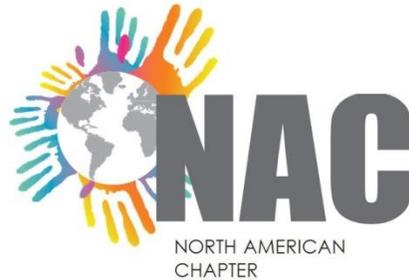


Identity, Social and Academic Influences: The Educational Experiences of African American Males

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Abstract

This research explored the educational experiences and perceptions of African American male secondary school students attending a diverse urban high school in the Northeast. Case study design was used and data were collected through focus groups, in-depth participant interviews, and observations of informal school environments. Analysis of the data suggested common themes related to identity, the social dimension and the academic dimension of school climate. The implications for practitioners are discussed.

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The nation's focus on educational achievement among differing racial and ethnic highlights the low scores of African American males. Nationally, the twelfth-grade reading scores of African American males are significantly lower than those for males and females across every other racial and ethnic group (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). The "educational experiences of African Americans impinge upon their ability to graduate from high school, manifesting in high rates of illiteracy and unemployment" (Palmer & Maramba, 2011, p. 434). Statistics suggest while many African American males graduate high school, they are exiting without skill sets that serve them in higher education or with career readiness (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2010). The positive correlations between education, income level, and quality of life compound these factors (Baum & Ma, 2007).

Without college or career readiness, some African American men's lives intersect with the criminal justice system. Thirty-two percent of all African American males were incarcerated for some time in their life compared to 17% for Latino American males, and 6% for Caucasian American males (Smith, 2009). Although there is an increasing trend toward college enrollment—66% for African American high school completers, compared to 70% for Caucasian American high school completers (NCES, 2012)—only 37% of the African American students who enter college graduate with their baccalaureate degrees (Slaughter, 2009).

These circumstances may result in a continuation of the poverty cycle. NCES (2012) reported the national poverty rate for African American households was more than triple that of Caucasian American households: 34% compared to 10%. In July 2013, the adjusted unemployment rate for African American males over age 20 was 12.5% compared to the rate of 6.3% for Caucasian American males in the same age group (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013).

For male teens ages 16-19 in April of 2013, the unemployment rates, separated by race were 44.7% for African American and 23.6% for Caucasian Americans (UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2013). In 2012, young African American males were imprisoned more than six times the rate of Caucasian American males (My Brother's Keeper Task Force, 2014). These four statistics regarding the educational status of African American males makes their experiences in schools salient for study.

Although extensive research has been performed about the achievement gap, which is the outperformance of African American males by Caucasian American males in average scores of academic performance tests with a statistically significant margin (NCES, 2012,) the persistent performance levels generate a need for further study. Moreover, much of the discussion on this topic has not included members of this group in a meaningful way and "such shortcomings, only further silence the voices of those on the margins who continually seek inclusion in schools and society" (Howard, 2008, p. 961). Consequently, this study sought the participation of African American male student voices to understand their perspectives of their educational experiences.

Review of the Literature

This section presents key themes in current literature as they relate to the study. The literature is organized by the burden of acting white, questioning acting white, identity, stereotype and stereotype threat, and school climate.

Burden of Acting White

This section addresses the "burden of acting white" as it relates to the themes and significance of this study. Following the Civil rights movement and Black Power movement of the 1950's and 1960's, social scientists in the late 1970's (Ogbu, 1978) began to search for insight into African American youths' perspectives as they related to school achievement.

Ogbu's anthropological work led to seminal research in the 1980's that involved 33 African American juniors at Capital High in Washington DC and led to the development of the theory of "oppositional culture" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 201) and "burden of acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177) as plausible explanations for the low levels of academic performance of African Americans. This work contradicted the previous research that posited genetic factors (Jensen, 1969) or cultural deprivation (Bloom, Davis, & Hess, 1965) as the causes of the low level of academic achievement for African Americans.

The influence of Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) publication led Tyson, Darity, and Castellano (2005, p. 58) to state, "Almost 20 years have passed since Fordham and Ogbu (1986) published the article... yet it remains among the most influential publications addressing the academic underachievement of Black students and the Black-White achievement gap." The initial work of Ogbu (1978) and his later work with Fordham (1986) asserted that many African American students feel that striving to achieve academically is a betrayal of their African American culture and thus, many do not pursue academic achievement.

The setting of the seminal research of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) was a public high school in a large urban center with a student body, mostly African American, with 50% receiving free or reduced price lunch. The work at this site supported the claim that a group of African American high school students (33) experienced a sense of belonging to and an identity associated with their African American culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). This sense of identifying as African American played an important role in their lived experiences of school and beyond. Fordham & Ogbu used the term "fictive kinship" (1986, p. 184) to describe the participants' sense of group belonging based on skin color. All participants perceived a brotherhood among African Americans people that placed the Caucasian American culture

outside it. The group belonging of these African American students was part of a cultural identity that was created in opposition to Caucasian American culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Ogbu's work explained African American's students' cultural identity was born because of "status problems" (2004, p. 12) where external forces worked to declare the group as a separate and distinct entity. Such forces in the United States began with the forced immigration of Africans as slaves, continued with inequality in education and the workforce, and remain active today through various acts and systems of exclusion and isolation.

