

*Michael.* Michael ranks in the top ten of his class. He is the younger of two children. He resides with his parents, both of whom have postgraduate degrees. His father is a federal law enforcement agent and his mother is a mathematics professor at a local historically Black university. Michael and his family live outside the DuBois attendance zone. At the time of the study, he had been chosen by the student body to become Mr. DuBois High School during the next academic year. Michael is also a scholar-athlete who participates on the football and track teams, yet he still finds time to be active in a myriad of extracurricular and co-curricular activities at DuBois.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection for the study were derived from the following sources: (a) one formal interview with each participant; (b) three focus groups—one with juniors, one with seniors, and one with both juniors and seniors; (c) five observations of each participant within school and during co-curricular and extracurricular activities after school hours; (d) archival document reviews; and (e) researcher's field notes. Two types of protocol were used in the study: (a) Individual Student Interview Protocol (see Appendix A) and (b) Focus Group Protocol (see Appendix B). The rationale for using these two protocols was to give more support for the findings from each participant individually and collectively.

### **Interviews**

According to Yin (2008), interviews are vital to the authenticity of case studies as an informational source. Additionally, interviews are advantageous to qualitative study as they provide more significant information that is often not evident through observation (Creswell, 2004). Each participant was formally interviewed one time with a follow-up informal, loosely-structured interview solely for the purpose of data clarification when needed. Each formal interview with participants was face-to-face and lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Being cognizant of the comfort level of my participants, I asked them to suggest a desired location to conduct the interview. Each formal and follow-up interview took place on the early college campus in a reserved office. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for analysis.

A follow-up interview with each participant covered information gleaned from the first interview but required more clarification and further investigation. In addition, I attempted to engage in informal conversations in non-instructional environments (during extra- and co-curricular activities and sporting events) in an endeavor to establish more trust with the participants and to foster greater authenticity of their responses. The information from the informal conversations was captured in field notes rather than audio-recorded tape.

### **Focus Groups**

Focus groups serve as an additional form of data collection. Glesne (2006) asserted that focus group research can have “emancipatory qualities if the topic is such that the discussion gives voice to the silenced experiences or augments personal reflection, growth, and knowledge development” (p. 104). In addition, Morgan (1997) explained that “the simplest test of whether focus groups are appropriate for a research project is to ask how actively and easily the participants would discuss the topic of interest” (p. 17). Moreover, the synergy and dynamism that can be produced from focus group interactions within same groups “often reveal unarticulated norms and normative assumptions” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903). In other words, by conducting focus groups with the participants, I had a greater opportunity to observe the complexity of group interactions that would generate not only opinions and beliefs, but also memories and practices that individual interviews may not evoke.

I conducted three focus groups—(a) one group with juniors; (b) one group with seniors; and (c) one group with all eight students. As the researcher, I assumed the role of

discussion facilitator by setting ground rules, posing and redirecting questions, and keeping track of time. I audio-recorded focus group discussions as recording in writing these discussions could be quite a challenge. Each of the three focus group sessions lasted approximately an hour and helped me better understand how the participants perceived the cultural dynamics of their home, communities and school environments in relationship to the meaning they gave to their academic success.

### **Observations**

An observation requires a researcher to describe a particular environment, the activities that take place there, the people who participated in the activities, and the meanings of what was observed from those who are observing (Patton, 2002). Such observations take place in naturalistic settings, or in the field. Eventually, the record of observations is used to help answer a particular research question and to provide additional evidence to corroborate information that is shared in interview and focus group settings (Patton, 2002). This method of data collection was chosen for this study because I sought to understand the participants' construction of their academic identities within the context where it most likely would be demonstrated—the school.

Further, while I was familiar with DuBois High School and its academy program, my observations served to triangulate what was written about the school with what I actually observed and experienced there through this data collection activity. Too, my observations helped me become more keenly aware of things “that may routinely escape awareness among the people in the setting” (Patton, 2002, p. 262). The enactment of peer relationships, demonstrations of school pride, behaviors in special school events, such as

National Honors Club assemblies, etc. were observed by watching behaviors and actions of students in and outside of classrooms within the context of DuBois.

### **Archival Document Review**

Along the same line as observing or interviewing is gathering data by studying documents (Stake, 1995). Records, documents, and archives are traditionally referred to as “material culture” which constitutes a rich source of information about an institution or program. Furthermore, for every qualitative study, data are usually collected on the background and history of the context or people being studied (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In the case of this study, sample archival documents reviewed were participants’ application data—actual application, application essay, and various documents, past and present that would support their identities as students (i.e., report cards, state assessment/test copies of awards received, etc.). Present and past yearbooks, newsletters, and newspaper articles were also used to help describe not only the academy program’s context, but also the participation of students in school-based activities that could affect their perceptions of themselves as students.

### **Researcher’s Field Notes**

The record of a researcher’s activities in the field is known as field notes. Such notes are important while conducting participant observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). These records should be written up immediately during and after the researcher’s field experiences/observations occur. Such records aid the research in remembering activities, conversations, events, and actions of the participants the researcher is studying. Field notes should be descriptive and reflective. The reflections can be documented concerning

analysis of data, on method, on ethical dilemmas and conflicts, and on the observer's frame of mind (Bodgan & Biklen, 2006). My field notes reflected such information as: (a) descriptions of DuBois's academy program; (b) interactions with the participants; (c) potential biases that could have influenced my observations; and (d) confirmations and struggles with my opinions and beliefs about what I was hearing and observing (Neuman, 2005). Table 1 presents a crosswalk aligning the research questions with data sources.

**Table 1**

**Alignment of Research Questions and Data Sources**

Research Questions	Data Sources
How do African American high school adolescents construct their academic identity?	Student Interviews, Observations, Field Notes, Archival Documents Review
What impact do sociocultural, sociohistorical and sociopolitical contexts have on academic identity development of African American high school adolescents?	Student Interviews, Focus Groups, Field Notes and Observations

**Data Analysis**

The procedures I used for data analysis of this study included coding the data from each individual interview and the focus group interviews by identifying and interpreting emergent themes. My goal was to extract responses and categorize them thematically. According to Maxwell (2005), "in qualitative research, the goal of coding is not to count things, but to fracture the data and rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category" (p. 96). Furthermore, organizing the data into overall themes and deciphering contents of the texts are crucial in

analyzing into categories (Creswell, 2004; Maxwell, 2005). The procedural steps that were used for coding the data were: (a) categorizing the participants' responses; (b) organizing the responses into specific groupings; and (c) generating the themes. Data were analyzed by interpreting content, a method which may reveal social behavior and used to study the communication process (Babbie, 2003). Though subjective, coding is a process by which parts of the transcript are labeled and themes or similarities of discussion are sought (Creswell, 2004).

Coding the data occurred in three phases: (a) reading the data; (b) organizing the data into categories; (c) selecting themes based on responses from interviews and focus groups, observations, review of archival data, and researcher's field notes. More specifically, after all of the interviews, both individual and focus groups, and observations had been completed and read, I gave each interview question its own color and each response relative to that specific question on his/her entire transcript was highlighted as well as transferred to a larger written chart that showed all interview questions and correlated responses together. On the color-coded chart, each interview question was written to the far left of the chart and each participant's interview response was written using the same color of the question adjacent on the right. This process was repeated for each participant. Each participant's response was separated by columns. After sections of the appropriate content had been placed under the specific interview question, the data for the research question were read again. Within each response, like phrases were extracted. Additionally, observation data as well as researcher's field notes and notes from archival document reviews were coded with a similar process. Based on

the commonalities among phrases from all data sources, these phrases were then organized in one of two categories: school perspectives and sociocultural perspectives. Data were further analyzed within these categories to generate six themes. The themes were: (a) “Gateway into the Real World”; (b) Tradition Worth the Trade; (c) The DuBois Dichotomy: The Traditional School vs. The Academy; (d) Family Matters; (e) Birds of a Feather; and (f) Oblivious or Optimistic: “I Put Race Aside.”

### **Role of Researcher**

Creswell (2009) wrote that researchers, “recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural and historical experiences” (p. 8). Therefore, it is imperative that I not only identify my positionality as it relates to research paradigms and strategies of inquiry, but also in relation to the influential impact of my personal interests and life on my research as well.

My positionality in my research is deeply rooted in my axiological assumptions as an educator which is in turn highly reflective of my cultural upbringing as a child growing up in an African American middle class residential community. My subjectivity, which I own, is to be dually noted in terms of my African American interpretive traditions and my professional association with the school my research participants attend. In addition to my personal life, the majority of my professional life has been spent in my research participants’ school, one in which I taught for seven years, and one in which I currently and indirectly supervise its magnet program students.

Demographically, the school is similar to my own high school alma mater. I attended historically Black primary and secondary schools; corporal punishment and chastisement were encouraged, embraced, and enforced by any member of the “village.” My public school teachers were also my Sunday school teachers, Black history *was* U.S. History, “handles” were placed on the names of all adults, and forgetting to say “yes ma’am” and “yes sir” was an abomination. With such a rich interpretive tradition concerning culture, I do not remember identity issues at all. I reaped many benefits of the gifted and talented program in grades K-12, maintained permanent status on the “A” or “AB” honor rolls, participated in numerous enrichment programs, attended Governor’s School for vocal music, and even became Miss North Carolina Central University during my senior year in college. My parents are college graduates with advanced degrees, middle grades educators, willing workers of the church, sit-in protestors of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and community leaders. My peers were children of parents who, for the most part, were educators, psychologists, small business owners, and retired U.S. military servicemen and women. On one hand, I was taught not to be ashamed of embracing our racial heritage by attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). On the other hand, I was also taught to be confident in my academic competence if I chose to attend a predominantly White institution.

All of the aforementioned aspects of my life have shaped my perspectives on education as an African American as well as sculpted my racial, sociocultural, and academic identities. Although this may sound quite risky in many research respects, it has its advantages—one being the recognition, realization, and ownership that I do have on

perspectives that exist as biases. Glesne (2006) concluded that “subjectivity, once recognized, can be monitored for more trustworthy research and subjectivity, in itself, can contribute to research” (p. 119). Therefore, I completely own my subjectivity. Prior to this realization, I thought it best to recognize that my autobiography was instrumental in the development of my research interest, but that it must be masked throughout the research process. My new perspective is the shared sentiment of Glesne (2006) which argues that I should utilize my points of view, interpretive traditions, interpretations, and personal stories in lieu of stifling them to synthesize processes of inquiry and scrutinize any assumptions.

My cautious demeanor and heightened awareness of the impact of my subjectivity did not exist without challenge. I was quite concerned about the data collection, yet equally if not more concerned with the procedure by which I gathered and analyzed the data. This highlights the “marriage” of my subjectivity and reflexivity in that I continuously conducted what Glesne (2006) called two research projects simultaneously: one with respect to my research interest and the other concerning my self-awareness. Although not an insurmountable task, the challenge circumspectly allowed my subjectivity to imbue my research in terms of making it rich with quality but not to saturate it and minimize the perspectives of my participants.

### **Ethics**

As an older adult seeking the perspectives and assumptions of much younger adults (some of whom were 18 years of age during the time of the study), I initially believed that receiving substantial information to springboard my research would be

limited and less substantial because of the perceived power I possess as the “Academy Director.” My safe harbor measure was that I did not teach the participants within the confines of the classroom and I did not serve as their academic achievement evaluator in terms of grades. I was a “gatekeeper” in maintaining the integrity and proper implementation of the academy program. However, the power issue did not appear to pose the threat that I perceived it when I spoke to the academy students on a variety of subjects. Oftentimes, the academy students are very candid and almost expose dangerous knowledge, or as Glesne (2006) stated, “When your others trust you, you invariably receive the privilege and burden of learning things that are problematic at best and dangerous at worst” (p. 135). More specifically, dangerous knowledge could also be knowledge that I learned through observations or listening to my research participants. This information could be considered unfavorable or negative about a particular group (social, ethnic, cultural, academic, etc.).

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthy qualitative research should be based on well-thought out, systematic plans including data collection that adheres to design-appropriate procedures. Both the procedures and the findings of the research should “stand up” to rigorous scrutiny from others (Janesick, 2000). Therefore, the accuracy of any qualitative study must be validated (Creswell, 2004). In other words, researchers must assure methods that support what one describes has been said or occurred is what actually happened.

Yin (2008) recommended multiple data sources be used to establish a roadmap of evidence for claims made, thus accuracy established. Further, there are eight verifications

researchers could use to assure the accuracy of a study. They are: (a) prolonged engagement and persistent observation, (b) triangulation, (c) peer review order briefing, (d) negative case analysis, (e) clarifying researcher bias, (f) member checks, (g) thick description, and external audits (Creswell and Miller, as cited in Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Since Creswell (as cited in Anfara et al., 2002) recommended that at least three of the eight verifications be used, I chose triangulation, member checks, and clarifying research bias.

