

Counter-Narratives of African American Academic Persistence:  
Identity Maps and Funds of Knowledge

by

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## ABSTRACT

Over 150 years since the abolition of slavery, African Americans still lack equal access to education and other quality of life markers. However, a slow increase in African American students pursuing and obtaining higher education demonstrates the progress of African American academic success. Although still not at an equitable level, this progress, and the voices of success are often muted by the majoritarian narrative of African American student failure. This dissertation focuses on African American student success and examines the specific socio-cultural characteristics and processes that shape the ways in which African American students develop their own counter-narratives to persist and gain access to higher education. This study utilizes narrative inquiry in the form of interviews, artifacts collection and student-drawn identity maps to understand the factors that influence the development of counter-narratives. The primary research questions included: What narratives did African American students tell themselves to help them persist in school, attain a high school diploma and pursue higher education? How did they develop their narratives? How did their narratives influence their educational experiences? Five African American students who attended an elite public university in the southwest United States participated in four to five interviews ranging from six to ten hours in total. Through the analysis of their stories, the importance of culture and context were clear. Specifically their social support systems including their parents, siblings, teachers and mentors, significantly influenced their identity development and human agency. The findings also point to a critical path forward: if society commits to supporting African American student success, then shine a light on stories of persistence and potential rather than shortcomings and failures.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Giving African American Student Achievement a Voice

*“Me being Black doesn't make me less than you, like no matter how much society wants you to think that, like it doesn't. But, yeah, so, like that's the anger side and the hoodlum.” - Jerome*

### Significance

#### Why African American Student Narratives?

Despite the abolition of slavery in 1865, racism and inequalities are ever-present in the United States, 150 years later. Although periods of change such as the abolition of slavery and reconstruction after the civil war, *Brown v. Board of Education* in the 1950s, and the civil rights movement of the 1960s created significant strides in equitable opportunities for African American<sup>1</sup> people, racism and severe inequity in educational opportunities still remain. Despite attempts to improve public schooling in the United States, African American students continue to dropout at a much higher rate. Only 69% of African American students compared to 86% of White students earned a high school diploma in 2011, and as of 2010, a dismal 17.7% of African American people held a

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, the terms African American and Black will both be used to describe an ethnic group of people whose ancestors were forced through slavery to immigrate to the U.S. The term African American will be favored over Black because I agree with some researchers (Ghee, 1990; Anglin & Whaley, 2006; Larkey & Hecht, 1995) who argue the use of African American “is indicative of a positive sense of self and captures a more comprehensive understanding of cultural heritage and ancestry” (Anglin & Whaley, 2006; p.457). However, there are times Black will be used because many people, researchers and even the study participants use the term Black. Further, “the conception of a Black sense of self is interdependent and influenced by group socialization processes and experiences” (Allen, 2001; Anglin & Whaley, 2006, p. 458). Although the term Black is more generic and often includes African people who chose to immigrate to the U.S. in recent years, both terms describe people of African descent, whether self-selected or self- imposed.

bachelor's degree compared to 29.3% of White people (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). The data are clear; educational attainment is not distributed equally among African American and White students. The statistics demonstrate that too few African American students gain access to college and earn bachelor degrees. However, despite the significant social barriers and societal limitations they encounter because of institutional racism, some African American students are able to traverse the rocky educational landscape, graduate high school, and persist to higher education.

Although the percentage of African American students who do manage to graduate from college is still relatively small, understanding how students transcend the significant societal and institutional barriers due discrimination implicit in the American education system to graduate high school and enter higher education is the focus of my research. It is important to understand how African American students experienced schooling and what factors influenced their ability to gain access to higher education. African American students' stories, or counter-narratives, provide time and place-specific, in-depth qualitative research and a richness of data to improve educational researchers' understanding of the African American student experience. Counter-narratives are "stories/narratives that splinter widely accepted truths about people, cultures, and institutions as well as the value of those institutions and the knowledge produced by and within those cultural institutions" and challenge the "modernist grand narratives that position the West at the pinnacle of development and civilization, casting Western ideals and knowledge as irrefutable representations of human knowledge and experience." (Mutua, 2008, p. 132). Since time and place play a major role in the life

experiences of students, narrative inquiry can fill in the details of more generalizable quantitative data regarding African American student persistence and attainment.

Firsthand narratives about race, racism and how racial oppression affects African American students in school and society are useful because they value the stories that are often overlooked and illuminates their lived experiences (Leonardo, 2013). Further, when African American students are empowered to share their stories, according to Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) recounting of Delgado's stance on the sharing of stories, that stories "provide members of outgroups a vehicle for psychic self-preservation; the exchange of stories from teller to listener can help overcome ethnocentrism and conviction of viewing the world in one way" (p. 57). These student counter-narratives can provide the reader divergent points of view or new ways of viewing the world, while empowering the teller. Further, "stories by people of color can catalyze the necessary cognitive conflict to jar dysconscious racism[...] without authentic voices of people of color[...] it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities" (p. 58). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained that when people of color share their stories, the reader may be forced to see the covert racism and learn about their experiences and communities, which would not be uncovered without the "authentic voices of people of color" (p. 58). Leonardo (2013) mimics their sentiment that readers of counter-narratives should be outraged and counter stories should "spur people to act, to strike an emotional cord" (p. 605). Within educational research, there is a continued need for counter-narratives that describe African American students who achieve academic persistence and attainment that are time and place specific, not only for empowerment,

but also to expose continued racism and to find ways to improve the educational pipeline for minoritized students.

### **Importance of Study**

Although a substantial amount of educational research focuses on the underachievement of African American students (Demo & Parker, 1987; Herring, 1989; Steele, 1997; Ramist et al., 1994), studies that focus on the persistence and attainment that highlight the voices and counter-narratives of African American student success are less available. As O'Connor (1999) confirmed, "much of the educational research on low income and minority youth, are overwhelmingly preoccupied with explaining the academic failure of these marginalized populations...Insufficient attention has been given to students...who accommodate to the norms and expectations of school and experience academic success despite risk" (p. 597). The importance of my research study is the place, time and context-specific examination of African American college students who have managed to traverse the difficult K-12 educational pipeline to enter a high caliber research university. Learning from their counter-narratives, researching the factors that helped them to persist to higher education is an extremely valuable way to understand African American academic achievement.

Harper (2012) confirms the importance of studying African American students who have succeeded, as defined by college graduation. Although Harper is specifically interested in African American male students, his comments are equally relevant for African American female college student achievement. Harper's statement mirrors O'Connor's:

[...T]hose who are interested in African American male student success have much to learn from Black men who have actually been successful. To increase their educational attainment, the popular one-sided emphasis on failure and low performing Black male undergraduates must be counterbalanced with insights gathered from those who somehow manage to navigate their way to and through higher education, despite all that is stacked against them. (p. 3).