Fordham & Ogbu's (1986) participants suggested that their family and community members hit a "job ceiling" and encounter other obstacles to upward mobility based upon their status as African Americans. These observations were related to a distrust and contempt of society by the students and their families that had been passed along generationally and reinforced by the participants' own experiences, particularly as the participants attended Caucasian American -controlled schools (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The participants perceived academic achievement and associated successful student behaviors with the behaviors of Caucasian American people (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). These behaviors included: "Speaking Standard English ... spending a lot of time in the library studying, working hard to get good grades, getting good grades, i.e., being known as a 'Brainiac'" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177).

This research suggested that when students opted to succeed in school, they were opting to "act white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 186). The researchers posited that African American students carry the burden of "acting white," (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p.186) the feeling of societal pressures to sacrifice their identity in order to display behaviors associated with the Caucasian American dominant culture, including academic achievement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

As a result, some African American participants in the Fordham & Ogbu (1986) study who achieved academic success developed specific strategies to handle this cultural conflict. These participants found ways of camouflaging their success in order to maintain group membership as African Americans. For the male participants experiencing academic achievement, this often meant joining sports teams that emphasized collaborative efforts. Some males formed alliances with bullies or developed comedic routines to help maintain bonds with their African American peers. Other low achieving participants were found to opt for ambivalence towards school, thus maintaining their cultural identity and increasing their chance of school failure (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Fordham & Ogbu (1986) asserted the cultural interpretations by the participants led them to possess an oppositional culture towards academic achievement as it was perceived by the participants as an aspect of Caucasian American culture. The participants' cultural interpretations left them burdened by a conflict that jeopardized their African American status with successful student behaviors and academic achievement, behaviors the participants perceived as "white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 187).

Questioning Acting White

This section addresses the theme of "questioning acting white" as the literature relates to the present study's themes and significance. As profound and insightful the work of Ogbu and Fordham (1986) was for its time, researchers have questioned the findings and expressed concern for its lack of empirical evidence and small number of participants. Since that time various researchers have posited other theories to explain the educational experiences of African American males, such as genetic inferiority (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994); environmental conditions (Noguera, 2003; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2004). Most salient among these studies

into the investigations of Ogbu and Fordham's hypothesis (Diamond, Lewis, & Gordon, 2007; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005) suggested that there is evidence leading to other explanations for the low academic achievement levels of African American participants.

The research of Diamond, Lewis, and Gordon (2007) contradicted Ogbu and Fordham's oppositional culture argument. Diamond, Lewis and Gordon (2007) found the desire to attend college was relatively equal for both African American and Caucasian American participants of all achievement levels. While the African American participants like those in Fordham and Ogbu's work expected that their race would negatively impact their life chances, these perceptions did not lead the African American to oppose educational aspirations.

Diamond's et al. (2007) findings did not support the claim that African American students opposed school success. Diamond et al. (2007) also found that only a small and equivalent number of high achieving African American and Caucasian American participants negotiated negative social sanctioning related to their academic success. Inter-racial negative peer pressure, where high achieving African American participants were considered "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 186) was not reported. Instead, only generalized teasing in small instances was reported by from high and low achieving participants of both races related to academic achievement without association to race (Diamond et al., 2007).

Participants in Diamond et al., 2007 reported indirect racial joking or comments from their Caucasian American peer group. The African American participants also reported they experienced this type of negative pressure and low expectations from some Caucasian American teachers. The implication of this unique experience of racism warrants attention and is discussed in literature related to both culturally responsive teaching and identity.

Finally, Diamond et al., 2007 reported low achieving African American participants had a tendency to hide their low achievement because of peer sanctioning for poor grades. These African American participants' peers valued academic success, and rather than risk the social cost, some participants employed a variety of techniques to save themselves from embarrassment. Diamond and his team interpreted these types of behaviors and attitudes as another contradiction to the oppositional culture concept of Fordham and Ogbu (1986).

Identity

Identity formation is related to the period of adolescence which is recognized as a period of self-exploration and the strengthening of a personal identity (Erikson, 1968). During this time, many African Americans navigate concepts of race and group memberships to find meaningful understanding of who they are and how the world sees them (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Noguera, 2008). "In some instances, African American males find themselves trying to establish and carry out who they are and what they stand for within their ecology, while fighting for acceptance and independence among peer groups and adults who often misunderstand them" (Matranec, 2011, p. 227). For African American males, adolescence can be particularly rife with struggles because the concept of race varies across environments. For most of these young men, schools become the primary place of socialization. Thus, to understand the African American male experience in school, it is imperative to understand how they experience their identity in this context.