Triangulation refers to comparison of findings that spring from two or more data collection sources or procedures (Janesick, 2000). This active comparison can determine the extent of consistency or inconsistency among various data sources. Data sources from this student included: (a) one individual interview per participants; (b) three focus groups—one for juniors, one for seniors, and one for both juniors and seniors; (c) school-based (in-school and extracurricular activities) observations; (d) archival document reviews; and (d) researcher's field notes. Using all of these data sources allowed me to determine whether my interpretations and analyses of the data corroborated each other. For example, review of archival documents (transcripts, student work samples, participants' cumulative folders) allowed me to gather information on participants' academic performance and achievement which, in turn, supported their perceptions of themselves (i.e., class rank, motivations to achieve, etc.). Observations of participants within and outside of their classes provided me with an additional opportunity to see how the participants enacted their academic identities. In other words, I learned if what they said in their individual interview and their focus groups was verified by their actions.

Member checking or respondent validation (Silverman, 2005) is a process by which the researcher takes a participant's findings back to them to review. The participants are provided a chance to verify, restate, including change wording, or correct interview transcriptions and interpretations made by the researcher. Transcriptions from the interviews were shared with each participant for their review. Each was given the opportunity to change or reiterate on any information previously given. Since I feared the participants would resort to environments where they could not be reached during the summer, I sought to give them their interview transcripts as soon as possible after their individual interview occurred. In doing so, I adhered to the fact that as a methodological weakness of this method too much time could pass and circumstances could change for the participants, which could also result in different responses to the interview questions posed earlier. Providing the transcripts of interviews as closely to the time the interview of each participant ended potentially avoided this dilemma.

Finally, I clarified my researcher bias in the following ways. I fully disclosed myself as an academic achiever during my K-12 schooling experiences and that I had supportive, college-educated parents. I openly acknowledged my positionality as "Academy Director" in the DuBois Early College Academy program. I also acknowledged that I had no power over the study's participants in that I did not actively teach them any courses during the time of the study. Further, I asked two doctoral students both inside and outside the Department of Teacher Education and Higher Education to review the interviews. I shared my interpretations of analyses with them to make sure that I presented an authentic case of each participant.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I explained the qualitative methodological paradigm chosen for this study. The instrumental case study was used to gain a greater understanding of each participant's academic, social, cultural, and personal experiences within their figured worlds and how the meaning-making of those experiences influenced the construction of their academic identities. I also explained the context of the study, described its eight participants, and shared how data were collected and analyzed. Further, I disclosed my role as researcher in this study and exposed my biases that could have influenced how I interpreted the data. In addition, I concluded by addressing ethics and trustworthiness of the study.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine how eight African American high school adolescents who participated in an early college academy program construct their academic identities. Using an instrumental case study design, data were gathered through: (a) one individual student interview; (b) three school-based student focus group interviews; (c) observations that occurred within and outside of school; (d) archival documents review; and (e) researcher's field notes.

Findings from the instrumental case study included the emergence of six major themes within two distinct categories. These two categories were school perspectives and sociocultural perspectives. The perception of race and racial identity was salient across both themes and are highlighted as well. In addition, each of the categories included themes. Three themes associated with school perspectives include: (a) "Gateway into the Real World," (b) Tradition Worth the Trade, and (c) The DuBois Dichotomy: The Traditional School vs. The Academy. The "Gateway into the Real World" theme represents the belief that education is the pathway to opportunity in successfully navigating through and fully experiencing what life has to offer. The Tradition Worth the Trade theme describes the importance of the historical influence of DuBois when compared to society's views of the institution academically and socially. The DuBois Dichotomy: The Traditional School vs. The Academy theme involves perceptions of

advantages and disadvantages of DuBois being a traditional high school and an academy—or school within a school.

Related to the sociocultural perspectives, the following three themes emerged from the data: (a) Family Matters, (b) Birds of a Feather, and (c) Oblivious or Optimistic: “I Put Race Aside.” The theme, Birds of a Feather, refers to the feelings participants shared about their academic abilities, particularly the impact of peer perceptions as well as broader societal stereotypes associated with Black students at predominantly Black schools. The theme, Family Matters, illustrates how participants’ family expectations are linked with school performance. Finally, the theme, Oblivious or Optimistic: “I Put Race Aside” describes the influence of racial identity and its impact on participants’ academic achievement and future pursuits.

Throughout this chapter, data from this study highlights and supports each theme. The data used in this chapter includes indicators of the data type as well as the date when the data was collected. For example, an individual interview (II) that was conducted on May 1, 2011 is denoted as (II, 5/1/11). Other abbreviations in the chapter include (FG), which denotes data retrieved from a focus group interview and (FN) for field notes. Evidence of observations and archival document review are inserted in the text of the chapter.

## **Perceptions of School**

### **“Gateway into the Real World”**

School perspectives are defined by how the participants felt about the importance of schooling in general and particularly as experienced at DuBois High School. Publicly

identified as accelerated, high-achieving juniors and seniors who attend a school-within-a-school (e.g. the early college academy), all eight participants were unanimous in their positive thoughts about school. At an age when some adolescents may consider school to be boring or even a waste of time, these students viewed school as a non-negotiable expectation and necessity in achieving future goals.

Felicia explained how school and education are needed for the dual purpose of academics and social stimulation: “People need school education education-wise and social-wise. They might not like it, but they need it” (II, 5/5/11). Similarly, Adam talked about how he recognized the privilege of attending public school in the United States. After all, receiving a free education was something not to be taken lightly. In regard to this stance, Adam said: “We [U.S. students] take it [school] for granted because we don’t have to pay for it like other countries. We don’t value school as we should. School is the gateway into the real world” (II, 5/5/11). Taylor also agreed that school is taken for granted by their peers. However, in her mind she felt attending school was a solution to boredom. The following quote typifies her perspective on school:

I like school because I couldn’t be at home and not do anything with myself. I hate being bored. And I feel like sometimes you take for granted the opportunity that we have to actually learn. Actually, I’m just grateful for it and you know if I didn’t have to work to make a living I would probably stay in school and be educated. (II, 5/5/11)

Similar to the aforementioned students, Sally also expressed positive feelings about attending school. For her, school provides her the opportunity to expand her

knowledge and develop herself intellectually and socially. She enjoyed the power school affords her. Happily, she admitted:

It's [school] important to me. Honestly, I'm a nerd so I love being educated and learning new things. I'm very curious so . . . to actually know what I'm talking about is very important to me when I'm talking to people. I like to throw out facts and things of that nature, so school helps me. It helps my conversation. I have always been a kind of curious and outspoken person. As I got older, I knew that its power to have knowledge and when you have a conversation with someone you want to know what you're talking about and you want them to know what you're talking about, so school helps you do that. This is just something that I like to work on and I know that it [school] enhances your vocabulary and things of that nature . . . and makes you a powerful person. (II, 5/9/11)

Wesley also acknowledged school as a preparatory stage for life including its challenges. He confidently admitted: "I feel like school honestly prepares you for the world and it prepares you to handle any challenge that may come your way" (II, 5/10/11). Thus, nearly all the participants positively acknowledged school as an opportunity for growth and a preparatory engagement for life in the future and something they did not take for granted.

All of the participants positively acknowledged school as an opportunity for growth and a preparatory engagement for life in the future. Schooling was something they did not take for granted. Additionally, all of the participants recognized schooling to be a gateway to intellectual and social expansion.

### **Tradition Worth the Trade**

Participants confirmed DuBois High School was steeped in historic tradition built on academic achievement on one hand, and infamously known in more recent years as a low performing and socially undesirable school on the other hand. The latter

characterization was often manifested through media mechanisms and discourses that had a negative impact on the school and its students. Nonetheless, DuBois' historic ties bind it to the surrounding community (S. Jones, [DuBois alumni and former teacher there] personal communication, May 29, 2010). Those same ties are evident throughout the city and state as a symbol of the revered connection among African American culture, tradition, education, and community. Furthermore, it is important to note that the participants in this study, many of whom did not live within the DuBois community or attendance zone, are students who may have been eligible and accepted to other specialized magnet or early college programs or could have attended their own attendance zone high schools. However, all chose to apply to the early college at DuBois. Many of these participants stated they made a personal choice to attend DuBois because of its rich tradition and chose to ignore the contemporary negative perceptions of the school. Notwithstanding the school's noteworthy athletic programs and award-winning band, DuBois is often characterized by violence, drugs, gangs, and low academic performance (FN, 5/3/11). Felicia expressed this sentiment when she said:

I like it [DuBois]. I think it is a very traditional institution. It stands on a very strong foundation. Like through history and everything with Civil Rights and what not, I think it holds a great legacy. There are some students that give it a bad name, but I think that ultimately it's a great school. (II, 5/5/11)

It is clear Felicia felt the tradition of the school was an important factor in her decision to attend the school. In addition, Felicia also offered up her explanation for why the school currently has a negative reputation:

Like some people who might not come from the best kind of neighborhoods or anything . . . Not tryin' to like stereotype anyone. It's just sometimes they don't do what they should. You know . . . skip class, get in fights. All that other stuff. They really don't know the meaning of why they're going to school. They don't want to better themselves in any way. They can give it a bad name, but sometimes, like the media can give it a bad name, too. So it's not only the students that are doing it, but I think there are a lot of good things that are happening at our school that we don't get recognized for. (II, 5/5/11)

Additionally, Jessica recognized the greatness of DuBois's history through its graduates.

Even though, she contended the school's current negative reputation could be attributed to students who lived in public housing neighborhoods. She described the unique blend of students at the school when she said:

I love it because of all the history. Graduates go on to do great things. It bothers me though because our reputation is horrible. We could stand some improvements. Recent years have put projects' kids—the not so great kids at DuBois. When you put bad seeds together, nothing good is going to come out. (II, 5/2/11)

Here Jessica described what she felt is the root of the negative reputation she believed DuBois had. She contended that low income students or students from impoverished backgrounds contributed to how the public perceived DuBois to be. Given her comments, socioeconomic status appeared to override racial identification and its stereotypes as the reason why other students did not excel academically and did not behave in socially acceptable ways.

Sally also proudly proclaimed that the history and pride lives on at DuBois; though, she was not blind to several of its imperfections. She commented:

I love Dubois—flaws and all. It has changed since 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but the history and pride still stands. Its flaws are: (1) they [teachers] do not teach enough lifelong lessons; (2) there is too much focus on testing; and (3) we got too many young teachers still trying to fit in with students. (II, 5/2/11)

The lifelong lessons to which Sally referred echoed the sentiments of various alumni who regularly visited DuBois during homecoming festivities or during special programs such as those where alumni were honored and credited their education at DuBois for their professional and personal success (FN, 5/19/11). Those stories included lessons in academic excellence, proper behavior, social expectations, and responding to situations rife with inequality and inequity. It appeared that Sally valued the teaching of the informal societal curriculum as much as she did her formal academic instruction, the explicit curriculum. She wanted more life lessons to be infused in her classroom teaching.