Highlighting African American students' voices who have traversed the often difficult, racialized educational landscape to persist in school, graduate high school, and enter a four-year university, is not meant to downplay the importance of studies that examine the underachievement of African American students. Rather, examining students who could be deemed 'successful' is meant to highlight their stories as a means to understand the possibilities for African American student educational success. Further, these stories of success are counter-narratives to the westernized narrative of African American academic failure.

Beyond listening to the students' counter-narratives, allowing students to express their identities through visual methods is another means to amplify unheard voices. Critical visual methods, through the use of identity maps, which are visual drawings created by the study participants to capture how they creatively represent their identities through drawings. Specifically, the identity maps allow the participants to share aspects of their self and identity through drawing that they might not be willing to voice during interviews. It also allows the researcher "the opportunity to learn what goes on below the radar, that is, how identities are embedded in memory, fears, and emotions that might not

be voiced” (Sirin & Fine, 2008, P. 17). Identity maps privilege the voices of those who are often oppressed and silenced in the majoritarian narrative. The use of identity maps as a critical visual method honors local knowledge, challenges dominant lies, reveals the concealed pain and demands social justice. Further, identity maps help the creator to contest the dominate narrative, inviting participants to consider their histories and their futures free from critique (Segalo, Manoff & Fine, 2015). My decision to include identity maps is significant because it allows for a richer understanding of how the students view themselves. It also helps to triangulate interview data and provide a rare glimpse into how African American college students view themselves and their identities in a visual way. Although I found a variety of research utilizing visual methods, I did not find a study that specifically asked African American college students to contextualize their identities, specifically their African American identity through a visual process.

In this next section, I provide an introduction to stories, African American oral tradition, majoritarian narratives, and counter-narratives. Subsequent sections describe the problem space, an introduction to narrative inquiry, an explanation of the conceptual framework and the theories from which it draws. I use the framework to organize my systematic review of the literature in Chapter Two. A definition of terms follows the problem space section. The chapter closes with my own stance as a researcher, a chapter summary and a look toward Chapter Two.

## **Introduction**

### **The Power of Stories**

“Telling ourselves our own stories [...] has as much as any single factor been responsible for the survival of African-Americans and their culture.” (Goss & Barnes, 1989, p. 18). Stories are the cornerstone of everyday life and social and cultural environments (Polkinghorne, 1988; Simpkinson & Simpkinson, 1993). A story “can be defined as the depiction of an event or series of events that is generally, but not always, encompassed by boundaries of time or space” (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 411). Stories are passed from generation to generation as a means of preserving common cultural characteristics (Gates, 1989; Howard, 1991). They help people to understand the meaning of life, make sense of their lives, and understand human behavior. Further, when independent and seemingly disconnected elements are brought together, they can become unified in a story (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Simply put, “throughout the ages and across cultures story continues to express the fundamental nature of humanity” (Huber et. al, 2013, p 214).

To create a story, experiences are structured based on culturally specific rules that influence both how those experiences are represented and the lasting memory of the stories (Banks-Wallace, 1999). These culturally specific rules for storytelling are not taught formally, but are learned and continually developed based on repeated exposure to oral storytelling (Champion, Katz, Muldrow, & Dail, 1999). Storytelling and the process of sharing stories with others are both interactive and nurturing, creating a common connection and experience for the storyteller and listener (Malone, 1994; Baker & Green,

1987; Banks-Wallace, 2002). Banks-Wallace (2002) referred to the stories that initiate the intimate relationship development between the teller and listener as touchstones. Touchstones “are things that remind people of a shared heritage and/or past. Certain stories bring forth a whole series of deep-seated memories about experiences that either cannot be or are not easily articulated” (p. 411). The shared cultural heritage and memories that stories create remain important to the African American community since slavery; even “the term African American symbolizes a unique storytelling tradition that is a synthesis of values and rituals rooted in African and American societies” (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 410).

### **African American Oral Tradition**

When Africans were forced to immigrate to the United States as slaves, their owners immediately tried to “domesticate” them and strip them of their culture and heritage. The slave owners carried out this domestication by denying the slaves the use of their African languages and along with it, their religion, values and beliefs (Goss & Barnes, 1989). Not only were slaves forced to assimilate by challenging their use of oral language, they were not allowed to use other forms of language expression including: reading, writing and even the use of song and drums were forbidden. Given their status as slaves, African American people did not have the power to challenge the slaveholders, and “[l]earning to read and write, accordingly, were forbidden to the slaves by law” (p. 16). Given the vast restrictions on their speech, use of their African language and subsequent loss of culture, the use of stories told orally became all the more important, and the underground African American culture emerged by word of mouth. “African-



Americans nurtured a private but collective oral culture, one they could not ‘write down’, but one they created, crafted, shared with each other and preserved for subsequent generations out loud, but outside of the hearing of the White people who enslaved them, and later, discriminated against them. It was in this isolated and protected black cultural space that African-American vernacular culture was born and thrived” (p. 17). Thus, the use of stories and the oral tradition remains important to the African American culture. These stories that are preserved from generation to generation serve as a foundation for the construction of their sense of reality, and function to impact their values, behaviors, goals and aspirations—stories that they “live by and *through*” (p. 17). African American people, who were “deprived by law of the tools of literacy, the narration of these stories in black vernacular forms served to bring together the several colorful fragments of lost African cultures in a spectacularly blended weave that we call African-American culture” (p.18). African American people can use stories as a collective remembrance of their past and for future empowerment. Although these collective stories benefit the African American community and their ability to maintain their culture, their stories do not hold the same power or saliency in the broader population. American society currently augments the stories, values and beliefs from a White, Eurocentric perspective.

### **The Majoritarian Narrative**

In American society in general, and in education in particular, the majoritarian story is White and middle-class. Delgado & Stefancic (1993) defined majoritarian story as the “bundle of presuppositions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understanding of persons in the dominant race” (p. 462). Majoritarian stories are generated from a

history of privilege. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) affirmed that the “majoritarian story is one that privileges Whites, men, the middle and or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference” (p. 28). Since the majoritarian stories, or master narratives are considered normal and natural in American society, the majority constructs suppositions about race based on White privilege. Master narratives often portray African Americans as passive, “and lacking both agency and voice” (Nasir, 2007, p. 149). In this way, stories and experiences of people of color are often distorted or not heard. Not only do master narratives fail to highlight the experiences of people outside of White culture, they embody racism with which people of color must contend. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) asserted, “the ideology of racism creates, maintains and justifies the use of a ‘master narrative’ in storytelling” (p. 27). Further, majoritarian storytelling supposes that people of color should assimilate to fit with the dominant standard. In schools, master narratives “argue that students of color should assimilate to the dominant White middle-class culture to succeed in school and in life” (p. 31). To challenge the racist master narratives present in school and larger society, educational researchers often use counter-narratives as a way to highlight the experiences of people of color whose stories are often unheard.