The research of Henri Tajfel (1982) on intergroup relations has helped researchers understand the tendency of people to classify themselves and form a group identity. Tajfel's extensive work has helped define ethnic identity as, "That part of an individual's self-concept which derives from knowledge of membership of a social group together with the value and

emotional significance attached to that membership” (1982, p. 255). Individuals have a need to categorize people according to religious, racial, gender, age or other affiliations (Tajfel, 1985 as cited in Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The function of this classification is to cognitively segment and order an individual’s social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). An individual has the tendency to classify others in his environment and attach the expected characteristics of a category. The classification also functions to place and define the individual within his social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). So, as African American males are placed by themselves and by others into the racial classification of African American, the classification attaches to them characteristics which will impact their identities and experiences of school.

The pioneering research of William Cross (1971, 1978) and his Nigresence model helped explain the complex process of ethnic identification formation. Others (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998) have provided different models that also help explain identity formation for African Americans. Models of ethnic identity formation have been used to investigate how ethnic identity of African Americans impacts their educational experiences, attitudes, and academic achievement (Cokley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2012; Spencer, Noll, Stolzhus, & Harpalani, 2001; Tatum, 2004 Wakefield & Hudley, 2005).

Stereotype

Stereotypes are judgments of individuals based on their membership in a particular racial or social group (Cameron, Alvarez, Ruble, & Fuligni, 2001). Given research that made salient African American males’ meaning of racial identity and group belonging as factors that shape their values of school behaviors and achievement, researchers have sought to better understand the effects of stereotypes on academic experiences and achievement. Howard (2008) sought to

understand the African American male experience in school and investigate the role, if any, stereotypes played in academic achievement. Results suggested that participants were very conscious of the negative racial stereotypes about African American men (Howard, 2008). The participants perceived their race affected their peers and teachers' perceptions of them. As a result, many participants felt they were often working against negative perceptions. The participants perceived their teacher's expectations were justified because many African American males were performing poorly in school, yet the participants wanted to be recognized as individuals (Howard, 2008).

Howard (2008) reported many participants were challenged in experiencing their individuality because of their African American race. Because they were African American, the participants felt viewed by the school at large as members of a group and "attributed much of the academic success to the desire to challenge negative stereotypes for Black males" (Howard, 2008, p. 969)

Howard (2008) suggested that there are micro-aggressions in school based on racial identity, including low quality instruction that puts some students at a disadvantage for high stakes exams and for college readiness. Howard (2008) suggested many African American males' perception of lost individuality because of their racial identification was salient to understanding the educational experiences of these young men.

Steele and Aronson's (1995) study on stereotype threat has been helpful in deepening the understanding of African American educational experiences given the research on African American identity and its understanding of the impact of racial group belonging on academic achievement. Additionally, Gayles (2006) investigated the role stereotype threat played over an extended period of time on African American high school students' educational experiences.

Whereas, the research of Steele & Aronson (1995) on stereotype threat was based on test scores, Gayles (2006) investigated the long term effects of stereotype threat on the academic efforts of five high achieving African American males in their senior year of high school. Gayles (2006) also explored the effect of stereotype threat differently in that this research was not focused not on immediate test performance, but rather the lasting effect on African American students' educational experiences.

School Climate

National Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) recognized healthy school climates decrease at risk behaviors such as tobacco use, alcohol abuse, violence, and gang involvement. Research (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009) indicated healthy school climates are positively correlated with academic achievement. The benefits of a positive school climate are numerous and include students' preparation for active citizenry in democratic societies, students and staff feeling respected and connected to each other with a common purpose, as well as many other factors related to higher academic achievement (The National School Climate Research Center, 2012, p. 4). Researchers (Kreft, 1993; Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010) have analyzed and measured various components of school climate to learn what can be done to improve the educational outcomes for all students, but especially African Americans and other minority groups.

Schools that provide a climate that promotes and values all of its students are best situated to have students who engage in academic and extracurricular activities that serve their intellectual and social-emotional development. The National School Climate Research Center (2012) recognized a "Safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school climate tends to foster greater attachment belonging to school, as well as, provide the optimal foundation for social,

emotional and academic learning” (p. 2). Tucker, Dixon, and Griddine (2010) investigated a critical component of school climate, students’ experiences of belonging. The participants reported that it was easier to get know administrators and school counselors because the school had fewer students than their previous schools. The participants also perceived less negative peer pressure at this school than at their previous schools. The smaller class sizes promoted positive influences among the participants and their peers.

An additional finding reported by Tucker et al. (2010) suggested the participants perceived school personnel in their current school held high expectations for the participants’ academic success. Additionally most participants had key adults in their lives who expected the participants to achieve success in high school. Together, the expectations of school personnel and family members created an environment where the participants experienced pressure to do well in school (Tucker et al., 2010). Participants who did not report having academic support from home, instead reported they held high expectations of themselves that helped them achieve academic success. The high expectations were related to the participants’ beliefs that an education was critical to live a life that was not subjected to poverty. These participants compared their prior experiences in other schools with many students who were distracted by chaotic home or social lives. At the participants’ current school, they were positively influenced by the many students who were focused on future goals. The positive peer relationships at their current school were part of the participants’ experiences of mattering to others (Tucker et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Relevant literature provided different paradigms of the African American male student experience: (a) African American students’ interpretations of culture may or may not have led

them to hold an oppositional culture that placed academic achievement in opposition to their status as African Americans (Diamond et al., 2007; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Tyson et al., 2005), (b) African American students' identity and awareness of negative stereotyped images for African Americans played a role in their educational experiences and achievement (Cokley et al., 2012; Gayles, 2006; Howard, 2008; Spencer et al., 2001; Steel & Aronson 1995), (c) Academic success is related to school climate (Alliman-Brissett et al., 2004; Milner, 2011; Tucker et al., 2010; Uwah et al., 2008).