Concerning the current negative reputation of DuBois, Wesley felt the media was largely responsible for these distorted perceptions. He explained his feelings:

I think the image of my school is not portrayed like it should be. I think it's portrayed to be a negative school where nothing gets accomplished. We're the exact opposite. A lot of things get accomplished and DuBois High School is one of the best high schools and produces the top quality of students, but it's not publicized so people don't think it is. Honestly I think because it's a historically Black high school and the media doesn't want to portray that Black people are successful in academics. I mean, if DuBois did real good in sports...that would be publicized, but not that we had the top amount of scholarship graduates for academic reasons in our district . . . which we did. (II, 5/19/11)

The obstacles to which Wesley referred included lack of resources, such as lab materials, and class sets of textbooks, teacher turnaround rates, and having to improvise when instruction or instructional school-wide communication was lacking. In other words, his

experience taught him that sometimes he had to seek information on his own because it was not always readily provided to him. In spite of these purported negative images, Wesley still attributed his attendance at DuBois to the development of perseverance and motivation through overcoming obstacles. Such obstacles served to help him and other students become self-sufficient and responsible for their own learning at times. He recalled:

It's always a twist and turn going about that you have to overcome. And in a sense it's kind of helpful because like it is not playing it straight through. You always have obstacles at DuBois High School . . . It shows that you must push yourself, motivate yourself, and be willing to educate yourself. It really teaches you to step up and rely on yourself to get things done. It's shown me that obstacles can come from any direction even if you're not prepared for it. So you have to be prepared at all times. (II, 5/19/11)

Adam, who also enjoyed DuBois, cited nothing negative about the school, but he did provide a slightly different perspective than Felecia, Jessica, Sally, and Wesley. He admitted, however, that the school needs more hands-on activities in classes and he insisted the “problems are because of the students. They take it [classes] for granted. You've got to want to do” (II, 5/5/11). Taylor also agreed a certain population of “Black children” (5/16/11) gave rise to the media's representation of DuBois being a “bad” school. Even so, the lack of caring about the importance of education by some students was manifested in such behavior that oftentimes became public outside the school though not inside where it should have been reprimanded. Taylor described her ambivalent feelings about the school:

I love the heritage. People say it's just a bunch of Black children who really don't care about learning and always get in fights. That isn't true. The best thing is the teachers, though. The worst thing is our students who don't care and the school lets people [them] slide. (II, 5/17/11)

Taylor described her feelings about social promotion and those students about whom she felt did not have to work as hard yet they ended up with the same diploma in an effort to preserve the school's increasing and laudable graduation rate. In addition, she referred to students she saw exhibiting undesirable behavior (using profanity, skipping class, and/or being insubordinate to teachers and administrators) and the reaction of adults at DuBois who oftentimes appeared to ignore or be too lenient in correcting and disciplining them. Along the same lines, Bishop confirmed Taylor's notion about the publicly labeled reputations that predominately African American schools tend to carry. Bishop explained how Black schools like DuBois unfairly receive excessive negative attention when he said: "DuBois is a good school. Black schools get bad reputations. White people think you must kill people, sell drugs, or do crack if you go there. It's better than what people give it credit for" (II, 6/3/11). In addition, Bishop shared an encounter that further expressed his sentiment:

And I know my Dad was talking to somebody about good schools and my Dad was like, "Yeah, well my son, he goes to DuBois Academy and it's a good school." And they were like, "Are you joking?" That's literally what they said. He was like, "No, I'm being for real. We thought you were joking." So it is just how people think of primary Black schools. Like it can't be good and you can't have smart students. It's always less. (II, 6/3/11)

Because of these encounters, Bishop came to believe that Whites thought subpar attitudes and low academic performance are commonplace at predominately Black schools.

Michael believed the community influence on DuBois had a major impact on how the school was perceived. While he recognized Dubois' shortcomings, including the school's test scores, he believed that ignorance fosters negative comments about the school. He optimistically and explicitly asserted these feelings:

I feel like my high school is getting back on the right track. Over the past couple of years, I believe it's been going in the wrong direction and has been noted all through the state with AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress] and proficiency scores. But I feel like over the past three, maybe two or three years, test scores started to improve and they instituted, implemented the support team. . . . After that, the people [staff] who are there now expect more of the students. The new administration and a lot of the teachers now are kind of like progressive . . . so they teach in different kind of ways and different kinds of styles so students will learn better. (II, 5/9/11)

Michael continued by identifying what he believed caused the negative comments about the school to continue. Nevertheless, he believed the school is "getting back on track the right track" (II, 5/9/11). He also expressed how the support from loyal alumni and committed community supporters had a positive impact on his perceptions of the school:

I feel like that people who have gone to the school and actually experienced DuBois High School and the things that DuBois offers know the amount of family that DuBois has and how a lot of people have high expectations for the students there. People around and DuBois itself really expect you to be like a beacon of hope for African American high school students and middle school students in the community. The best [thing] is community support of the school. The community outpour is like mad crazy. I can go somewhere or compete in a poetry competition, football, or anything and meet people who graduated from DuBois and they are like, 'Hey baby. You need anything?' And they don't even know me (chuckles). That's mad love. (II, 5/9/11)

In spite of the negative press associated with Dubois, all participants decided to attend and to persist at DuBois because of its rich legacy and traditions. These traits along

with the presence of caring educators and supportive community agents (e.g. alumni) fortified the participants' desire to go against negative perceptions that were publicized. For these students, the tradition of the school was indeed worth the trade of attending any other school.

### **The DuBois Dichotomy—The Traditional School vs. The Academy**

Within DuBois High School exists a traditional school and an early college academy (formerly known as “The Academy”). DuBois teachers and students acknowledged the dichotomy within both organizational school structures (FN, 10/7/10). Over the years, people have jokingly and seriously made reference to “The Academy” students as “thinking and acting like they are better than their peers” (S. Jones, personal communication, May 29, 2010). Perhaps this belief stemmed from an issue that existed many years ago even before the inception of the early college. In the 1980's and 1990's, students in honors classes and the specialized magnet program were housed in an area of the school that was literally shut off and separated from the rest of the school. This deliberate physical separation spawned feelings of elitism, favoritism, and separatism that loom even today (S. Jones, personal communication, May 29, 2010; FN, 10/7/10).

The participants in this study who are students in the early college academy experienced a different dichotomy. They felt they *lacked* support that everyone seemed to think they received. For example, while most of the participants seemed to be satisfied with their teachers' performance, they specifically commented on a situation where they remembered a teacher whom they perceived as incompetent in the subject matter. Sally described the teacher as one who “didn't know the material and she told us that very

often” (FG, 5/9/11). Adam referenced the same teacher and recalled one time in class she said: “I don’t want to teach this” [advanced placement chemistry class]. . . . She said we weren’t equipped to take the class and that she didn’t want to teach it” (FG, 5/9/11). After a long period of complaints, administrators replaced the teacher with one who was competent, albeit condescending when interacting with students. Sally remembered the replacement teacher and his condescending behavior towards the students:

Around three quarters of the semester, closer to the AP [Advanced Placement] exam, they [the school’s administrators] decided to get a teacher who taught it [advanced placement chemistry] years before. He came and he was very belittling to our class. He disrespected a lot of the students and he pulled a select few aside, including me and said there’s no hope for the rest of the class. I’m just going to focus on getting y’all through it. I started to go with my administrator some days and do my work and other days I went to the honors chemistry teacher’s class during that time. (FG, 5/9/11)

Related to the science content-area classes, the students not only were frustrated with the lack of competent teachers, but also with the dearth of quality science equipment within their science classes. For instance, Sally expressed her displeasure with her AP Chemistry class: “In Chemistry, and AP Chemistry, we couldn’t do any experiments because we didn’t have any of the chemicals or the equipment. Labs are essential to passing the exam [End-of-Course] and they make everything interesting anyway” (FG, 5/9/11). Without consideration of why laboratory resources were depleted (lack of school funding, lack of district materials, etc.), Sally felt the depletion was an indication of devalue and lack of concern for early college students who primarily made up the population of the class.

More specifically, the participants also acknowledged differences in themselves as early college students and those who attended the traditional school. Taylor described how she felt that early college program students received preferential treatment:

Some traditional students are not getting pushed as hard as we do. [The Early College students] want to do better . . . We have to succeed and move on. They [traditional students] are not getting pushed because they're just gonna move on anyway. (FG, 5/19/11)

Furthermore, the participants wanted to be recognized by administrators with the same regularity as students who were consistent troublemakers. To the participants, their success in academics is taken for granted. Sally recalled her frustrations with the lack of attention her and her classmates received:

I was highly upset that my principal knew the guys who were skipping class but didn't even know my name. You know they know the ones that stay in trouble . . . I had a friend who was not passing his classes but they [the school administration] called, called, and called and made sure he [the friend] walked for graduation. You didn't call my house and make sure I was okay and at graduation. Like you know they really do, I guess, take for granted that we are alright. (FG, 5/19/11)

Bishop agreed and disagreed with Sally. He felt that administrators had great expectations of them as early college students and as a result, more time was needed for them (administrators) to spend on students who required more attention. In response to Sally, Bishop explained:

I agree with you and kind of disagree with you . . . You are a great student and I guess they [the administrators] assume that you're going to walk [graduate]. I mean I don't think they mean anything by it. (FG, 5/19/11)

The seniors, in particular, mentioned feelings of disconnectedness from the traditional students because they were actually taking college classes. Nevertheless, the dual experience they were receiving was worth the dilemma of the dichotomy. Dialogue from the focus group of seniors supported this assertion.

Felicia: They [the administrators] try not to include us in anything. Homecoming court, meetings, anything.

Michael: I ain't even sweating that. I am in college now.

Taylor: Yeah! I like the position we are in. We are still at DuBois, but we get to have this college experience and that's what is most important.

Wesley: I love DuBois, but I am glad to be out of there. 'Dem children (the traditional school students) were getting on my nerves.

All: *Hard laughter* (FG, 6/8/11)

Despite acknowledging differential treatment of early college and traditional students by teachers and administrators, all the participants in this study had their overall positive feelings about being at DuBois. Felicia mentioned the “pace of the early college is good. It pushes me” (FG, 5/19/11). Sally was “very pleased, but I do not like being with the same students all four years. I like diversity” (FG, 5/19/11). Jessica felt she “gets the best of both worlds—high school and college” (FG, 6/8/11). Taylor, who found a sense of validation in her decision to attend DuBois confirmed, “I feel at home. I knew I got what I needed when I was successful on the state tests” (FG, 6/8/11). Michael also expressed his pleasure with the early college program when he said, “I like the Academy. Higher level classes helped me and taught me how to study and excel” (FG, 5/9/11). Bishop stated, “The academy is the best thing that could have every happened to me. I

have no regrets” (FG, 6/8/11). Wesley, who was very critical of himself, admitted, “I could have done better. [He was number five in his graduating class and made only one “B” in high school] but ‘I grew personally. The academy has taught me how to be aggressive. If I don’t care, I can’t expect anyone to care for me” (FG, 6/8/11). Each of these students expressed how the learning in environment at DuBois within the early college program fostered their academic and personal growth.

Despite discontentment with some teachers, perceived lack of support from the administration, and feelings associated with disconnectedness, the participants spoke fondly of DuBois. In addition to expressing their fondness of DuBois as an institution, all participants acknowledged the academy as a bridge to success in pursuit of their various post-secondary endeavors. Notwithstanding the noticeable lack of ethnic diversity in the academy, the pacing, rigor, curriculum, challenge, and dual-enrollment experience outweighed the shortcomings and disappointments making their overall experience at DuBois worthwhile and beneficial.

### **Sociocultural Perspectives**

#### **Family Matters**

All eight participants expressed the influence of family background and expectations in their academic identity development and how they are expected to achieve in school. For them, family was a driving force in their academic success and pursuits. For example, Wesley, who was ranked number five out of a senior class of approximately 330, attributed his birth and the backgrounds of his parents as motivation

for him to do well in school. While he did not blame his parents for his upbringing, he wanted to avoid the same “distractions” they encountered as young adults. He explained:

I pushed myself honestly because I saw my Mom and my Dad . . . how they had me. They had me once they graduated from high school and it didn't turn out well . . . But for me, my Mom always wanted me to do better in life [than she did] and I saw what I wanted, and that's what she wanted. Now that I see it's important for me to do well, I see that's what I want to do. So it's important for me to get through high school without any distractions. Like I said, Mom and Dad were both smart. Mom went on to do well; Dad became incarcerated. It's important for me to avoid “their same distractions.” So, I won't be distracted by three things: 1) life; 2) the media; and 3) having a girlfriend. I will date after college when I know nothing will go wrong. (II, 5/19/11)

Another child of teenage parents, Adam revealed his caregiver and motivational supporter was his paternal grandmother. She became his daily caregiver when his mother moved to another city. He admitted his love for both his parents; however, he cautioned “they have the good stuff and the bad stuff” (II, 5/5/11). Adam wanted to avoid the “bad stuff.” He described his Dad:

[My] father came from New York and moved down here. He really doesn't work. He has been to jail, one, well, let me see. Maybe he has been to jail a few times. My mother is a high school dropout. She has been working. She moves around a lot . . . I love both of my parents, but they have the good stuff and the bad stuff. . . . It [the bad stuff] actually keeps me focused because I don't want to go down the road that they went down (II, 5/5/11)

Adam felt his parents' influence affected his two sisters as well. He believed the decisions his sisters made about where and with whom they lived predestined them to lives that were unacceptable to him. Thus, the (dis)connectedness within his family

contributed to his desire to not be like his parents or sisters. He described the challenges his sisters face in the wake of their decision to live with their parents:

One of my sisters already has a child, but she is one year younger than me. She chose to move with my mother and that changed her. And my younger sister, she also chose to move to Chase back then too because it was her father that they moved with. And they are not doing as well as I am in school. They are more like bad. Basically they are bad. (II, 5/5/11)

Both Wesley and Adam used circumstances of their families as driving forces to avoid repeating of behaviors they observed. For them, the (dis)connection (e.g. unmarried parents, incarceration of a parent, physical separation of parents, and sibling decisions) within their family structures had a far greater influence than the connectedness of their family structure.