### **Counter-narratives**

Counter-narratives are stories about people outside of the majority, who are often overlooked in the research literature. Their stories challenge the dominant narrative because they examine, critique and counter the majoritarian narrative (Harper & Davis, 2012). Within the African American community, and other communities of color,

storytelling has a long and rich tradition that was and is used for empowerment. Delgado (1989) affirmed, “oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation” (p. 2436). According to Solorzano and Yosso (2010), the counter-narrative served various theoretical, pedagogical and methodological functions, including to: build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems; open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position; and teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone (p. 475). Since African Americans are often silenced in both education and society, the counter-narrative serves as a vehicle to empower their voices so they can construct their own reality that counters the norms of White society.

## **Problem Space**

### **Introduction to Problem Space**

Although there are African American students who succeed academically, the voice of African American student success is often muffled by the majoritarian stories of African American student failure. Previous research documented how African American students’ educational experiences vary across school districts based on demographics and funding (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 1991); the neighborhood’s influence (Patillo-McCoy,

1999); and the school itself (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993; Hemmings, 1996). Each research study provided a situation-specific account of African American students' experiences that are distinct to the contexts in which they find themselves. Although there is a plethora of research surrounding African American student underachievement, there are fewer examples of student achievement in qualitative or quantitative forms. By sharing their stories of academic persistence, power is given to the students and to their experiences as African Americans. In the next section I define and expand upon what narrative research is and is not.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research “that involves the gathering of narratives—written, oral, visual—focusing on the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences, seeking to provide insight that befits the complexity of human lives” (Josselson, 2006, p. 4). More simply, narrative researchers collect individuals' stories to try and make meaning of their lives and their lived experiences. Pinner and Daynes (2006) defined narrative research as both a method and the phenomenon being studied. As a method, narrative discusses the lived experiences and stories of individuals (Creswell, 2007). According to Trahar (2009), narrative researchers hope to understand the ways in which individuals construct their stories, to uncover for whom and why they construct their stories and the cultural discourses upon which their stories are told. According to Coulter and Smith (2009), there are many forms of narrative inquiry, but Polkinghorne (1995) designated two main categories, including: analysis of narrative and narrative analysis. Analysis of narratives falls more in line with general types of

qualitative research where the researcher collects and analyzes narratives to form categories and themes. Whereas, “narrative analysis studies rely on stories as a way of knowing. Stories emerge as data are collected and then are framed and rendered through an analytical process that is artistic as well as rigorous” (Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 577). For the purposes of this research study, I ascribe to a more generalized definition of narrative inquiry, in line with Josselson (2006) and Pinner and Daynes (2006) who described narrative research as collecting stories of people’s lived experiences. In this way, I ascribe to analysis of narrative rather than narrative analysis. Next, I outline my conceptual framework and approach to the larger problem space of understanding the schooling experiences of African American students who graduate from high school and enter a four-year university.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Qualitative research provides the opportunity to develop deep, person, place, and context specific understanding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Researchers who employ qualitative methods value individuals’ lived-experiences, knowing that environments are not static (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research is concerned with how people make meaning of their lives and how their environment and social constructs interact with the meaning they prescribe to their lived experiences (Hatch, 2002). In this dissertation, I argue that there is great value in listening to and understanding the voices of students as they narrate their educational journeys. Examining how and why individuals construct their stories in their varied social and cultural contexts, can uncover social, cultural and psychological factors that influenced the development of the stories

they tell (Trahar, 2009). In particular, listening to educational stories may help educators better understand how students, who are often minoritized in schools, are able to persist and go on to college (Harper, 2012). Through in-depth interviews with African American students, I can gain an understanding of their personal and educational experiences and the factors that contributed to their persistence.

I contend that specific socio-cultural characteristics and processes shape the ways in which African American students develop their own counter-narratives to persist and gain access to higher education. Specifically, agency, identity, culture and context interact to produce persistence. As imaged in the diagram below, each component encompasses a complex and interactive set of factors. Identity broadly includes the multiple identities a person enacts to pursue opportunities in life. In this dissertation, I focus heavily on ethnic/racial identities and gender identities, among others (Lundy, 2003; Welch & Hodges, 1997; Wright, 2009; Chavous et al., 2003; Oyserman et al., 2001). According to Bennett (2006), neighborhoods, parenting, and racial socialization significantly influence ethnic identity development. Both agency and identity development are heavily influenced by the culture and context in which students find themselves (Nasir et al., 2009). Agency is an individual's ability to act on the world, to make choices that are shaped by opportunities, cultural norms, and the context in which they are situated (Noguera, 2003). Context includes place and time-specific factors, such as students' social/economic status and the physical location and neighborhood in which they live. Culture also impacts identity development and agency. "Culture can be seen as the medium of human development which [prepares humans] for interactions with the

world” (Cole & Parker, 2011, p. 135). All of these components coalesce to aid in African American students’ development of counter-narratives and educational persistence. The following diagram illustrates the dynamic interplay between these constructs. This intersectionality framework, which highlights the intersection of exclusion, subordination and multiple identities, articulates the varied experiences of inequality and how those experiences differentially affect persistence, identity development, culture and context, and agency (Hancock, 2007). Students construct and develop counter-narratives, identity, and agency in response to their culture and context including: racial microaggressions, which are subtle insults, that may be verbal, nonverbal and/or visual, directed toward people of color, and institutional discrimination they likely experience (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Quijada Cerecer, 2013).