Method

The purpose of this research was to explore the educational experiences and perceptions of African American males in a diverse urban high school. The methodology is organized into the following sections: setting, participants, research design, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, coding, and trustworthiness. The following research questions guided the inquiry.

1. How do African American male secondary school students perceive how academic achievement has impacted their attitudes towards school?
2. How do African American male secondary school students perceive the contributing factors leading to academic achievement?

Setting

The research study was conducted within a large (1,529 students) urban high school in the U.S. northeast serving grades 9 through 12. The district served its economically and racially diverse students through 12 elementary schools, four middle schools, one small alternative high school, and two large comprehensive high schools. Demographics of the student body of Normal High School (a pseudonym) indicated: 37% qualified for free or reduced price lunch; 10% special education students; 6.4% not fluent in English; 44.4% were Caucasian American;

30.7% were Hispanic; 20.4% African American; Asian American 3.8%; 0.5% two or more races; 0.1% American Indian (CSDE, 2013). Institutional Review Board protocols were observed.

Participants

A purposive sampling method was employed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) of junior and senior boys at the setting with varying academic experiences. The academic transcripts were accessed to identify and verify the participants' GPA and 10 participants were identified into three GPA groups—low, medium and high—as sub-cases of the study. The range of GPA characteristic of the participants ensured a rich sample that offered a comprehensive range of student experiences and perspectives related to the phenomenon under study. Pseudonyms are used for reporting.

Table 1: *Description of Participants*

Participant	Focus group	GPA	Grade	Adults at home	Educational level
Darwood (DH)	Low	1.28	11	Two parent	Mom -2 yr. College
Jah (JA)	Low	1.95	11	Divorced	Mom- Master's Dad- Bachelor's
River (OW)	Low	0.45	12	Single mother	Mom- Some College
Adam (AD)	Medium	2.36	11	Two parent	Mom-High

					School
					Dad- High
					School
Izzy (ID)	Medium	2.60	12	Single mother	Mom- Some College
Caz (JC)	Medium	2.34	12	Single mother	Some College
Easter (EB)	High	4.10	12	Two parent	Mom-College Dad- College
Max (MB)	High	3.70	12	Single mother	Mom-College
Red (CJ)	High	3.30	12	Two parent	Mom- Master's Dad- High School
Xavier (JH)	High	3.30	12	Single mother	Some College

Research Design

Exploratory case study case design was selected to understand the participants' perceptions and experiences of Normal High School (Yin, 1994), with the case bound by self-identified African American, male, junior or senior-level students at the setting and with the sub-cases bound by GPA (see Table 1). The ideological framework applied to this research was based on sociocultural theory first advanced by Lev Vygotsky. Sociocultural theory posits children learn and develop through interactions with individuals, society, objects and culture (Vygotsky, 1978). In a Vygotskian perspective, learning cannot be separated from the social

aspects of school. Therefore, interplay between the participants and their school environment was recognized as a significant component of their experiences. The research included the conditions of the school environment as relevant to the phenomena under study. Trustworthiness was sought through a diverse sample of participants in three levels of achievement: low, medium, and high. Case study design allowed for the exploration of differences within and between cases which provided an effective way to answer the research questions (Yin, 1994).

Instrumentation

Researcher created instrumentation protocol, including the *Participant Demographic Form*, was used to collect information pertaining to the student's age, grade level, extracurricular interests, and make-up of the student's household and the educational levels of its members. In addition, *The Focus Group Protocol* was used to pose open-ended questions to the participants in each focus group that was formed according to academic achievement levels (low: < 2.0, medium: 2.0 to 2.9, high: 3.0 or >). The *Observation Record Form* was used to record observations about the participants' dress, relations, and behaviors in unstructured areas of the school, such as the cafeteria or lobby. *The Student Interview Protocol* was used for the in-depth student interviews and focused around the following general themes: role models outside of school, most influential adults in the school setting, influence of peers on achievement, postsecondary goals, and personal struggles for academic success. There were 20 questions in total and the interviews lasted approximately one hour. In the academic year prior to this study, these instruments were field-tested in a previous study and in informal discussions with tenth and twelfth-grade African American males. Feedback from the field study and discussions was used to refine the instruments to their present form.

Data Collection

All focus groups, interviews, and follow-up interviews were recorded and transcribed. To begin the data collection, the researcher conducted three focus groups (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) that were formed according to GPA as determined by school transcript: (low: < 2.0, medium: 2.0 to 2.9, high: 3.0 or >). *The Focus Group Protocol* was used to pose open-ended questions related to the phenomenon under study. There were two participants in the high achieving focus group, two participants in the medium achieving focus group, and two low achieving participants and one medium participant in the low achieving focus group.