Raised by a single mother, Felicia felt the divorce of her parents when she was younger did not affect her academic life. In spite of the divorce, both of Felicia's parents were supporters of her academic identity and achievement. When questioned about the effect her parents' divorce had on her as a student, she recalled her mother being a more present parent than her father. She said:

When I was little I used to see them [her parents] argue all the time, but I don't know if that has had an impact on me because he [her father] wasn't around a lot. So I'm used to like my mom taking care of me and doing more stuff for me. I would go to her if I needed something I wouldn't really go to him. I don't think it [parent's divorce] has taken an emotional toll on me. It's just the way things are. . . My Mom would punish me when I didn't get good grades but she has always been there to support me to do better. My Dad always wanted me to make good grades, too. But he hasn't pushed me like my Mom. (II, 5/5/11)

In addition, being academically successful was a clear, explicit expectation for Felicia. Her family had a history of accomplishment in various areas of their lives. For Felicia, maintaining the legacy of academic excellence was expected and fueled her will to do so. She expressed how her family's history of academic excellence motivated her when she said:

To be honest, both sides of my family have a pretty long history or a good history [of excellence] and I think they try to push my sister and me to keep the greatness up. Most people in my family created things or did something people recognize. . . . My great aunt established a chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. My Mom was a charter sorority member at a White university. My great grandfather was the President of a large historically Black university during the Civil Rights Movement. He went to Harvard. I think he was the only Black in his graduating class. My aunt is the chairman of a school board in another state. She also ran for a political office. I think we have a pretty good legacy. So my family tries to push me to do the same. . . . It's not a lot of pressure for me because I know that I can do it. (II, 5/5/11)

Even though Sally was not a product of a single parent household like Felicia, Sally also gave praise to her mother. Her mother was not married to her father, but her mother and her stepfather raised her. Sally acknowledged that her stepfather is "strict and very caring" (II, 5/9/11). Even so, she proudly recognized the power of her stepfather's presence. He taught her different ways to learn math and other subjects. She explained his influence:

My stepfather has been with my Mom since I was little. But he is very strict with us and very caring. He pretty much is the enforcer in the house and my Mom just carries everything out . . . Honestly, I can say that I'm his [her stepfather's] first child because everybody says that I have so much more than his own kids. Like when I was in elementary school we used to work and I always say to my teacher we did it this way and we learned it this way. He [my stepfather] would teach me that there's other ways to do work. You don't have to just do what your teacher

told you. So I learned different ways in math and everything. He took the time to do all that kind of stuff with me. . . . He has really been there for the whole family. (II, 5/10/11)

For Jessica, Bishop, Michael, and Taylor, a two-parent family home was not only normal, but viewed as essential to being successful in school. Jessica described it as “my parents have the most influence on my academic success. They only accept the best. No bad grades” (II, 5/2/11). She even recalled getting a “C” on a progress report and receiving punishment in the third grade. Another great influence for Jessica was her grandfather, who went to college at 16, and became an engineer. She proudly explained, “Yes and he [her grandfather] still is smart. He turned 80 this year and he still can breakdown computers and put them back together and is always banging on stuff trying to stay youthful (laughs)” (II, 5/2/11).

Michael’s parents were influential in his life particularly in the sense of instilling the importance of God being an anchor in living. He learned from his parents:

Nothing is going to be given to you or handed to you. You have to be the best. My parents put me in situations to make me better. I was taught to put God first and pushed to strive for “white-collar” jobs. (II, 5/9/11)

Even the influence of his mother was noticed by his peers as they referred to him as “Mr. Whiteboard” because his Mom would make him work out math problems on a whiteboard at home (FN, 6/8/10). Further, Michael recognized that his parents applauded and expressed pride in his efforts; however, he believed that his intentional endeavors at academic excellence were never enough. He described the high expectations of his parents when he said:

They [his parents] would never tell me they were satisfied. They would congratulate me and say they were proud, but did not want me to become complacent. They always stressed that there was no reason I should not get a full scholarship to college. (II, 5/9/11)

Although most of the participants identified their mothers as significant motivational influences in their drive for academic achievement, Bishop stated his father was the parent to be especially praised. Bishop described his father's influence on his life when he said:

My dad has the greatest influence on me. He is so smart. But with both of my parents, college and academics were an expectation—never not an option. They told me if I got a full scholarship, they would get me a car. (II, 6/3/11)

Taylor exclaimed that,

Family motivation for me is priceless. There are many times when you just want to almost give up on stuff and do not want to pursue the goals that you put in front of you . . . but to have a family like that says to you, 'No, I see this in you and we're going to do this, and together we're going to get there,' means everything to me. (II, 5/19/11)

One of the most significant factors in guiding the participants through their high school journeys and in striving for post-secondary success was the influence of family. The institution of family for some participants provided a model of expected academic excellence while in high school and beyond. However, for other participants, existing family structures and perceived failures associated with some relatives' lived experiences established the need for the participants to avoid activities or behaviors that would result

in similar unsuccessful outcomes. Whether family members were considered successful or not, they all had high expectations of the participants.

### **Birds of a Feather**

Though family relationships became significant motivational factors in the participants' development of their academic identities, peer interactions also signaled the importance of how these high school adolescents constructed their academic identities. The environment of the early college program helped students determine their peer interactions. As such, their peer group determined, influenced, and in some cases, qualified their peer interactions. For example, choices in peer interactions for Sally and Wesley were gender-related. Sally described her preference in terms of her peer group:

I hang around boys because it is less drama. Most of my boy-friends are athletes and have the same mindset of commitment and determination that I do. We complement our academic life with a sports mentality. The few girl-friends I do have are goal-oriented. But I have very few of them. (II, 5/9/11)

Wesley spoke about trust issues with females versus males. Those reasons originated from his upbringing. He articulated his reasons:

I'm having trust issues with my friends. It's easy for me to trust a female versus for me to trust a male. I guess that's because the first male figure [in my life], my father, wasn't always there. So that kind of hurt vs. my Mom who was always there. I do have quite a few male friends, but when it comes down to the ones like my best friends I hang out with, I would rather and do have more female friends. (II, 5/19/11)

For Taylor and Michael, their peers must be like-minded and share the same interests.

Taylor noted that her friends included those at school and at church:

My peer group I chose in the ninth grade has not shifted one bit. The peer group that I chose—some of them went to church with me and others of them I met in the class, but we all pretty much were alike. We are academically inclined, in the top 20 of our class, and it is instilled in us to be academically-driven. You know we're not into, you know, what adults would consider disturbances or disobedient children. You know—no alcohol, no smoking. We don't even go to parties like that 'cause I just never flow with that. Then you know we're all family-oriented. All of us—all of us honestly—do have a Mom and a Dad in our homes and we do live in the suburb-type communities which is a coincidence in that regard. We all have a church life so we hang out. We help each other study or we just be cracking up. It's just like people I hang out with are just similar to me from the ninth grade. (II, 5/19/11)

Michael explained the small circle of friends he has view him as someone to whom they can go for academic assistance or personal problems. Nonetheless, he knew when it was time to be serious and when it was time to have fun with them. He commented:

I have a really small circle [of friends]. Most of those people choose to hang out with. Most of them [his friends] see me as somebody you can come to for help in certain subjects like histories and English . . . Those types of things they can come to me on. They always have known me to listen to a problem . . . That's with any friendship I feel, though. They see me as somebody who's fun to be around and really can turn off and on the switch of having fun and being serious when having work to do. My friends know when it is time to be about business, we are going to be about business and when it's time for us to kind of let loose, we will just have fun. We can do that as well. All in all, I try to hang out with people who try to mirror their lifestyle like mine. (II, 5/9/11)

Michael also believed the male friends he chose could be a great challenge to him. He recognized that an adolescent yearns for a sense of belonging, but to him the key is at what cost. He explained what he meant:

The greatest challenge I face is the people I choose to hang around—as an African American, your boys and things like that. And if your boys are skipping class and doing drugs and things like that you are going to want to be cool and you are going want to be down with them as well. So you're not going to do what you

need to be doing in the classroom. You want to get the attention you need. So I feel like basically, as an African American, as young people go, we might be the biggest threat to ourselves. (FG, 5/19/11)

Adam indicated that he hangs around his cousins who are academy students because they say positive things around him. He acknowledged:

Those are the only people I trust and always have something positive to say. They never like put me down or anything. Like they always find ways to pick me up and push me further than like bring me down, talk bad about me, and they always have something good to say. And they look at me like . . . I guess they . . . how can I say this? They see a lot in me of what I can do and stuff like that. (II, 5/5/11)

Felicia revealed that all of her friends strive for academic excellence and are mostly in the academy; although, she does hang around a few traditional DuBois kids. She noted, “The people that I hang around or like go out with are in the academy, but I still, I have friends outside of the academy. I know the people” (II, 5/5/11). Jessica, on the other hand, was a bit more selective with her friendships. She said:

Well, academy kids, we stick together because you’re put together. I do have friends outside of the academy, but even those friends are like doing something. Even though they are traditional students, they’re still going to class doing what they need to do to graduate from high school. So I surround myself with people who are goal-oriented. (II, 5/2/11)

Separation from middle school friends encouraged Bishop’s desire to attend the academy. Not only was he interested in the academy, but also he sought to be more focused in academics. He clarified his reason for wanting to attend DuBois’s early college academy:

The academy there [at DuBois] intrigued me. But what really got me there was the fact that I wanted to get away from the people I was with in middle school. I

didn't do as well as I should've. I worked really hard and I had a lot of friends and I was really outgoing and stuff, but it wasn't working in other aspects. I wasn't focused academically and stuff and I really needed to be focused. I really wanted to get away. (II, 6/3/11)

As a result of choosing to attend DuBois, Bishop experienced the sacrifice of losing the relationship with his best friend, who happens to be White. He explained further:

Like my best friend, he switched schools, too, but he was White and he stopped talking to me. Like our whole relationship changed actually. He is a conservative guy and we've been friends for a couple of years, three or four years. I don't really even talk to him anymore. I mean we talk here and there, but it might be the fact that we go to separate schools or it might be the fact that I go to a predominately Black school. I think that the predominately Black thing is that/ (II, 6/3/11)

Although the participants acknowledged their association with both academy and traditional students at DuBois, their responses indicated that the overall atmosphere of the academy heavily influenced their peer associations. All participants mentioned the need to be selective when choosing a peer group. Nonetheless, for some participants, criteria for peer relationships included like-mindedness, commitment, positive goal-orientation, academic focus, positive conversations, and mirroring lifestyles. For others, minimizing drama and establishing trust in relationships was accomplished by exercising the choice of gender preference – male friendships vs. female friendships.

### **Oblivious or Optimistic: “I Put Race Aside”**

Given the participants' responses about reasons they wanted to attend the early college academy, one that was situated in a historically Black high school that was oftentimes decried by the media, race was explored on a more personal level. When

asked how “being Black” affected their academic achievement and perceptions of themselves as students, they did not think their race mattered. Felicia believed that “society may say that a White person may be smarter than a Black person, but we are all made the same way. We are not given the same opportunities, but ultimately strive the same way” (FG, 5/19/11). In other words, she did not think race affected her desire to achieve; nonetheless, she acknowledged the unequal opportunities afforded to Blacks.

Sally echoed the same sentiment when she said, “I have performed well in Black schools . . . Race may matter with scholarships or jobs, but not with school” (FG, 5/19/11). Nonetheless, Sally admitted that she is not the stereotypical Black student. She clarified how she saw herself as a Black student and as change agent:

My driving force is change. [I want to] be the change within the world. I’m not your typical Black student. I don’t want people to look at Black students and think of them as poor, dumb, and uneducated so I try to show them that we can be different. I want to change the world not just for Black students, but for everyone. Whether it’s in medicine with my chemistry, whatever I choose to do with it, it will affect the whole world. Then I want to travel so I’m going to be all over the place, giving people a little taste of Sally. (FG, 5/19/11)

Jessica also felt that race should not be a factor in terms of the academic performance of a student. She said, “It [race] doesn’t make a difference. I have been a Black person in African American schools. Schools were good. I got a good education” (FG, 6/8/11).