**Features of Counter-Narratives for African American Academic Persistence**

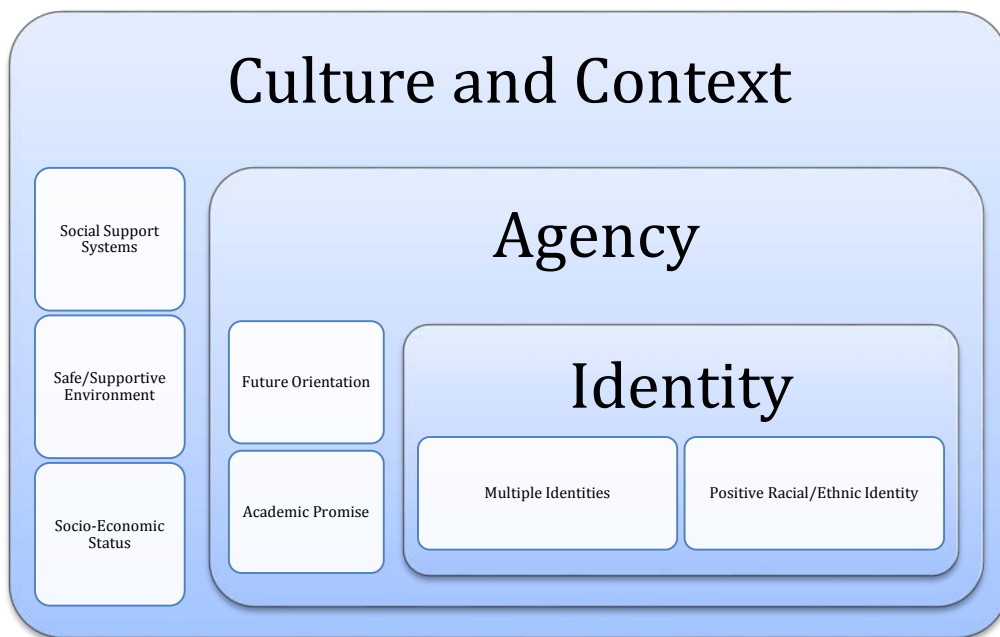


Figure 1.

Despite the systemic inequalities, racism and significant economic disparities many African American children face, within mainstream education in the U.S., individuals have some degree of choice and ability to transcend. In order to persist in school, students must develop agency, which allows them to be an agent in the world. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency is “the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posted by changing historical situations” (p. 970). Emirbayer and Mische’s statement explained how agency is a social engagement process that is affected by the past, present and the future. As actors engage with social structures, they can switch between the past, present and future contexts to either reproduce or transform them. It is impossible to separate agency from structure. Although their environment and the social structures in which they must navigate affect the outcome of their lives, agency provides them some control over their lives. “The choices made by an individual may be shaped by both the available opportunities and the norms present within the cultural milieu in which they are situated” (Noguera, 2003, p. 440). Agency is important in African American students’ educational experiences, because they undoubtedly experience structures and environments that hinder their ability to persist. However, in their role as actors, they can challenge the structures through action or otherwise reproduce past outcomes. According to Wyness (1999), the social sciences have begun to recast children, not as “adults-in-waiting”, but rather, “children are deeply implicated in the social world as agents” (p.



354). Wyness described how children should be considered as adults and as skilled social actors. He discussed how there are two varying theoretical approaches regarding children and agency. The first broad theory placed “children in their own contexts of playground and peer group” and the second theory located “children within the broader social structure and are more interested in systemic denial of this agency” (Wyness, 1999, p. 355). The first theoretical perspective placed children in their own private worlds with private lives and meanings. Agency is identified through micro-societies and small-scale interactions. The second theoretical perspective “needs to be reconciled with a theory of power and social inequality. Children and the concept of childhood are positioned nationally and globally as an exploited and inferior social group” (p. 355). However, Wyness believed that children should be thought of as social actors, much the same as adults are considered. Within schools, Wyness believed that children create their own micro-societies where they must navigate and negotiate various relationships and structures.

Schools serve to segregate and regulate students from the rest of society. The social structural perspective focuses on how students are able to negotiate the adult-imposed schooling structures (Wyness, 1999). According to Wyness, young people can threaten the authority of schooling because they are competent and can organized themselves. Researchers such as Willis have demonstrated students’ agency and defiance of authority. Willis’ (1977) seminal work *Learning to Labour*, outlined how working class and low-income boys are disillusioned by the achievement ideology of schooling and society and instead oppose and resist that ideology. According to Stuart Wells et al.

(2004), Willis' work "showed us empirically and theoretically how the choices these students make about their schooling and their lives are inextricably tied to their understanding of where they and their families fit into the larger capitalistic society and the opportunities available to them as a result" (p. 59). Stuart Wells et al.'s assertion adds credence to the interrelationship between social structures and agency. These are working-class English boys lacked equitable educational opportunities and exhibited the power of agency. Although the boys' choices were limited, "even within these limits, they will exercise the human agency that allows them to participate and to some degree mold their own social reproduction" (Stuart Wells et al., p. 59). Stuart Wells et al. explained the idea of agency and how even with limited opportunity, individuals still possess the power to make choices that affect their lives, even if those choices are within societal constraints based on, in this case, class. Just like social class alone does not determine how students act and respond to the opportunity structure, "both structural and cultural forces influence choices and actions, but neither has the power to act as the sole determinant of behavior because human beings also have the ability to produce cultural forms that can counter these pressures" (Noguera, 2003, p. 440). In summary, Willis' research helped to explain that "while schools do matter to these students – in part because they espouse an achievement ideology that these boys penetrate and critique while legitimizing their school failure – clearly their larger social context matters a great deal as well, especially in how they make sense of schools and school work" (Stuart Wells et al., p. 60). Willis' (1977) research highlighted the importance of schools, but also that the school is only one institution that the boys use to make sense of their lives

and where they fit within society (Stuart Wells et al., 2004). Although power may still be limited, agency helps individuals to act on the world.

Just as agency and social structures are inextricably intertwined, identity is also interconnected and impacts African American student persistence. Identity motivates action; “one pursues opportunities to enact one’s claimed identities and thereby validates them for oneself and for others” (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007, p. 108). Just as agency helps people to act on the world, developing and claiming one’s identity is inextricably linked to agency, to act on their claimed identity. Students possess multiple identities, but ethnic identity is an innate driving force for African American students’ academic success. Adedunmu’s (2008) study found that ethnic identity is a strong predictor of academic achievement for urban African American adolescents. Despite the importance of ethnic identity for African American students, societal norms and structures currently promote White identity. Thus, African American students develop their identities in light of majoritarian norms and stereotypes. Holland and Lachicotte (2007) defined identity as “a higher-order psychological function that organizes sentiments, understandings, and embodied knowledge relevant to a culturally imagined, personally valued social position” (p. 113). African American students develop both agency and multiple identities in response to how they understand themselves in relation to others, societal norms, expectations, beliefs and structures—their culture and context.