Following the focus groups, 11 interviews, and six follow up interviews over a five-month period were conducted (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The *Student Interview Protocol* provided a semi-structured framework of open-ended questions for participant interviews intended to collect the informant's perspective on many factors related to educational experiences and aspirations. Based upon participant interests and responses, the interview process was fluid and evolved organically based upon participant responses. Follow-up interviews allowed for member-checking and emergent and ongoing restructuring of the data collection and analysis

Additionally, observations of the participants in non-formal school environments were conducted in areas such as the library, school lobby, and cafeteria multiple times to learn of their experiences related to their school environment and peers. This triangulation of data collection (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to produce different views or vantage points when analyzing the data.

Data Analysis

A constant comparative procedure was used in an inductive analysis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Participants' responses, information, and observation data were jointly recorded,

interpreted, and coded on an ongoing basis to understanding emerging meaning, concepts, and categories, which further informed ongoing data collection.

All coding of the data was done manually. Inductive analysis began with the initial marking of each word or phrase deemed relevant to the phenomenon under study. The marked words and phrases were interpreted for meaning. Analysis of differences and similarities and unique phenomena were made in each case and across cases using all sources of data. The next phase of coding involved aggregating data under codes related to similar instances (Stake, 1995). During this phase, the meanings were aggregated into themes that reflected the participants' voices and experiences.

The last phase of coding involved analysis of the data to find the essence of the participants' experiences and perceptions. Relationships and issues were probed resulting in aggregated categorical data. Category codes were reconsidered, some collapsed, and final themes were developed.

Trustworthiness of the Study

This section addresses measures taken to address various aspects of trustworthiness. To achieve credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a researcher journal was consistently used, noting possible biases as part of the data collection and analysis which informed further data collection and analysis, in a reciprocal way. Member checking was performed to ensure the participants' voices were accurately portrayed. Field notes collected from the observations and were cross referenced with responses from the focus group participants and participant interviews and provided a triangulation of data sources. An independent auditor examined the audit trail, consisting of samples of student information and responses, field notes, instruments,

transcriptions, coding procedures and decisions. Rich description in the results and alternative theory development further enhanced trustworthiness.

Results

Three themes emerged from the research related to identity, the social dimension of school climate and the academic dimension of school climate. Each theme is described in the following section.

Identity

Theme one related to the participants' identity as African Americans. The theme developed from the participants' perceptions of their own identity within the school community. This theme arose from the way participants' perceived their identity as a reflection of the family who raised them and not within society's singular construct of race based on skin color. Some participants who had multiracial parents and two Haitian American participants who had self-identified as African American in the demographics and who experienced prejudice from African American peers, recognized society often did not differentiate the Haitian culture from Black or African American identity. The participants also perceived their identity as African Americans in contrast to negative stereotypes that associated low academic ability and performance with African Americans. In this context, high achieving participants experienced racial comments that challenged their identity as African Americans because of their high academic achievement. Despite these obstacles, high achieving participants humbly maintained visions of themselves as individuals striving to be their best selves.

Adam and Caz, perceived the color of their skin often led many people to consider them by race, African American or Black. Although participants understood the terms, "African American" and "Black" encompass several ethnic groups, participants also noted that society often did not make a differentiation and thus lacked a clear connection to the identity of Black or

African American people, supporting the notion that ethnic identity is a measure of how one identifies with the practices of one's ethnic group (Nasir et al., 2009). Adam recognized his lack of a strong identification with the African American or Black Identity when he said, "I am Haitian-American but there is no box for that." When Darwood spoke about his parents' mixed races and his own light skin, a focus group member commented, "To society, you just a shade of Black." This comment illustrated how some participants negotiated their racial identity with those values they perceived society had.

Many of these participants believed racial identity was not a singular concept. The participants self-reported being African American to the researcher during the recruitment phase, but when probed in focus groups and interviews, provided elaboration. For example, Easter explained his identity as being, "International" because his mother is Panamanian and his father is Jamaican. Darwood said, "I'm African American but my mom is Spanish and my dad is Black and White." Two other participants, who had a strong sense of being Haitian American, considered themselves Black or African American because they saw that race was a construct of society. One of them, Caz summarized that despite their unique traits, their dark skin color meant, "We get treated like one [an African American person]." These participants marked African American in boxes on forms but felt the indication was an inadequate and incomplete descriptor of them.

The participants perceived their racial identity did not fully explain their educational experiences of high school. Izzy noted the term Caucasian American was a large concept that obscured unique traits. Izzy explained "Most of the kids in there are White, but they could be Russian, Canadian, British, and whatever." Izzy's perspective was as an individual with a set of unique characteristics, although his dark skin color was a trait he shared with others. The

participants believed a better explanation for the way they conducted themselves in high school was their values and attitudes they developed from the family members who raised them. Adam summarized the participants' views. "It's race in school? No. It's just being the way you are brought up, not the color of your skin." Adam, like the others believed the school did not differentiate for a student's race, and one's racial identity had no impact on a student's performance.