Unlike Felicia, Sally, and Jessica, Michael did not simply view race as neutral label, but also as a source of motivation. He stated:

If it [race] affects school at all—I have to strive harder and have more to prove. Being African American does that to me. Being African American is an asset. A

brain is a brain . . . whatever anybody else can do, I can do the same, if not better. I have never been intimidated. (II, 5/9/11)

Thus, Michael recognized how being African American was viewed in the broader society, but he felt empowered as an African American that he could achieve the same academic merits as any other student regardless of race. In concert with Michael's comments, Wesley also felt race did not affect his desire to be an academically sound student. He believed one's parental foundation and upbringing and prior schooling helped him develop his academic identity. He rationalized his thinking this way:

It [how well he achieves in school] depends on: 1) how you are brought up; 2) how your parents raised you; and 3) the kind of schools you go to. My elementary school was diverse and motivating. My middle school was diverse but challenging and my high school is not diverse, but that's where I began to learn to push myself. (FG, 5/19/11)

When Wesley spoke of his desire to be academically and professionally successful, he adamantly, yet confidently maintained a moral sensibility. He commented about how his desire to excel was more tied to his personal drive versus his race:

I mean along with being successful . . . I mean who doesn't want to be able to live comfortably by the time they reach a certain age. But I don't know about trying to prove people wrong. It doesn't matter what I look like or where I come from, you know what I'm saying? I want to be successful, but I also need to prove you wrong and prove to you just for my race that I'm above average. That's crazy. I'm exceptional! I can do just as good as you can if not better if I try . . . Basically, I want to be remembered for what I am and who I am. Personally, even if I wasn't connected to my skin color, I want to be remembered for doing the right thing. (II, 5/19/11)

Similarly, Bishop understood the operationalization of race in his life to be one where he demonstrated to others, particularly White people, that he was not what they believed him to be. Bishop also understood the power of institutionalized racism. He explained:

No race is smarter than the other. Schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods get less funding and less resources. Black kids are not dumber; they just have poorer foundations. I had to work harder in White schools because they wanted to put me in slow classes for no reason. Teachers deemed me slow because I was unorganized. I was even accused of stealing. (II, 6/3/11)

Bishop later summed up his feelings about race and achievement when he said, “I don’t like to worry about race. It’s not my thing. I think that’s just an excuse” (FG, 6/8/11).

Adam also did not consider race as a motivational factor in defining his academic identity. He seriously stated that “I don’t like my personality attributes to be described as a color” (FG, 5/19/11). Situating himself at DuBois, he saw school as an opportunity and a gateway. He went on to say, “I do my best. I put race aside” (FG, 5/19/11).

According to the school website, participation in the early college academy program affords these students many opportunities such as gaining exposure to the college experience, creating high scholarship potential to choice colleges, earning college credit hours for up to one year. In addition, the academy program provides a challenging environment that stimulates learning, encourages academic development, and perpetuates maturity while fostering academic rigor, substantiating academic relevance and forming beneficial relationships (School Website, 2010). With this in mind, post-secondary plans for these eight participants involved attendance at four-year colleges or universities.

While they attended a predominately Black high school, most of them sought more ethnically diverse learning spaces for their next academic journeys. For example, Taylor explained,

I'm going to a college that is a private school. Probably one of the top schools in the nation, especially for sciences and in the medical field. It is not a huge minority population there. So you know I'm about to shift again, but I would say that it is more of a balance than I ever experienced in terms of my academic career. And it's [the college] small. So that you will have classrooms with like 10 people in it; it's a learning environment. So I think that it's going to be good for me in terms that I will get to now shift and be around a different type of people once again [referring to White people]. See, when I was in middle school. I was with people who were upper class and they were Caucasian. And then at DuBois, I experienced an African American community of all different [socioeconomic] classes. [By] going to the college, I'm going to be shifting back into a school that you know is predominately Caucasian and probably that middle to upper class kids attend because that school does cost \$54,000 a year and unless you are making money or you get scholarships, you probably aren't going to be going there. (II, 5/19/11)

Sally stated that she wanted to attend a college that maintains some aspects of DuBois, but not all. She mentioned, "I want different demographics. I want to try something new. There is a similarity, though. My high school has a very tight knit alumni network and \_\_\_\_\_ [name of the university] has a very tight-knit alumni network" (II, 5/9/11).

Wesley, who will begin his matriculation into college this summer, also indicated that he welcomed the opportunity to attend a diverse institution. He noted,

This summer actually I'm doing a summer program at the college I chose to attend. And I'm doing that because it gives me something to do during the summer. It's also going to help me out during the school year. I get a couple dollars for textbooks, I'm kind of happy and I also get some school credits as well. So that will be great. And then in the fall I will attend that college actually. It's a good engineering school and it's also diverse in its population and it's also located in my state so I don't have to go too far. I'm far enough where I can

support myself, but if something was to go wrong, I'm not that far from my family to where I can ask them for help . . . It's a very diverse school. . . . I miss the cultural aspect of my elementary and middle school so I wish to return to that. (II, 5/19/11)

Junior, Michael framed his rationale for his post-secondary choice as he prepared for his early college year. Clearly, Michael dared to be different. He explained:

I chose to go to my early college school [a PWI-predominately White institution] 'cause you know that it was the road less traveled. I did want to do something different from everybody else. [Many of his peers attended the HBCU institution for their early college dually-enrolled senior year experience]. Plus you know I felt like the school would be a good, you know, a great opportunity for me not to pass up. I felt like if I qualified for it, you know, why not take advantage of it. So that was basically it. And then I realized that I probably would be going to a PWI for college anyway so I just started to get acclimated to college life. (II, 5/9/11)

When questioned about his choice of a PWI instead of a historically Black college or university (HBCU), he went on to say:

I love HBCUs. I like the sense of family and things like that. I just didn't feel like as far as my future went, it wouldn't serve me any purpose to go to a HBCU for my senior year of high school.

Jessica had a different point of view when considering HBCUs. She, on the other hand, without hesitation asserted her desire to attend an HBCU. She adamantly affirmed reasons her choice, one of the top engineering schools in the country:

I want to be an engineer and I feel like undergrad is my last hoorah (makes cheering gestures) of being with African Americans because I'm not gonna get that every day with my profession (engineering). Most people who are engineers are Caucasian men. Me being a female and African American, it's rare. Anyway, my mom went to the university, I grew up on that campus. My mom was a cheerleader. So I used to go with her during homecoming and cheer during the

parade and stuff and then I used to go to summer camp at the university. So it's just like that's home for me. (II, 5/2/11)

Adam and Felicia were both undecided at the time of their interviews and indecisive in selecting a particular school. Unsettled about attending an HBCU, Felicia admitted,

At first I wanted to go to an HBCU because I thought I would have more fun there, but . . . I don't know. I have to focus on my academics, too. I think if I went to a HBCU, I would be more about extracurricular stuff like the band and SGA [Student Government Association]. You don't really see anything about their academics. I mean *I know* (with emphasis) they [HBCUs] are good in like math, science and engineering. I went to a camp at one over the summer for chemistry. But I think if I did go to that school I would major in like Chemistry, but I don't want say this like I am being racist. I am still considering both the HBCU and PWI. (II, 5/5/11)

Adam heard some things about HBCUs, yet he was still considering both HBCUs and PWIs in his final decision-making. He further explained, "They [HBCU students] talk about all the parties that's going on, what happened on the weekends, and they don't really talk about academic stuff like that" (II, 5/5/11).

With an altogether different perspective and choice, Bishop has chosen a unique collegiate pathway. With the rationale of simply being a great fit, Bishop believed his school plans will foster his academic and athletic interests. He said,

Well, I wasn't thinking about the Naval Academy until they contacted me for basketball. A few other schools offered too, but I thought it was the best opportunity for me. I made sure I picked the school not just because of basketball, but because I really wanted to go there. I know it's going to be hard. It's something that I want to do, but I thought it was something that I could thrive at. I'm doing what I think because I'm a pretty focused cat and I think I'll do well there. (II, 6/3/11)

All participants expressed the notion that race was not a deciding factor in how well they have performed, are currently performing, or will perform academically. They stressed they were as smart, if not smarter, than their White counterparts as indicated by their SAT scores, state proficiency tests, and grades. The participants further validated this belief by referring to their academic successes throughout the years at both predominantly Black and White schools. While half of the participants preferred to have more ethnically diverse experiences in their post-secondary school attendance, only one of them unequivocally preferred to attend an HBCU. Two participants were considering attendance at an HBCU, with one participant making the choice of post-secondary school attendance based on scholarship opportunities.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the responses of each participant were influenced by their experiential knowledge and associated encounters within their individual and collective (the academy) figured worlds. The participants valued the opportunity to be educated in a school setting that was, especially in past years, historically significant and known for its academic excellence. Though the participants recognized their presence in the academy afforded them special status, on one hand they also consciously felt privileged; yet, on the other hand, they judged others, particularly some who attended the traditional school, in the same ways they sought to negate about how society viewed them. Relationships with peers and family were important in the definitions of their academic identities. While the participants “put race aside” where their academic achievement is

concerned, all were quite aware of the stereotypical descriptions society held about them academically, culturally, and socially.

## **CHAPTER V**

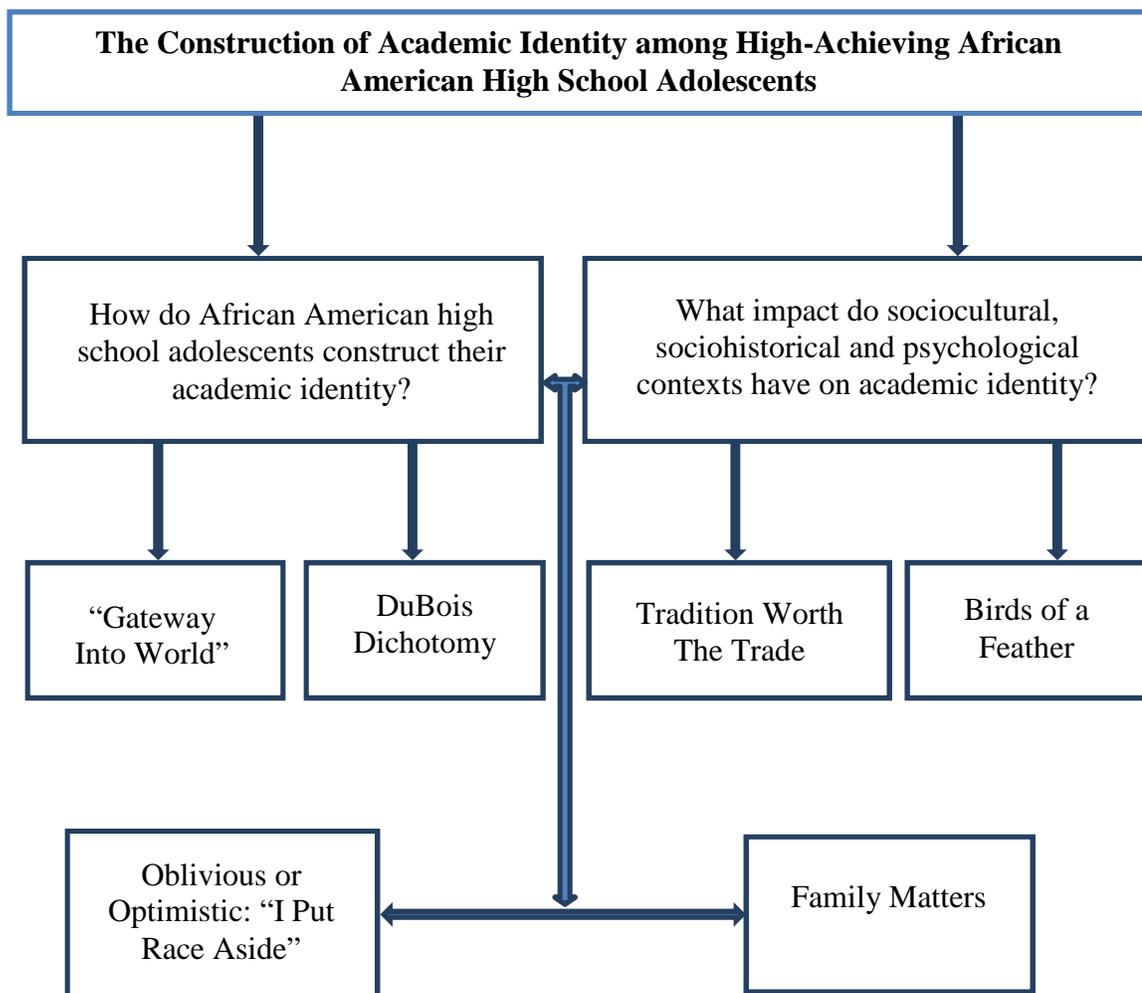
### **INTERPRETATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to examine how high-achieving African American high school adolescents in an early college academy program in the southeastern United States construct their academic identities. The research questions used in this study were as follows:

1. How do African American high school adolescents construct their academic identity?
2. What impact do sociocultural, sociohistorical and psychological contexts have on academic identity development of African American high school adolescents?