The culture and context in which they find themselves strongly influences agency, identity and academic persistence. The two most significant factors of culture and context are social support systems and their neighborhood, the physical environment in which

they live and go to school. African American students' social support system, including: parents, community, family, teachers, administrators, etc., contribute to students' development of a positive ethnic identity and strong academic performance. According to Noguera (2003), who cited Foster (1997), Ladson-Billings (1994) and Lee (2000), "the performance of African Americans, more so than other students, is influenced by a large degree by the social support and encouragement that they receive from teachers" (p. 449). When the African American students' social support system values African American cultural norms students experience a consistent appreciation for their cultural identity. Thus, social support systems who respect, value, and acknowledge African American students' cultural identity and are responsive to students' cultural needs, are the most successful in helping African American students develop strong racial identities. For example, African American students develop shared interest, trust and experience with their teachers when their teachers show compassion, care and cultural knowledge (Lewis, James, Hancock & Hill-Jackson, 2008). In order to accentuate a positive ethnic identity as a predictor of student persistence, schools should find meaningful ways to intertwine African American culture and cultural values in the curriculum, school environment and school events. Students who live in a safe neighborhood, in an environment where people value higher education, are more likely to persist.

These factors alone may not lead to academic persistence and attainment, but coupled with African American students' development of agency, identity (including positive ethnic identity), culture and context (including social support systems and safe neighborhood) they are more likely to persist. Further, if African American students are

able to develop the aforementioned factors, they develop counter-narratives that help them persist despite the structural inequalities with which they must contend. Ultimately, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks help to guide the research questions and inquiry to understand African American students' schooling experiences, and their persistence and attainment. Next I discuss the research questions that guide this study.

### **Research Questions**

Through the use narrative inquiry, I complete a qualitative research study to learn about individual African American students who are enrolled in a four-year public university. My main research questions are as follows:

1. What narratives did African American students tell themselves to help them persist in school, attain a high school diploma and pursue higher education?
2. How did they develop their narratives?
3. How did their narratives influence their educational experiences?

Upon completion of my research study, it would be useful to understand how these individuals gained academic persistence and attainment through their individual experiences, to gain a greater understanding of their schooling experiences and the role their counter-narratives played in their persistence and attainment. Next, I discuss a definition of terms and about me as the researcher.

### **Definition of Terms**

According to Banks (1995), race is a socially constructed category that differentiates racial groups with one group displaying dominance over another group. In the U.S., White people exhibit superiority and dominance over all other groups. Racism

is defined many different ways. Lorde (1992) defined racism as “the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance” (p. 496). Marable’s (1992) definition included specific groups within the definition claiming racism is “a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African-American, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color” (p. 5). Both definitions mention superiority and institutional power, and domination of one group over all others. Racism refers to categorizing a group of people based solely on their race. Race reflects the ideology that people within that group share common traits, from physical abilities to personality and behaviors. By classifying people into these groups, inherently, there is a ranking of superiority vs. inferiority depending on the power structures within the given society. According to Thompson (1997), racism is institutional, structural, embodied and cultural. With this framework in mind, “racism is a *system* of privilege and oppression, a network of traditions, legitimating standards, material and institutional arrangements, and ideological apparatuses that, together, serve to perpetuate hierarchical social relations based on race.” (p. 9) In America, African American people and other people of color hold less power and privilege than White people, thus, are grouped as inferior based on their racial categories. Racism also encompasses racial discrimination and stereotyping. Racial stereotyping, whether intentional or unintentional, forms biases and often leads to discrimination since most stereotypes have a negative undertone and breed inferiority of the racialized group. African Americans have historically experienced racial discrimination in all aspects of American society, based solely on their race.

Although race, ethnicity and culture are often used interchangeably, for the purposes of this dissertation, culture is defined as follows:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 181).

Individuals do not define a culture, but rather a social system defines the normative values that are central to and influence the culture (Schwartz, 2009). Culture is ever-changing and dynamic and is influenced by previous generations. Historical participation and successful adaptation of human activities shape the culture, which impacts human development and humans' interaction with the world (Cole & Parker, 2011).

Throughout this proposal, the terms African American and Black are both used. Although my preference is to use African American, many researchers and the study participants often used the term Black. Since their forced immigration to the USA during slavery, the preferred term used to identify people of African descent who were brought to the USA has changed continually from "Colored" in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to "Negro" until the late 1960s to "Black" and finally, to "African American". According to Agyemang et al. (2005), generally, the term Black referred to people with ancestral origins from Africa and covers a broad range of ethnic and cultural

backgrounds. The term African American is used to identify people from African ancestral origins. African American has been a term used since at least the 1920s, but remains the USA preferred term since the 1970s. “Black” gained prominence during the civil rights movement and was favored by radical and militant groups such as the Black Panthers. “Initially, ‘Black’ was used to describe though who were progressive, forward-looking, and/or radical” (Smith, 1992, p. 499). The term “Black” was also favored because it was the best antonym for “White”, especially for those people hoping to distance their identity as separate to and the antithesis of “White”. According to Branch (1988), some people view “Black” as derogatory, in part due to the association with “black” being evil. Also, the militant nature of some of the Black separatist groups, like the Black Panthers, led some to associate “Black” with militant, separatists, and the “Black” power movement, which was sometimes viewed as negative. The broad term often “conceals a remarkable heterogeneity of cultures among diverse African populations, and reinforces racial stereotypes” (Agyemang et al., p. 1016). However, people who use the term should weigh the benefits of the need for simplicity with the dangers of stereotyping, according to Agyemang et al. (2005).

In the late 1980s, the term African American was introduced with the main goal of connecting Black people with a cultural connection to their heritage and ancestral homeland. According to Williams (1988a), using the term African American helped to reconceptualize Black people as an ethnic group rather than as a racial category. Despite the potential positive aspects of the term “African American” it also has some criticisms, including those who believe it is too inclusive, since Africa is not one single culture, but



many cultures. Since 1991, Gallup has been polling Black/African American people to determine which term they prefer. As of 2007, 24% preferred the term African American, 13% preferred the term Black, and 61% did not have a preference. Since 1991, Gallup has conducted 7 such polls. In all 7 polls the percentages have remained fairly consistent, with an average of 61% of poll participants saying they have no preference between Black or African American (Newport, 2007). Given the lack of preference among Black people, throughout this paper, the terms “Black” and “African American” are both used. Further, the students who were interviewed often used the terms interchangeably, aiding in the decision to use both terms interchangeably. Although the term definition can sometimes be confusing, with no clear correct term usage, it is important to define since the study subject, African American students, and the research theme, often use these terms.