In summary, data suggested a consensus among high, medium, and low achieving participants. They did not perceive themselves as simply, Black or African American males. Supporting research suggests that racial identity is a highly individualized process and there is tremendous variability within any given ethnic group in terms of strength and importance of ethnic identification (Phinney, 1996). For some, multiracial parents and for many, a sense of individuality were two factors that limited a strong identity or sense of belonging to one particular race although participants self-identified as Black or African American.

Social Dimension of School Climate

Theme two related to the participants' experiences and perceptions of their relationships with peers and school personnel as aspects of the social dimension of school climate (Loukas, 2007). The participants' perceived the student body to be friendly, inclusive, and accepting of racial diversity. However, the participants perceived that interactions with some peers and some teachers sometimes reinforced negative racial stereotypes and adversely affected the participant's relation to the school. The social experiences of informal areas of the school, such as the lunchroom, where patterning along racial lines was visible in observations, also heightened the participants' race consciousness. This notion— of equality not unity—demonstrated aspects of the social dimension theme as it relates to school climate, supporting Loukas' (2007) contention

that “[school climate] is a multidimensional construct that includes physical, social, and academic dimensions” (p. 1) and that “The social dimension is built around interpersonal relationships between and among students, teachers, and staff; and involves equitable and fair treatment of students by school personnel and a sense of competition and comparison between students” (p. 1).

The participants experienced friendships that went across racial lines and positively affected their connection and attitude towards school. Additionally, the participants experienced a heightened sense of racial consciousness when they felt racial patterns in unstructured time and places within the school context. Race was not perceived as a barrier in relating to peers or teachers; however some teachers were perceived to demonstrate a soft racism. Participants suggested that some teachers held low expectations for African Americans and hyper-enforced school rules at times for African Americans. Overall, participants experienced comfort in and perceived belonging to the school community, although to some degree the participants perceived a negative association with their race.

The participants experienced Normal High School’s social dimension as a complex web of interpersonal and group relationships. This web managed old friendships, new friendships, within classroom relationships, and racial consciousness. Almost all of the participants reported having a long history of friendships with peers that were not limited by race. As Red said, “I had the same friends since probably the sixth grade up to now.” When asked about his friends, Red replied, “They are ...just a mix. I have Hispanic; I have Asian friends, Caucasian, and Black.” All participants had friendships that crossed racial and ethnic lines. Racial differences were not perceived as important by the participants. The researcher needed to use further probing questions in follow-up interviews to obtain racial descriptors of people participants mentioned.

The participants' friendships reflected the diversity of the student body. Max said it simply. "I have friends. Like every race!" Even Caz who talked about his identity as a Haitian American, described his best friend, a Caucasian American person. "He's not Black or Haitian. It's like being able to be yourself ... He is respectful and open minded." He, like other participants, found relationships that provided them with a sense of esteem and belonging that were not based on race.

Most participants reported equanimity in the building. Izzy said, "I feel just that normal teenage kid." Within the regular school day, the participants navigated the school climate by seeing themselves as an individual and representative of their upbringing, not as a member of a racial group. As Easter said, "When I come to school, I am not saying I forget that I'm Black when I get here... I'm just Easter. I have friends, we have fun. I guess when you walk through the doors, race is not an issue to anyone, and it's just you. A person."

Data suggested participants perceived a sense of belonging and maintained friendships that went across racial lines while at Normal High School. The low, medium, and high achieving participants were able to connect to peers from a variety of races and ethnicities to form meaningful friendships with common interests. Race was not expressed as a barrier in relating to peers. Participants reported that the large racially and economically diverse student body of Normal High School provided friendships that positively affected the participants' attitude towards their school experiences. The social dimension of the school climate was positively affected by these established friendships that integrated across race.

The participants viewed teachers and school personnel to be mostly fair and offered equal treatment to all students, except for some who believed teachers may have favored certain types

of students, but that race was not associated with that favoritism. However, in a few instances, a participant perceived disparate teacher attitudes based on race.

Xavier explained that racial prejudice could be seen when “Teachers sometimes don’t expect much from you. They seem like they don’t care or expect you to learn and succeed. I think they have low expectations most of the times.” Xavier believed that some teachers anticipated low levels of work from African American students or invested little into their learning. He was disappointed by this attitude because he aspired to go to college to develop into a professional musician. “My Mom and I expect a lot [from school].” Xavier perceived some teachers held low expectations for him and he perceived these as obstacles to his academic success.

A low achieving participant, River, said, “Some teachers are prejudiced sometimes. A couple of teachers are prejudiced, I think [*sic*].” He was unable to be more specific about his classroom teachers but provided an example from a different school setting. “Say if a couple of Black kids walking down the hallway, security, teachers will stop ‘em and ask for a pass, if a couple of White kids, they wouldn’t stop ‘em [*sic*].”

In summary, all low, medium, and high achieving participants perceived that school personnel were mostly fair and treated all students equally to other students. However, some participants also perceived soft racism, or different attitudes in their teachers, including low expectations and hyper sensitivity to school rules because of the participants’ race. Analysis of the data suggested that consensus emerged among the participants’ perceptions of the social dimension of the school climate at Normal High School. The theme related to the social dimension of the school climate emerged from related issues of the participants experiencing comfort in the presence of other African Americans, a sense of equality and acceptance among

diverse friends, a heightened sense of race consciousness in the unstructured contexts of the school, and interactions with school personnel. A sense of belonging or connection to school is an important factor contributing directly to academic success (Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014). Although the participants perceived a negative aspect of the social dimension with their perception of soft racism by some school personnel, the social dimension was a mostly positive experience for the participants and suggests the social dimension had a positive effect on the academic achievement for the participants.