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I will address my research questions by discussing how my findings connect with previous studies on the phenomena. In addition, I will also share implications and suggestions for policy and classroom practice. Implications and suggestions for further research will also be included in this chapter.

Figure 2 provides a graphic representation of how my research questions were answered through subthemes that emerged from the data.



**Figure 2. Alignment of Research Questions with Themes**

All eight participants from various backgrounds revealed commonalities and differences in how they constructed, perceived, and demonstrated their academic identities. First, all the participants enjoyed attending school and found the process of schooling to be most beneficial and one that would lead to future success. Both juniors and seniors believed without a doubt that being academically successful in school was a non-negotiable necessity. Each one chose to apply to the academy for various reasons. For example, Michael, a junior, wanted to attend DuBois Early College Academy's

program for the exposure to college classes and the curriculum. He thought it would be good for him as preparation for the atmosphere of higher education. Wesley, a senior, wanted the academy experience to help him develop “perseverance and motivation to overcome obstacles” (II, 5/19/11). In other words, Wesley used his academy interactions to teach him responsibility for his own learning, an adult characteristic he believed to be vital for achievement beyond his secondary school years. These high achieving African American adolescents possessed a strong self-concept of their academic identities which propelled them to excel academically (Perry, 2003).

Since attendance at school and the academy program in general were both a privilege to Adam, he considered having the opportunity to be schooled for the purpose of education a “gateway into the real world.” Therefore, average-to-low achievement was definitely not acceptable. Being a high achiever, for him, is a demonstration of gratitude for being an American who has the opportunity to pursue an education. These students exhibited what Welch and Hodges (1997) described as academic motivation and Osborne (1997) described as academic identity whereby these students were intrigued by the challenge associated with excelling academically. Unlike students in previous studies who dis-identified with an identity of academic excellence (Cokley, 2002; Griffin, 2002; Osborne, 1997, 2001), these students’ academic identities were strengthened by confronting challenges associated with academic achievement. For other participants in the study, going to school and doing well was a diversion from boredom (Taylor), an intellectual and social activity that is meaningful (Felicia and Sally), and a family expectation of excellence (Jessica). Regardless of the participants’ reasons for choosing

to enroll in the academy, the DuBois academy symbolized Black collective identity with academic excellence and strong racial identity coexisting and thriving (Fordham, 1996). Therefore, the development of the participants' academic identities was a byproduct of the sociocultural environment cultivated within the DuBois academy (Hutchins, 1995; Lave, 1988; Lemke, 2000; Wortham, 2001).

The necessity of schooling for each of these participants was instilled early in their lives, thus signifying the genesis of their academic identity formation. As such, family support for these students arose from quite different circumstances and for quite different reasons. These findings support previous findings that suggest family support is vital to the development of academic identity (Burke & Hoelter, 1988; Sanders, 1998; Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997). These participants were also socialized to think that they could do well in school from obviously powerful social agents. For many of them, the power of parental/family influence served as the first sculptors of their academic identities. Jessica, a prime example of this early influence, reflected on how she began to measure her success by grades. When asked who or what most influenced her to be academically successful, she explained instances in which her parents, "only accepted the best," and often exercised punishment, because she earned a "C" on her progress report. She recollected that ever since she was young enough to bring home grades, she had been pushed academically.

These words echo the same sentiment as Felicia. When referring to the impact of her mom's influence, Felicia expressed, "She would always punish me when I didn't get good grades so, I mean, yeah she was always there trying to support me to do better and

stuff” (II, 5/5/11). Both ladies (Jessica and Felicia) at young ages were influenced by the parental reinforcement of ensuring good grades through the use of punishment (Jessica’s term), an agent used often to prevent repetitive and undesirable behaviors. Although punishment is not an ideal consequence for any adolescent, these participants clearly acknowledged that, in this case, it was a form of support.

Unlike these female participants, Wesley’s emphasis was less through reinforced punishment and more through habit or routine. Wesley explained how after school each day, the household expectation of doing homework was considered his first and primary responsibility, “The first thing that she would tell me to do is do my homework. It’s always important to do your school work first before you do anything else. Nothing else mattered.” (II, 5/19/11). This form of discipline and structure was a political act by Wesley’s family to ensure he possessed a strong academic identity (Ward, 2000). This intentional parenting tactic was used to develop positive academic habits within Wesley that would persist throughout his academic career. In all of the aforementioned instances concerning parental push for success, each participant’s parent or other family member acted as a cultural broker by fostering and enforcing the mental competency needed within to be successful in school (Carter, 2005). According to Berzonsky and Neimeyer (2006) and Streitmatter (1989), one’s academic success is dependent upon where one is in one’s identity development (roles, attitudes, beliefs and aspirations). All eight participants defined their role in school (to be a high-achievers); their attitudes exuded confidence as they never in word or deed denied the belief in their academic abilities, and

their aspirations reached far beyond high school with inevitable conversations about attending college.

All of the aforementioned self-identifying characteristics revealed strong academic identities of the participants. Burke and Hoelter (1988) posited the initiation of academic identity development is when a student perceives himself capable of doing academic tasks. As indicated by the participants' archival documents, active engagement in school activities (as seen during observations), interview discourse and early college academy participation, these students believe themselves to be capable. In both overt and covert ways, all expressed their confidence in their academic abilities during their interviews. Whether it was demonstrated blatantly through covert responses like those from Bishop who modestly admitted, "I am not a genius, but I am smart" (II, 6/3/11) or Felicia, Taylor, Adam, and Michael who expressed that they were pleased with their academic performance; or overtly like Wesley who asserted, "I know I can go through life successfully" (II, 5/19/11), like Sally, who identified herself as "a nerd" (II, 5/9/11) or even Jessica who claimed that she was pretty successful in all aspects of schooling and believed, "I think that you can be successful and not be smart in everything, but if you work hard and are successful with most aspects of school, I think you're smart" (II, 5/2/11). Although all participants were adolescents, they did not express any role confusion as posited by Erickson's (1968) identity theory. Conversely, all participants possessed assurance in their abilities signifying their development far beyond that of mediation of learning processes (learning identity) and well into the development of their academic identities.

The self-assurance of many of the participants at times during the study resounded in acknowledgement of the dichotomy that exists at DuBois. The expressed consequence of the dichotomy that negatively characterized the academy participants as “thinking and acting like they are better than their peers,” was oftentimes distinct throughout their discourse during the study. These findings were not always consistent with previous studies on high achieving African American students who experienced being ostracized because of their academic merits (Ford et al., 2008; Milner, 2002). Quite the contrary, some of the academy students were quite judgmental of the traditional school students. Although they articulated their feelings of disconnectedness, lack of support and attention given by school administration, participants’ comments at times contradicted their notion that the “academy kids” are not student elitists. In fact, the participants also engaged in negative discourse about the traditional school students. For example, Jessica, who when referring to some traditional students expressed the negative aspects associated with DuBois are due in part to the “project kids.” She further explained: “When you put bad seeds together, nothing good is going to come out” (II, 5/2/11). Similarly, Felicia who disclaimed stereotyping in her interview communicated, “It’s just sometimes they don’t do what they should . . . skip class, get in fights, all that other stuff. They really don’t know the meaning of why they’re going to school. They don’t want to better themselves in no way” (II, 5/5/11). Even Taylor commented on family structure and socioeconomics as well as moral or religious grounding when she said, “all of us honestly do have a Mom and a Dad in our homes and we do live in the suburb-type communities which is a coincidence in that regard. We all have a church life

. . . .” These stigmatizing labels of Black students who are considered deviant or missing what the dominant society believes to be essential trappings of success (i.e., two-parent family, middle class status, and religious affiliation, etc.) reflects this notion of “acting Black” whereby acting intellectually incompetent and ignorant is a normalized behavior (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2008; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004). Perhaps, this adds to the notion that certain aspects of the societal curriculum and other environmental factors, such as poverty and family structure affected the participants’ opinions of some Black students to the degree that intragroup racism, classism and whether one is spiritually connected (in this case) are revealed.

Whether it is via arrogance or confidence, the strength of the participants’ academic identities is undeniably evident. These students most certainly are living examples of

the personal commitment to a standard of excellence [academy membership], the willingness to persist in the challenge [negating the stereotypes, and rejecting the negative reputation of DuBois], struggle [working to defy the odds], excitement [graduation and college], and disappointment [school structural factors] intrinsic in the learning process. (Welch & Hodges, 1997, p. 37)

Not only did the adolescents’ participation in the academy and early emphasis on academics from parents provide a springboard to academic identity development, but also the reinforcement of sociocultural, sociohistorical, and psychological factors have contributed significantly to the conceptualization of academic attainment for these students.

*Research Question #2: What impact do sociocultural, sociohistorical and psychological contexts have on academic identity?*

The sociohistorical context with which the participants are positioned academically, involves that of both school and home. Because of the rich tradition of DuBois High School and its impact upon the surrounding community, it was often publicly recognized as an institution of educational empowerment and a hub for social justice. All eight participants had knowledge of this perspective and referenced the historical significance of DuBois High School in their individual interviews. Be reminded that all participants chose DuBois despite the sometimes frequent and negative portrayal of it. Even with the negative views of the school, many of the participants acknowledged that the reason for attending DuBois was, in part, due to the success of its graduates, and they, too, wanted to achieve that success. Jessica referenced this by stating, “I love it [DuBois] because of all the history. Graduates go on to do great things” (II, 5/2/11). This validates the connection between sociohistorical ideals and these students’ desire for academic attainment. Furthermore, three of the eight participants are children of DuBois graduates, affording them the opportunity to know “living representations” of the DuBois legacy. The “figured world” of DuBois represented a positive learning environment where high academic expectations were the norm. Thus, the students enrolled in the academy internalized these expectations within their academic identities (Holland et al., 1998; Nasir & Cook, 2009). The participants’ respect for the culture at DuBois highlights the significant impact a school’s culture can have on a student’s academic self-concept and subsequent achievement (Goodenough, 1981).

As previously mentioned, multiple and competing accounts of African American historical experiences that include education are often distorted or masked and ultimately can impede the identity construction of present day African American adolescents and their perception of academics. Yet in this case, although conflicting perceptions of the school are often magnified and its historical significance to Black intelligence minimized, all eight high-achieving participants chose to educate themselves as the well-informed “Negro” rather than the “misinformed, ignorant Negro.” In contrast to Woodson’s (1990/1933) conceptualization of the mis-educated Negro, these participants were determined to dispel the negative stereotypes attached them. Yet, these participants did not appear to embrace their race specifically when defining why or what motivated them to achieve, but rather they adopted attitudes that incorporated striving for academic excellence as an act of resilience to fight against racial stereotypes of what society believed them to be. As a result, they constructed with the support of other social agents (e.g. parents, teachers, and peers) alternative academic identities which allowed them to successfully navigate the academic environment (Carter, 2008a). The conundrum, however, becomes the fact that this resilience is perceived, at times, by others as avoidance rather than acceptance of the Black collective and its perceptions. Ultimately, this may cause questions or feelings of ambiguity in considering the participants’ racial identities as positive ones.

Moreover, from another sociohistorical perspective, these are Generation Y millennials, whom the literature characteristically defines as possessing a high-level of assurance that for this group of participants transcends race (Howe & Strauss, 2003).

Furthermore, these participants also exuded a level of focus and determination often overlooked in popular depictions of African American adolescents. These participants acknowledged the negative stereotypes assigned to them by society, but they chose not to embrace them. Rather they chose to defy these misguided notions. The desire to succeed not only academically, but also in life exhibited by these participants is indicative of their millennial personas (Howe & Strauss, 2003).

Perhaps one of the most influential contexts on the construction of academic identity among these eight participants is the sociocultural context. The integrated social forces of home, school, and society were extremely significant with regard to their connections with academics. The sociocultural theory posits that culture represents an individual's social relationships and interactions (Vygotsky, 1978, 1993). In this study, the sociocultural factors ranging from parents to teachers greatly shaped the academic identities of the participants. First of all, at home, the support and goal-setting from parents greatly impacted them. Without a doubt, parents, whether single or married, college-educated or not, middle-class or not were the primary forces of academic motivation for all participants. When referencing his parents, Michael shared,

Whenever I was struggling with my math class, my mom was a math professor, so I would come to her for like help for like one problem and it would turn into like a whole class session and she would pull out this whiteboard and she would post it up on a chair and she would sit there and teach me on this little whiteboard. I used to have to go up on the whiteboard for like two hours straight and do all these problems that she would line up for me. (II, 5/9/11)

Like Michael, Bishop was socialized to strive for excellence to the point that he felt his lifestyle was "normal" to everyone until he attended DuBois and realized that everyone,

did not share the same academic attainment goals and philosophies. He contended that, “I never thought of myself like . . . not going to college, because I thought it was normal. I thought everybody goes to college. Cause I mean my parents went to college and told me to go” (II, 6/3/11). For both of these young men, their “figured worlds” consisted of an environment in which excellence was expected and failure was not an option (Holland et al., 1998; Nasir & Cook, 2009). The perception shared by these two participants was also shared among Felicia, Sally, Jessica, and Taylor, all of whom wished to follow the educational example of their parents and/or siblings. However, for Wesley and Adam, their socializing force was to learn from the mistakes of their family members and strive to avoid such behaviors. These findings support previous studies which suggest the expectations and support of family members play a significant role in the development of academic identity (Burke & Hoelter, 1988; Ward, 2000).