### **About Me and My Filters**

I define myself as a Critical Race Theorist because of my desire to understand the implications of racial constructs in which people of color, specifically African Americans, must navigate and how society impacts them because of race. My status as a White, middle-class woman provides me access to privileges in American society due to continued dominance of White power structures. Further, after learning about my privilege as a White woman, I felt compelled to study inequalities in the American education system, inequalities I never had to experience. Whiteness studies (McIntosh, 1988; Frankenberg, 1993; Roediger, 1991) emerged in the early 1990s to understand “how the taken-for-granted and invisible character of Whiteness reinforces systems of

advantage and disadvantage and how the construction of Whiteness supports the hegemony of White power and the class structure” (Anderson, 2003, p. 22). It is important that I understand the power structures of American society through the lens of Whiteness and how these power structures affect my research perspectives.

Although I am White, I am married to an African American man so I often visualize and empathize with him due to barriers he faces on a daily basis due to his skin color. I realize that my status as a White woman allows me easier access to many privileges in American society that my husband does not easily attain. Although my husband’s experiences are not representative of all African American people in the United States, I believe my interactions with him and witnessing the racism he has experienced, gives me a more critical eye when considering issues of race and how they affect people of color. Also, we have two bi-racial children and even though they are both under four years old, I have already experienced and witnessed microaggressions through social interactions in my role as their mother. My role as wife, mother, and researcher makes me hyper-aware of instances where my children and husband experience discrimination, microaggressions and inequities.

### **Summary and Chapters Description**

In Chapter One, I provided an introduction to the study subject, which are African American students in four-year universities; an explanation of narrative, counter-narratives and majoritarian stories, as a way to understand the importance of students narratives in educational research; an introduction to the research questions, and a discuss of the conceptual framework and factors that influence African American students’

development of counter-narratives and academic persistence and attainment. In Chapter Two, theoretical framework, greater details about the factors in the development of counter-narratives and an introduction to narrative research are discussed. Chapter Three highlights the research methods. Chapter Four provides an analysis of the research results, and Chapter Five examines the research and include interpretations, conclusions and future recommendations.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This chapter reports the results of my systematic review of the literature that examines persistence of African American students in attaining college admission and matriculating in a college or university. I have organized the chapter using my conceptual framework. In doing so, I drew on the theoretical constructs that support the use of this framework. The factors that may potentially help African American students gain educational persistence and attainment are regularly mentioned through the research literature. Each student's experience is unique and therefore, the potential outcome of the study can help understand which factor(s) are most significant to the student's ability to gain academic persistence and attainment.

### **Chapter Organization**

Chapter Two opens with an overview of the theoretical framework, an introduction to Critical Race Theory (CRT), a discussion of intersectionality and an explanation of the relationship among CRT, intersectionality, and narrative inquiry. The next section describes each of the factors in the development of counter-narratives in greater detail, including: positive racial identity, agency, and culture and context. Educational research is examined and cited to further explain each of the factor's potential influence on African American student academic persistence and attainment. Chapter Two concludes with a summary.

## **Persistence**

Too few African American students graduate from high school and enter higher education institutions. Despite the limited number, some African American students are able to persist. Academic persistence and attainment is a complex, multifaceted educational subject. It cannot be understood simply by examining one facet of the educational system. However, stories of students' persistence and attainment may help illuminate the factors that aid in their academic successes. Distilling the discussion of the research literature, I define academic persistence and attainment as the accomplishment of high school graduation and admission to higher education. The terms achievement, attainment, success, and persistence are often interchangeably used throughout the research literature. I chose persistence and attainment, because these terms best describe the process of continuing in school and graduating, with higher education aspirations.

Academic persistence as it relates to African American students, who are often labeled 'at risk', are defined by their ability to persist within the educational system, despite substantial environmental (Fine 1991; Mehan 1997; Feiner, Brand, Adan, Mulhall, Flowers & Sartin 1993), social (Fine 1990; St. John 1990), cultural (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock 1986) and economic barriers (Heck & Mahoe 2006; Bryke & Thum 1989). Persistence is complex because there are many factors contributing to whether students continue or persist in school and do not drop-out, including "the relevance of social divisions (race, ethnicity, social class, and gender) and the contingent effects of school settings, processes and policies in explaining students' academic and social lives" (Pollock, 2004). Academic persistence as a term, denotes remaining or

persisting within the system of education and not dropping or failing out, whereas academic attainment signals degree completion, or in the case of this research, high school graduation. Without persistence, a student would not graduate, or attain degree completion. Persistence is socially constructed. The interactions between the individual, the context in which they are raised, and the institutions in which they live and attend school construct whether a student is able to persist.

### **Literature Search Procedures**

The author completed a systematic review of the literature to identify relevant literature related to African American academic persistence. The search process included three steps: identification of relevant articles, screening to determine usefulness, and complete review. The first step included searching the following educational databases for relevant articles: Onlinelibrary.wiley.com, Ac.els-cdn.com, Eac.wested.org, Jstor.org, Muse.jhu.edu, and Eric.ed.gov, among others. Several articles were found through the use of Google Scholar, which linked through the ASU library system. Combinations and variations of the following search terms were used: Black, African American, minority, minority students, students, student, persistence, academic success, academic achievement, achievement, education, identity, agency, individual agency, human agency, ethnic identity, race, racial identity, parents, social support, family, siblings, teachers, counselors, mentors, agency, community, critical race theory, narratives, narrative, counter-narrative, counter-narratives, attainment, educational attainment, college, higher education, learning. The vast majority of these terms were used in combination with Black and/or African American.

## **Inclusion Criteria**

As a result of my search, I located approximately 1000 articles. Through reading the titles and abstracts, I winnowed the list to approximately 250 articles, based on the applicability of the research studies and connection to identity, agency and culture and context as they related to African American students. Given there is not a great number of articles that relate specifically to African American academic persistence and attainment, many of the articles focus on other aspects of the school experiences of minoritized students, sometimes focusing on academic underachievement. There was a preference and concerted effort to find articles dated from 2011 – present. However, several articles significant to the topic were included, despite their age. There were many times where the most-relevant articles were from previous decades, especially when considering foundational articles to fields of study for CRT and narrative. Preference for inclusion was given to articles that directly studied the academic persistence or achievement of African American students in the K-12 and/or higher education system. However, there were times where other minoritized students were included in relevant research articles to discuss race, racism and inequities in the American Educational system. Ancestral searches were utilized when relevant to the major themes. While reading relevant articles, it is common to find citations within the article that are applicable to the research, at which time the article's bibliography was used to find other pertinent articles. For the purposes of this literature review, well over one hundred articles were included to provide an in-depth view of the main themes discussed.