The social dimension was perceived as an environment that afforded the participants with meaningful relationships with peers and mostly fair treatment by school personnel. The participants' social experiences of Normal high school provided a sense of belonging and equality among a large heterogeneous student body. The social climate of Normal High School had a positive impact on the participants' attitude towards school.

Academic Dimension of School Climate

Theme three revealed the participants' experiences and perceptions of peer influences on academic achievement. There was consensus in participants' perception of peer influences as they related to academic achievement among medium and high achieving participants who perceived their friendships were supportive of academic achievement and did not exhibit pressure towards negative school behaviors such as skipping class or not doing homework. Low achieving participants suggested that their friendships had no effect on the participants' grades and did not exert pressure towards negative school behaviors. However, low achieving participants experienced embarrassment related to failing or low grades when in context with peers.

Analysis of the data revealed that high achieving participants' peer influences were mostly positive and valued school achievement, reinforcing research (Diamond, et al., 2007) which found that both high achieving Caucasian American and African American students experienced a degree of negative peer sanctions for academic striving and achievement. When seen as overly studious, or academically skilled, the high achieving participants in this study received negative attention from their peers in racial connotations as "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 4). However, further analysis of the data revealed instances related to high achieving participants perceiving positive peer influence toward academic striving and achievement. These instances characterized high achieving participants' peer relationships as supportive of academic achievement. A positive academic dimension of the school climate can have a profound impact on students' motivation, achievement, behavior, and emotional states (Loukas, 2007, p. 2). The effects of this positive academic dimension may be related to the value placed on achievement by the participants' peer relationships at Normal High School. The support experienced by the high achieving participants' peer relationships may have countered negative peer sanctions related to the "burden of acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177).

A collective view of the high achieving participants was that their peers' influences were mostly supportive and encouraging of academic success. These participants reported a predominance of friends that were bound for college. Red described his friends. "All my friends are good students ...they're all accepted into college." Red, like the other students in this group esteemed their friend's success in the classroom.

The high achieving participants' friendships were characterized by support for purposeful academic behaviors and generally a good will towards each other in the academic arena. Xavier expressed it directly. "We encourage each other. We'll study together or help each other out

with questions and stuff. We all want to do well.” Some of the high achieving participants also articulated their independence in regards to peer pressure as found in Xavier’s comment that “I can make my own decision without pressure.” The participants noted positive behavior of their friends but downplayed it with a reiteration of their own agency in school. Additionally, none of these students reported any peer pressure for negative student behaviors.

However, high achieving students did notice some backlash for their academic performance. Instances in the data regarding the participants’ identity included an aspect related to the idea of “acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) Fordham & Ogbu (1986, p. 177) have used the term “burden of acting White” to describe how some African American students were conflicted with adopting successful student behaviors that they associated with behaviors of White people. Xavier spoke about this difficulty for high achieving students:

I mean it’s kind of weird. A lot of people call me ‘The Whitest Black guy they know’ because of the way I act, which in of itself still reinforces the stereotype that Black people are kind of the opposite of the way I am - because I am so polite and talk so well and write well and all of that.

Easter considered some of his peers’ connection of academic achievement to White culture offensive to both Caucasian American and African American people. He continued:

They say White, not that it’s White, but why would automatically you assume that’s White [referring to good grades and honors classes]? Why can’t it just be the right thing? So, I do feel like that’s offensive to Caucasian people. So say a Black person is acting White, what is so bad about White people or Caucasian people? I don’t know.

Medium achieving participants reported having friendships with peers who sought a college education. Izzy spoke about this factor. “Basically the kids who want to succeed in

life...and we talk about going to college.” Izzy found friends who were actively seeking success after high school and sought a college education. Medium achieving participants reported their friends demonstrated appropriate student behaviors and aspired to academic success and encouraged academic achievement. Caz discussed one such friend. “He wants to get things done as early as possible ... So that made me want to do the same thing. We actually have little competitions, like who can have a better grade in this class.” Caz’s friendship was characterized by encouragement and promoted scholastic achievement. Caz and his friend are planning to attend college after high school.

Low achieving participants reported their peers had little to no influence on their academic performance. When the topic of friendships was discussed in an interview with River, he described his friends as, “Average students, couple low [level of achievement], couple higher [level of achievement].” His friendships were with peers across the range of achievement levels, which was common for the students in this group. Darwood described his friends as, “All different types of ethnicities. They get to class on time, they get good grades.” Darwood like the other low achieving participants interacted with peers who were racially diverse and had a range of achievement levels.