As significant as familial relationships were in conversations with the participants, so were their expressions about their peer group associations and interactions. This concept of peer support relates to Wortham’s (2004) concept of collective practice. In fact, learning is a co-constructed practice whereby individuals come together to create new knowledge, norms, and expectations (Greeno, 1997; Latour, 1993; Rogoff, 1995; Wertsch, 1998; Wortham, 2004). When referencing academic identity construction, this was quite noteworthy as all eight participants either stated or inferred that their ideal peer group consisted of those who shared like goals and expectations. Too, most of the participants chose their friends within the academy for the aforementioned reason. For instance, Michael asserted, “When it is time to be about

business, we are going to be about business and when it's time for us to let loose. . . I try to hang out with people who try to mirror their lifestyle like mine" (II, 5/9/11). Others, including Sally, Taylor, Wesley, and Felicia, chose their peers by limiting the number of close associates and oftentimes restricting the gender of choice. For example, Sally would rather communicate with boys to "avoid drama." Likewise, Wesley preferred the friendship of women as he has been socialized to avoid the friendship of males mainly because he developed trust issues as a result of his father's incarceration, which as perceived by Wesley, was abandonment. Still, the power of all of the socializing forces drove each student closer to their academic goals.

One interesting fact, in particular, is how the participants responded to societal forces. In general, African American adolescents are often stereotyped and associated with negative perceptions of academic success. Steele and Aronson (1995) refer to this encounter as a stereotype threat. A stereotype threat ensues when an individual is at risk of conforming, as self-characteristic, to a negative stereotype about one's group. For African American adolescents, this negative stereotype is the myth of their intellectual inferiority. The responses of the participants during the interviews and focus groups indicated that they are fully aware of these perceptions, and how the inseparability of society, culture, and race cannot go unnoticed or ignored when dealing with how the African American conceptualizes identity or academic attainment. With regard to this notion, the male participants were much more vocal than the female participants. For instance Michael stated,

I'm driven. I'm well written. I really don't settle for not being the best at whatever I am trying to accomplish. . . . I am not a Hip Hop guy. I'm not like. . . that's not me. I know a plenty of Black boys, African American boys who aren't that kind of persons so . . . . Stereotype is what the media makes it to be and what people believe. (II, 5/9/11)

When referring back to DuBois and the portrayal of Blacks, Wesley asserted,

Because it's a historically Black high school, the media doesn't want to portray Black people being successful in academics. I mean if Dubois does real good in sports. That would be publicized, but not the fact that we had the top amount of scholarship graduates for academic reasons last year. (II, 5/19/11)

These young men recognized themselves as they are represented in the societal curriculum. These counter-narratives highlight the persistence of the participants to excel in spite of being unjustly labeled (Carter, 2005). Nevertheless, despite their efforts and persistence to counteract these notions, the participants play into the beliefs they work hard to contradict. For example, the societal curriculum often portrays the phenomenon of Hip-Hop as a detrimental art form and one that is at times in conflict with school values (Beachum, 2011) rather than a creditable form of artistic expression. Michael, like many in society, associated Hip Hop with substandard behavior as if this art form and intelligence cannot co-exist.

As indicated in the literature, some participants alluded to the consciousness or awareness of their race. The literature points out that they are at the apparent stage for this in the construction of their racial identity development. Although not exclusive to a particular age, one participant, Bishop, had experiential knowledge from a personal racial encounter triggering his awareness:

They [Whites] treat you like you're inferior. I just feel like I was there, I was always, I didn't get bullied on. I know there were racist people there but I mean we were so young. But the teachers, they just treated you like you're slow. Like they all treated me like I was slow. I'm always organized, but you know they always used to get on me about how I used to treat my cubby. They [teachers] picked on me pretty much. And that's how I felt when I went to a private school. When I went to public school it got a little better but I still felt like I used to get in trouble because I was the only Black being in class. I remember in eighth grade I was in an art class and this lady's money got stolen from her purse in like a back room. She accused the only two Black kids class in the room. I mean ever since then I saw how racist the world really was. So it's sad but it is the truth. (II, 6/3/11)

Tatum (1997) described these types of experiences with racism as triggers, which in turn hasten the transition to the encounter stage. The second stage to which Tatum (1997) refers is the stage of racial consciousness which often forces one to contemplate the consequences of racial group membership. Similarly, after joining the academy, Bishop found that his best friend, who happened to be White, distanced himself from Bishop and eventually severed ties with their friendship.

Furthermore, the responses of these participants to sociocultural agents or forces gave way to the formation of their psychological perspectives regarding to race. Despite their knowledge of the stereotyping of DuBois students, the participants maintained their positive outlook on their prospects for academic success. Like the students in the study conducted by Henfield et al. (2008) on Black students attending a Black school, they, too, appeared skilled and resilient to the distress of stereotyping. This may be due in part to the fact that stereotyping at DuBois is primarily directed toward the traditional students, thereby making resilient behavior easier. As such, the academy is viewed as the only praiseworthy aspect that remains of DuBois. Academy membership is recognized as very

prestigious and highly regarded in the county's African American community. Moreover, when considering the participants' responses throughout the study, one can conclude that racial identity development indeed may have a greater impact on high-achieving African American adolescents who confront a myriad of stereotypes associated with race and intelligence (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2008).

The resilience that continued to exude in the expression of the academic capabilities of the participants exposed their psychological traits associated with their academic identities. Related to the emergent subtheme, Oblivious or Optimistic?: "I Put Race Aside," one may infer the participants have adopted a "raceless persona." Racelessness in this case is considered to be a conscious or unconscious effort to disassociate with Black racial identity. In contrast, rather than associate these students with being "raceless," I believe them to be consciously resistant to the reinforcement of the societal-imposed negative images and perceptions the societal curriculum may reveal. As demonstrated in the data, the participants are neither in denial nor ashamed of their Black collective identity. In fact, they are quite assured of who they are racially and while they may put their race aside when considering why they achieve in school, they implicitly and explicitly at times, use it as a form of resistance to what society believes they can accomplish and be.

Previous literature calls for students at times to adopt a "raceless" persona through which they avoid those of their race who are disengaged from learning and use language and exhibit behavior that pleases teachers (Fordham, 1988). From reviewing this study's interviews, focus group data, and observations of them with their peers, the participants

did not exclusively socialize with academy students, but they appeared to have more relationships with students who were recognized as high-achieving. Furthermore, the participants did appear to make an effort to maintain their collective identities without assimilation or “acting White” in their estimations. According to Fordham (1988), dissociation from the Black collective is required especially with females as they believed this abandonment is required by schools “as the price to pay if they desire to achieve vertical mobility” (p. 74). Therefore, unlike Fordham’s (1988) study which suggested African American students must adopt a value system consistent with White culture, these participants created their own value system which is consistent with the sociocultural norms that were co-constructed by their environment (Vygotsky, 1993).

In spite of facing unique challenges as a non-traditional school, DuBois provided a nurturing environment for these participants without forcing them to “act White” or forsake their racial identity (Ford et al., 2008). Yes, the students verbally admitted that school success was the vehicle to vertical or upward mobility, but they exercised that right at no one’s expense to include their own. Again, I posit that instead of denying association with their race, these participants unconsciously succumb to the challenges of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) yet they seem to strive and navigate through school with an appreciation for who they are as high-achieving students who happen to be African American.

## **Implications**

### **Administrative Suggestions**

Seven out of the eight participants in focus group settings acknowledged their discontent with the administration of DuBois and their lack of recognizing academy students or even mere familiarity with their names. These participants reported that the administrators only knew the “bad kids” and neither recognized their accomplishments on a regular basis nor acknowledged them face-to-face. The participants boasted that the often masked and minimized success of DuBois was due, in part, to the success of these and other academy students whom they felt merited acknowledgement of some sort. Administrators must be willing to reach out and better understand the complexities of high-achieving students just as much as they work to rehabilitate and redirect those who have otherwise less desirable academic outcomes. Endeavors to better understand these students may result in efforts to foster an environment that generates high-achieving outcomes. In addition, administrators must be sure not to overlook what students contribute to the overall school climate. Although the participants in this study were heavily involved at DuBois in terms of membership in various organizations, they often felt their voices and opinions were not heard in school decision-making processes. Administrators can provide them with opportunities to amplify their otherwise perceived silenced and stifled voices through participation in student advisory groups. Participants’ input as it concerns institutional practices and curriculum may alleviate such students feeling unimportant.

Furthermore, schools themselves are significant as they relate to the construction and conceptualization of academic identities. Administrators must understand that accountability rests not solely with classroom teachers to provide rigor; school leaders must exhaust all opportunities to maximize identity development in the adolescents whom they serve. Administrators must also strategically and carefully find better ways to accommodate students' needs by hiring competent teachers who have the necessary pedagogical skill sets to mentor, teach, and foster academic identities of all students. Additionally, participants discussed their perspectives and questioned the care exhibited for and high-expectations set forth by teachers. Administrators must find a better balance for teacher distribution. With the current national emphasis on the achievement gap and accountability mandates, in some cases, administrators are assigning experienced, highly-qualified teachers to struggling students and less experienced teachers to high-achieving students. This may be of greater benefit to low-achieving students in fostering their academic identities, yet it cripples the learning growth of high-achievers such as the participants in this study. Both groups of students—high achievers and academically struggling and challenged students—deserve the most well-prepared teachers possible.

### **Policy Suggestions**

Lawmakers and other policy stakeholders must ensure the equitable allocation and distribution of funds to provide educational programs for all students. Much of the funds currently used by schools as distributed by federal programs are earmarked for struggling students in an effort to increase their proficiencies and ultimately eradicate the achievement gap. One such program would be the early college. Findings in this study

revealed that the early college concept had a positive effect on the participants' academic identities and thus yielded positive gains in testing proficiencies for DuBois. The research literature supports this finding as noted by Caplan, Henderson, Henderson, and Fleming (2002) who noted that including enrichment type programs in which acceleration is used enhances the achievement of high achieving and academically gifted high school students.

In addition, policymakers must recognize the need for vertical teaming and community networking operations to better serve the community surrounding DuBois. There is often a disconnection that exists between feeder elementary, middle and high schools; therefore, an academic preparation disconnection for students can occur, for secondary school teachers may not be completely privy to the content preparation provided by elementary and middle school teachers of students who feed into high schools. The motivation to achieve should follow students at the beginning of schooling (elementary) to ensure the strength of positive academic identities. In addition, schools must establish partnerships with local community institutions and organizations, also considered socialization agents (Cortes, 1979), to increase greater access.

Perhaps, most importantly, policymakers must continue to fund teacher education programs. A minimum standard must be put in place by lawmakers that will provide better training for educators, thus preventing the status quo or teachers losing valuable instructional time with learning-as-they-go training. Subsequently, this may be of detriment to academic identity development of students, not exclusive to those who are high achieving.

### **Classroom Suggestions**

Previous research reveals that African American or Black students have an increased awareness and understanding of their attitudes about race, societal racism, and an understanding of the structural effects of schooling on social, political, and economic mobility. Educators of all races need to familiarize themselves and seek training on how to utilize best pedagogical practices that dually perpetuate high academic achievement and a positive racial identity (Carter, 2008). This is not limited to non-minority teachers. As research indicates, Black high school students, like the participants in this study, have acknowledged both Black and White teachers as being very reliable in reiterating the counter-narrative of Black achievement that fosters the development of positive, academic achievement beliefs (Carter, 2005). These teachers are vital threads to the fabric of achievement motivation of African American adolescents.

Participants in this study also noted a desire to learn from peers of other diverse backgrounds. In addition, teachers like parents, must realize their responsibilities as cultural agents of change in the classroom. Teachers must facilitate learning that creates a non-threatening atmosphere and simultaneously guides students to discover and create meaning within the classroom without perpetuating uncomfortable feelings of inferiority. Additionally, classroom teachers should create opportunities for collective dialogue and discourse within the classroom based on culturally relevant material, merged with current facets of societal curriculum. The first step is becoming aware. The next step is to comprehending, and then analyzing. Only after these aforementioned steps have taken

place, can teachers become educational allies who may help in fostering greater development of students' cognitive identities (Cortes, 1979).