## **Exclusion Criteria**

Articles were excluded if they did not discuss identity, agency, CRT, narrative, culture and context, academic persistence, qualitative research, African Americans, or minority students. However, some articles that did not specifically address education or academic persistence were included, since the study examined agency, identity and the students' culture and context, which also includes aspects outside of their schooling lives.

## **Theoretical Framework**

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

CRT gives a voice to African American students and “provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step in the road to justice” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58). Storytelling has been historically used as a means to heal racial oppression because hearing their stories may help oppressed people to understand how their histories and history of being oppressed. Education often silences the voices and dialogue of people of color and CRT studies can create a voice for the oppressed (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

According to Guba and Lincoln (2005) CRT is “a blanket term denoting a set of several alternative paradigms including neo-Marxism, feminism, materialism, participatory inquiry” (p. 109). The ontology of Critical theory is one of historical realism, meaning, “reality is shaped by a congeries of social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender factors, and then crystallized into a series of structures that are now taken as ‘real’ ... a historical reality” (p. 110). CRT originated in the study of law, but has since gained significance in the study of education, women's studies and sociology



(Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). CRT is used in education to “identify, analyze, and transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 63).

There are five basic elements of the CRT model including: “(a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the transdisciplinary perspective” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 63). Unlike the CRT model for other disciplines, the CRT framework for education places race and racism in the foreground of research while challenging traditional paradigms and explaining how social constructs impact people of color.

Further, CRT:

Focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of communities of color and offers a liberatory and transformative method for examining racial/ethnic, gender, and class discrimination. It also utilizes transdisciplinary knowledge and the methodological base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, and the law to forge better understandings of the various forms of discrimination (p. 63).

CRT is a useful framework for examining African American students’ schooling experiences due to the transdisciplinary inclusion of both race and class discrimination.

Critical theory was developed during the 1930s at the Frankfurt School by a group of German researchers who were examining the “changing nature of capitalism and the mutating forms of domination that accompanied this change” (Kincheloe & McLaren,

2002). Critical theory was based on German philosophical and social traditions, especially Marx, Weber, Hegel, and Kant. The Frankfurt School theorists credited with the development of critical theory includes: Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Jürgen Habermas. Horkheimer well explained his vision for critical theory; he believed “critical theory could help to promote a self-conscious and organized working-class by fostering a debate between theoreticians, the advanced elements of class, and those in need of greater awareness about social contradictions” (Held, 1980p. 50). Critical theory is sometimes distinguished from the literary criticism and referred to as critical social theory; its goal is to critique and change society through improved understanding of society as a whole and integration of the major social sciences (Held, 1980; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). According to Guba and Lincoln (2005) one of the main tenants of CRT is the intersectionality of race with other forms of subordination. Intersectionality is defined as the “interaction of multiple identities and varied forms of exclusion and subordination” (Davis, 2008, p. 234). Intersectionality is often used as a framework to study oppression and it is important to delve further into the history of intersectionality and its use in educational research.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality grew from Crenshaw’s (1989) study of African American women and the intersection of their African American and female identities. She talked about the invisibility and marginalization of African American women and conceptualized the intersections of race, gender and class, especially related to inequities as part of the feminist debate (Knapp, 2005). Crenshaw (1989) was clear to suggest that

one identity category should not be treated as dominant, and often one or more identities are left out of politics and research. According to Hancock (2007), intersectionality gives credence to all categories equally and the relationship between categories is fluid and open. The overlap of various instances of inequality is at the heart of intersectionality. Even though intersectionality started out of feminist studies of African American women, it can easily be applied to understanding the intersections of multiple forms of oppression like race, gender and sexuality (Brah & Phoenix, 2004).

CRT and intersectionality are helpful when examining complex identities and how these identities affect each other. Using both CRT and intersectionality encourages the examination of multiple identities and membership categories, and the intersection of the categories of oppression (Anderson & McCormack, 2010). Delgado & Stefancic (2001) employed the intersectionality framework through a CRT lens to study African American male identities. The use of intersectionality was to acknowledge much literature viewed African American men as a monolithic group with a universal set of experiences. Howard & Reynolds (2013) argue that much research on African American males has failed to produce new knowledge because it didn't acknowledge the multiple social factors that affect African American males' experiences. Next, I draw a connection between the use of CRT, intersectionality and narrative inquiry.

### **CRT, Intersectionality and Narrative**

One of the foundational elements of Critical Race Theory is what Solorzano and Yosso (2002) called the centrality of experiential knowledge. CRT scholars recognized the voices of people of color and their experiential knowledge is central to and critical to

studying and transmitting information about racial subordination. According to Parker (2010), “CRT and qualitative research in education both utilize personal narratives (of the self and others) that can also use fiction or performance-based texts (Denzin, 1997), to illustrate, from a critical position, the historical and current connections and effects of racial issues and concerns” (P. 50). CRT acknowledges subordination can take more than one form and intersectionality can frame the multiple ways African American people experience discrimination. Using narratives allows CRT researchers to share the knowledge and lived experiences of people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Both CRT and narrative inquiry can examine race as the critical center for the research. Critically examining race at the center of where research is discussed and conducted helps to draw a link between the manifestations of past and present-day discrimination (Parker, 2010, p. 46). Meanwhile, intersectionality provides a framework for intersections of other forms of oppression and discrimination. Qualitative research narratives not only link past and present racism and discrimination, it can bring to light the “effects of what the color-blind perspective omits with its present-day orientation” (p. 46). Both Stanfield (1993, 1994) and Foster (1994) noted the potential controversy of how researchers who study African American communities have represented their study participants. Controversies have ranged from the researchers’ position of power and privilege, misuse of power, lack of critical questioning, and misrepresentation and exploitation of study participants. However, since race is at the center of CRT, qualitative researchers can use CRT and narratives to challenge racial policies, images and representations. Qualitative inquiry and research in education that focus on CRT and narrative can add a much-

needed racial dimension to the research (Parker, 2010, p. 50). Next, I examine examples of research that include the factors influencing students' ability to develop counter-narratives that aid in their academic persistence and attainment, including: agency, identities, especially race/ethnic identity, and culture and context.

### **Literature Review: Agency, Identity and Culture and Context's**

#### **Influence on the Development of Counter-narratives**

It is my contention that agency, identity and culture and context contribute to academic persistence and attainment in schools. Ultimately, the goal of this research project is to understand in what ways these various factors contribute to academic achievement in the study participants. How students develop and utilize these factors may vary greatly between each student. Further, their agency and multiple identities may be influenced by their culture and context, location within societal structures and by their social support systems. These aforementioned factors are not all encompassing, and the research study may uncover other variables that impact academic achievement. However, these factors are those that regularly appear in the literature surrounding African American academic persistence and attainment. The examples of narrative research discussed below do not fit neatly into each of these factors, but the studies have been designated into categories as they fit most-closely.