The low achieving participants reported their grades were not influenced by friends. The low achieving participants experienced friendships that were mostly free from pressure to skip class or other inappropriate behaviors. They denied or minimized any influence from friendships related to academic achievement. In interviews, the topic of how friends can have influence on teenagers to do negative or positive acts was explored. River said he had not experienced peer pressure for neither negative nor positive actions, “No. Probably not, no type of pressure.” Jah was the only one to concede to some small negative peer pressure. He said, “A little bit of peer

pressure to skip class, or do something you're not supposed to." These participants said they were unaffected by peer influence for positive student achievement but hinted at some negative sanctioning for low grades such as snickering or critical comments received because of poor test scores or other grades.

However, deeper analysis of the data revealed low achieving participants valued their peer's esteem. Darwood said, "I feel embarrassed when my report card comes." He expressed the low value his peers placed on poor grades, and was embarrassed by his place in this low ranking. Because he and the other low achieving participants have friends with a range of achievement levels, they felt in certain instances inadequate in regards to their report cards. The low achieving participants perceived their friendships to have little if any positive or negative influence on their academic performances, but they suggested negative attachment to poor performance in school among the participants' peer group.

Low achieving participants reported experiencing friendships that went across racial lines and achievement levels. These friendships offered little influence or pressure on the participants towards academic success or to engage in negative behaviors detrimental to academic success. However, the peer relationships exhibited negative sanctioning of failing and poor grades.

Analysis of the data suggested themes in three areas: identity, social dimension of school climate, and academic dimension of school climate. The implications of these themes for practitioners at high schools are discussed in the next section.

Implications for Practice

The participants' perceptions of identity emphasized how the high school years can be particularly turbulent for all adolescents, but especially for African American males, as their identity was connected to negative stereotyped images at times. The participants' experiences

and perceptions of their identity as individuals and as African Americans suggested that practitioners might help African American males develop a healthy and strong self-image. Schools could provide formal opportunities such as an elective class or coursework that provides healthy and safe ways for teens to reflect on and understand their self-identity. An addition of these experiences to high school curriculum offerings would be especially helpful to African American males who are challenged to navigate their racial identity as they grow towards self-actualized adults.

To address the “burden of acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1985, p. 177) phenomenon, practitioners might devise school programs that promote an emphasis on education related to successful and positive images for African Americans. Research on racial identity (Nasir et al., 2009) found some African American males had difficulty developing identities that incorporated academic competence and value. School programs that promote positive images relating education to career success for African Americans may decrease the association of academic achievement as the domain of Caucasian culture and renew the strength of education in the African American culture. Other research focused on the impact racial identity had on academic achievement. Cokley and his team (2012) found that the strongest positive predictor of achievement for African Americans males was their self-concept while the importance of race was a significant negative predictor of achievement. This research (Cokely et al., 2012; Nasir et al., 2009) and the present study’s theme on identity suggest that schools might consider developing programs to help African Americans males examine their self-concept and the role race plays in their identity as an effort to improve the educational experiences of African American males.

Practitioners could benefit from strategies offered by “culturally relevant teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17) to adjust pedagogy specifically for low achieving African American males. A recognized expert, Gloria Ladson Billings used the term “culturally relevant teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17) to describe pedagogy that successfully empowered African American students to grow academically, socially, emotionally, and politically. The experiences of low achieving participants in the academic dimension of the school climate suggested a dire need for practitioners to glean from the research and practices of “culturally relevant teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17).

The social force of peer influences to further the academic achievement levels of all African American males, but especially those who are academically low achieving is a clear outcome of this study. Incorporating the social fabric of the students’ lives and strengthening its positive nature into freshman transition programs would likely increase the sense of feeling that they matter to others and creating support networks for students, which have been found as contributing to academic achievement (Tucker et al., 2010). Future research might address why low achieving African American students failed to perceive positive influences from peers. Considering research on identity configurations for African American males and the lack of explicitly positive peer influences for low achieving African American students would likely lead to interventions that would improve academic achievement levels for all African American males.

If schools can find avenues to facilitate student relationships with adults who can provide encouragement and guidance towards professional goals, then students who struggle to connect with and find value for academic achievement will likely develop a different perspective of academic achievement. Clarity about future goals and the motivation to attain them rarely comes

from a student by himself (Steinberg, 1996). Students with clear goals cited an adult, a teacher, counselor, parent, or relative, as the source of guidance related to future aspirations (Noguera, 2008). Although parents are often a source for helping adolescents develop future goals, teachers and mentors can also help. When families are becoming increasingly stressed, practitioners should consider implementing mentoring programs that can help students grow a specific vision of their future self, which will likely lead to an improved relationship with school. One such program that has been emerging since 1970 is the National Black MBA Leaders of Tomorrow mentoring program. This program's primary purpose is to create relationships that foster economic and intellectual wealth in African American communities. Because the program matches African American business leaders with African American adolescents, it is appropriate for the mentoring needs of African American males. African American male students would likely benefit from research that would help them identify the type of mentoring that best meet their needs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the voices of African American males attending a diverse urban high school in the northeast. Data were collected through focus groups, participant interviews, and observations about the participants' educational experiences and perceptions of school. Analysis of the data suggested themes related identity, social and academic influences. The significance of the themes and their implications for practitioners were offered.

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