### **Future Research**

Based on the discussion and analysis of this instrumental case study, implications arise for future research. Although it is not known if the findings in this study are unique to the eight African American high-achieving adolescent participants at a predominantly Black high school, I propose that future comparative studies include other high-achieving African American adolescents at predominantly White high schools. Another recommendation for future research could be to examine in greater depth the impact of gender, family structure, and religious background on the development of academic identities among African American adolescents.

All participants in the study were early college academy students. Therefore, many of the perceptions about learning, academic attainment, and post-secondary endeavors were from a pre-college perspective. Furthermore, it would be interesting to hear the voices of more African American high-achieving high school adolescents who do not participate in such a program to compare experiences. Information from this study, as well as future studies that highlight various aspects of high-achievers, may yield greater knowledge about African American achievement in general.

Future studies should also incorporate the use of more interviews. Additional interviews could provide more in-depth data and comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. For example, the use of separate focus groups for males and females, academy students and traditional students, and high achieving and low achieving students

could provide tremendous insight into the development of academic identities across students from different backgrounds.

In addition, due to the fact this study focused on one Black high school in the southeastern part of the United States, one cannot be sure whether the findings would be consistent at all Black high schools. Furthermore, one cannot be sure whether the findings about these pre-college trained African American students attending a southeastern Black high school would relate to the same students at White high school. Therefore, the proposed cross comparative study would be most beneficial.

### **Summary**

The eight high-achieving African American high school adolescent participants in this study viewed education and schooling as a positive experience that will prepare them for success in life. For these participants, attendance at DuBois High School was dually beneficial as it allowed them to participate in a rigorous, challenging, college preparatory environment, the early college academy program, and to become a part of the Dubois historic legacy. At the same time, they were growing academically, socially, and personally. While at DuBois, these participants exhibited strong academic identities. The construction of their identities was significantly impacted by familial examples of excellence and great expectations, peer interactions, and their interpretations of themselves throughout various aspects of societal curriculum. The participants negotiated and navigated their identities as a result of their experiential knowledge within their figured worlds, both individual and collective. It was evident however, that the perspectives of the participants were generalized to the point that they echoed and

exemplified similar stereotypes and images of African Americans that they sought so desperately to negate and disprove. Nevertheless, they desired to continue to excel no matter how difficult circumstances became, for without a doubt, “you’ve got to want to do!”

The implications of this study suggested that administrators, teachers, and policymakers play key roles in promoting positive academic identities in all students, in particular, high achieving ones. Additionally, more research needs to be conducted that includes the voices of African American high achieving adolescents. Such research should be conducted in various other educational settings because African American high achievers exist beyond early college academy programs. They, too, have a story to tell.

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**APPENDIX A****INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

## Individual Interview Protocol Questions

- 1) How do you feel about DuBois High School?
- 2) What do you think about school?
- 3) How do you feel about your participation in the academy?
  - a. Are you pleased with your academic performance? Why or why not?
- 4) How do you think race affects your academic performance?
- 5) Talk to me about who you choose to hang out with and why.
  - a. What about those you choose not to hang around? Why or why not?
- 6) Tell me the ways your home life and school life complement or conflict with each other.
  - a. How do your parents feel about your performance at school?
- 7) How do the people you interact with the most feel about you or view you in terms of your academic achievements?
  - a. Does your community view you as an academic achiever?
- 8) What are your plans after high school graduation?

**APPENDIX B**  
**FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

Focus Group Questions:

1. How do you feel about DuBois High School?
2. How does being African American affect your academic achievements or endeavors?
3. What criteria do you use in choosing your peer groups?
4. How did your experience at DuBois High as an early college student determine your post-secondary plans?
5. What is the greatest challenge facing African American high school students today? How should African American students work to overcome this challenge?

## APPENDIX C

## IRB AUTHORIZED APPROVAL



THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA  
GREENSBORO

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE  
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Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

To: Jewell Cooper  
Teacher Ed/Higher Ed  
317 Curry Building

From: UNCG IRB

  
Authorized signature on behalf of IRB

Approval Date: 6/07/2010  
Expiration Date of Approval: 6/06/2011

RE: Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)  
Submission Type: Initial  
Expedited Category: 7.Surveys/interviews/focus groups,6.Voice/image research recordings  
Study #: 10-0189

Study Title: Constructing Academic Identity Among African American High School Adolescents

This submission has been approved by the IRB for the period indicated. It has been determined that the risk involved in this research is no more than minimal.

**Study Description:**

The purpose of this project is to examine how a group of African American adolescents construct their academic identity and what influences affect its construction.

**Regulatory and other findings:**

This research, which involves children, meets criteria at 45 CFR 46.404 (research involving no greater than minimal risk). Permission of one parent or guardian is sufficient.

**Investigator's Responsibilities**

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

When applicable, enclosed are stamped copies of approved consent documents and other recruitment materials. You must copy the stamped consent forms for use with subjects unless you have approval to do otherwise.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented (use the modification application available at <http://www.uncg.edu/orc/irb.htm>). Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB using the "Unanticipated Problem/Event" form at the same website.

CC: Johnette McCain, Chris Farrior, (ORED), Non-IRB Review Contact, (ORC), Non-IRB Review Contact

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO**

***CONSENT FOR A MINOR TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM***

Project Title: The Construction of Academic Identity Among African American High School Adolescents

Project Director: Johnette McCain

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

The purpose of this study is to examine how a group of African American adolescents construct their academic identity and what influences affect its construction. Additionally, through the interpretive lenses of sociocultural theory and racial and academic identity development, I endeavor to gain greater insight in ultimately answering the following research questions:

- 1) How do African American high school adolescents construct their academic identity?
- 2) What impact do sociocultural, sociohistorical and sociopolitical contexts have on academic identity development of African American high school adolescents?

Your child is an African American early college academy junior or senior student. I would like to work with me because I value what they have to say about their high school experiences and think what they say is very important.

Your child will be asked to answer 8 interview questions in a face-to-face interview with me and to answer some additional questions with some other early college academy juniors and seniors. The face-to-face interview should only take about an hour. The interview with the group should last about an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes.

Your child will be asked to answer 8 interview questions in a face-to-face interview with me and to answer some additional questions with some other early college academy juniors and seniors. The face-to-face interview should only take about an hour. The interview with the group should last about an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes. Both sessions will be audio-taped. I will use a tape recorder to help me remember what your child says during the interview.

Your child's decision to participate will not affect his/her education at school or his/her grades.

While there are no direct benefits to you in this study, there are minimal risks to you. For example, our child might disclose information that might be potentially embarrassing. Measures will be taken to assure the confidentiality of what your child says to me. To minimize these risks, you and your child will be able to review interview transcripts for additions, deletions, corrections, etc. If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated or if you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Eric Allen in the Office of Research Compliance at UNCG at (336) 256-1482. Questions, concerns or complaints about

UNCG IRB  
Approved Consent Form

Valid 6/7/10 to 6/6/11

this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Johnette McCain who may be contacted at (336) 451-5240 or mccainj@gcsnc.com.

Your child may begin to think about what influences have caused them to be most successful and embrace those influences to ensure continued success. Your child may also realize or reflect on any hindrances to their academic success as a result of this project and make adjustments to ensure continued success. In addition your child may be able to offer advice to other early college academy juniors or seniors to help them become more successful.

In using the responses given to me by your child, we may be able to help educators and educational researchers help better foster the success of African American high school students. They may be better equipped to assist African American high school adolescents in fostering the development racial, social, and personal identities yielding greater cognitive or learning outcomes. Ultimately, these findings may shape positive academic identities for African American high school adolescents.

There are no costs to you or payments to you or your child as a result of participation in this study. Additionally, there no direct benefits to your child by participating in this study.

Your child will be given a false name so that only he/she and I will know who they are. What is said to me will be kept confidential. Because his/her voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, his/her confidentiality for things he/she says on the tape cannot be guaranteed although I will keep the tapes in a secured locked cabinet/file, so that I will only have access to them. I will keep the data from the project in my home in a locked file cabinet. No information from the project study will be kept in my office.

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

You have the right to refuse to allow your child to participate or to withdraw him or her at any time, without penalty. If your child does withdraw, it will not affect you or your child in any way. If you or your child chooses to withdraw, you may request that any data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness allow your child to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing that you have read it or it has been read to you. You fully understand the contents of this document and consent to your child taking part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are the legal parent or guardian of the child who wishes to participate in this study described to you by Johnette McCain.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

UNCG IRB  
Approved Consent Form

Valid 6/7/10 to 6/6/11

## UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

*CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM*

Project Title: The Construction of Academic Identity Among African American High School Adolescents

Project Director: Johnette McCain

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

The purpose of this study is to examine how a group of African American high school adolescents construct their academic identity and what influences affect its construction. You are an African American early college academy junior or senior student. I would like you to work with me because I value what they you to say about your high school experiences and think what you say is very important.

You will be asked to answer 8 interview questions in a face-to-face interview with me and to answer some additional questions with some other early college academy juniors and seniors. The face-to-face interview should only take about an hour. The interview with the group should last about an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes.

I will use a tape recorder to help me remember what you say during the interview. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below. Additionally, you will choose your own pseudonym to be used in the study. This information will only be known to you and me.

While there are no direct benefits to you in this study, there are minimal risks to you. For example, if you decide that you have changed your mind on any you say to me, you have the right to ask me not to include it in my study. I will give you the opportunity to read all transcriptions of your interviews. In another case, you might disclose information that would potentially be embarrassing. Measures will be taken to assure the confidentiality of what you say to me. You may add or delete any information. Your decision to participate will not affect your education at school or your grades. If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated or if you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Eric Allen in the Office of Research Compliance at UNCG at (336) 256-1482. Questions, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Johnette McCain who may be contacted at (336) 451-5240 or [mccainj@gcsnc.com](mailto:mccainj@gcsnc.com).

You may begin to think about what influences have caused you to be most successful and embrace those influences to ensure continued success. You may also realize or reflect on any hindrances to their academic success as a result of this project and make adjustments to ensure continued success. In addition you may be able to offer advice to other early college academy

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juniors or seniors to help them become more successful.

In using your responses, we may be able to help educators and educational researchers help better foster the success of African American high school students. They may be better equipped to assist African American high school adolescents in fostering the development racial, social, and personal identities yielding greater cognitive or learning outcomes. Ultimately, these findings may shape positive academic identities for African American high school adolescents.

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

You will be given a false name so that no will know who you are. Only I will know your true identity. What is said to me will be kept confidential. I will keep the data from the project in my home in a locked file cabinet. No information from the project study will be kept in my office. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

I will let you know if there is any new information or changes made to the study.

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Johnette McCain.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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**APPENDIX D****IRB AUTHORIZED RENEWAL****IRB Notice**

IRB [irbcorre@uncg.edu]

**Sent:** Monday, May 23, 2011 10:52 AM**To:** jecooper@uncg.edu**Cc:** McCain, Johnette; cifarrio@uncg.edu; irbcorre@uncg.edu

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**To:** Jewell Cooper  
Teacher Ed/higher Ed  
317 Curry Building**From:** UNCG IRB

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Authorized signature on behalf of IRB**Approval Date:** 5/23/2011**Expiration Date of Approval:** 5/21/2012**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)**Submission Type:** Renewal**Expedited Category:** 8(c) Continuing Review - Data Analysis Only**Study #:** 10-0189**Study Title:** Constructing Academic Identity Among African American High School Adolescents

This submission has been approved by the IRB for the period indicated.

**Study Description:**

The purpose of this project is to examine how a group of African American adolescents construct their academic identity and what influences affect its construction.

**Submission Description:**

Renewal request, dated 5/17/11. Participant involvement complete, renewal requested for data analysis only.

**Regulatory and other findings:**

This research, which involves children, meets criteria at 45 CFR 46.404 (research involving no greater than minimal risk). Permission of one parent or guardian is sufficient.

**Investigator's Responsibilities**

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

Signed letters, along with stamped copies of consent forms and other recruitment materials will be scanned to you in a separate email. These consent forms must be used unless the IRB has given you approval to waive this requirement.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented (use the modification application available at <http://www.uncg.edu/orc/irb.htm>). Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB using the "Unanticipated Problem/Event" form at the same website.

CC: Johnette McCain, Chris Fariior, (ORED), Non-IRB Review Contact, (ORC), Non-IRB Review Contact