#### **Agency**

Despite the systemic inequalities, racism and significant economic disparities many African American children face within mainstream education in the U.S., individuals have some degree of choice and ability to transcend. Possessing agency gives

students the power to act on the world, which can aid in their academic persistence. Agency is “the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posted by changing historical situations” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). Emirbayer and Mische describe how agency is a social engagement process that is affected by the past, present and the future. As actors engage with social structures, they can switch between the past, present and future contexts to either reproduce or transform them. It is impossible to separate agency from structure. Agency in a CRT framework highlights how individuals are able to act within the systemic constraints of a racialized society, where African American students are unable to escape the stereotypes and racism implicit in American society. Although their environment and the racist social structures in which they must navigate affect the outcome of their lives, agency provides them some control. “The choices made by an individual may be shaped by both the available opportunities and the norms present within the cultural milieu in which they are situated” (Noguera, 2003, p. 440). Agency is important in African American students’ educational experiences, because they undoubtedly experience structures and environments that hinder their ability to persist. However, in their role as actors, they can challenge the structures through action or otherwise reproduce past outcomes. Agency is identified through micro-societies and small-scale interactions.

Schools serve to segregate and regulate students from the rest of society.

According to Wyness, young people can threaten the authority of schooling because they are competent and can organized themselves. Researchers such as Willis have demonstrated students' agency and defiance of authority. Willis' (1977) seminal work *Learning to Labour*, outlined how working class and low-income boys are disillusioned by the achievement ideology of schooling and society and instead oppose and resist that ideology. According to Stuart Wells et al. (2004), Willis' work "showed us empirically and theoretically how the choices these students make about their schooling and their lives are inextricably tied to their understanding of where they and their families fit into the larger capitalistic society and the opportunities available to them as a result" (p. 59). Stuart Wells et al's. assertion adds credence to the interrelationship between social structures and agency. These are working-class English boys lacked equitable educational opportunities and exhibited the power of agency. Although the boys' choices were limited, "even within these limits, they will exercise the human agency that allows them to participate and to some degree mold their own social reproduction" (Stuart Wells et al., p. 59). Stuart Wells et al. explained the idea of agency and how even with limited opportunity, individuals still possess the power to make choices that affect their lives, even if those choices are within societal constraints based on, in this case, class. Just like social class alone does not determine how students act and respond to the opportunity structure, "both structural and cultural forces influence choices and actions, but neither has the power to act as the sole determinant of behavior because human beings also have the ability to produce cultural forms that can counter these pressures" (Noguera, 2003, p. 440). In summary, Willis' research helped to explain that "while schools do matter to

these students – in part because they espouse an achievement ideology that these boys penetrate and critique while legitimizing their school failure – clearly their larger social context matters a great deal as well, especially in how they make sense of schools and school work” (Stuart Wells et al., p. 60). Willis’ (1977) research highlighted the importance of schools, but also that the school is only one institution that the boys use to make sense of their lives and where they fit within society (Stuart Wells et al., 2004). Although individual power may still be limited, agency helps people to act on the world.

The educational system can nurture or discourage students’ sense of agency depending on the level of opportunity or oppression within the system. For example, in middle-class schools, students are encouraged to voice their own opinions even if they differ from teachers and authority figures (Yates & Youniss, 1998), whereas, in working-class schools, students are not encouraged to think independently. Rather, the system relies heavily on safety and maintenance (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998). However, despite the systemic inequalities between well-resourced and lower-income schools, students are still able to develop some agency that can positively influence students’ educational aspirations and attainment (Mcintyre, 2006).

Noguera (2003) examined African American males and masculinity. Although his use of narrative is limited, he did talk about his own experience as an African American man and those of a colleague of his as an example of two African American men, raised in impoverished conditions, who, despite great structural challenges, were able to succeed academically and in life. He also detailed a story about four African American students in an honors English class, three of which are male and one who is



female and their confrontation with reading *Huckleberry Finn*. Their teacher explicitly told them that in their response papers, they were not to talk about race but only about the plot, because she believed race was not a main part of the story. Two of the four students had issue with the use of “nigger” in the text, and the teacher told them if they continued to make it an issue, they should leave the course. Although it is unclear if the teacher was aware of how her actions affected the African American students, two of the students chose to leave the class, one chose to write the paper as the teacher requested, and the female student chose to ignore the teacher’s requirements and write her paper about race.

This story highlights one of Noguera’s arguments in his paper that students possess agency to make choices about their education. Although this scenario also brought to light the environmental structural barriers and racism that may lead to situations where students may need to make difficult choices, “all students are active participants in their own education and not passive objects whose behavior can be manipulated by adults and reform measures....[l]earning how to influence the attitudes and behaviors of African American males must begin with an understanding of the ways in which structural and cultural forces shape their experiences in schools” (p. 452). Noguera’s statement summarized the importance of agency and identity development in response to the context in which students find themselves and the role of schooling in the development of agency and identity. Although Noguera’s paper touched on important intersections between identity, race and gender, he left open the need for further research to understand youth culture. He believed researchers “need to consult with young people on how the structure and culture of schools contribute to low academic achievement and

to enlist their input” (p. 453). Although researchers have continually focused on the underachievement of African American students, my study examines how the structures and culture of school affect students’ counter-narratives and how their identity, agency and their specific culture and contexts produce academic successes, rather than failures.

In Miron and Lauria’s (1998) case study of two urban high schools, they examined the influence the schools have on students’ racial/ethnic identity construction and how their racial/ethnic identities impact the students’ resistance and accommodation to White hegemony. The two schools selected were “City High” and “Neighborhood High”. City High is a citywide school with high admissions standards that enrolled all African American students who are low-income students. Neighborhood High was more ethnically diverse and only enrolls students from one lower-class neighborhood. Miron and Lauria’s (1998) comparative study found that many of the students resisted their schooling, however, the authors were quick to remind the reader that students were not passive or powerless as the common stereotypes argue. Rather, these inner-city students “vigorously wish to compete for academic excellence and decry the school when the curriculum of Neighborhood High denies them this opportunity. By choosing to remain in high school instead of dropping out or allowing themselves to be ‘pushed out’ (Fine, 1991), inner-city high school students in the South make strategic choices to improve their future lot in life” (p. 191). Further, the authors heard the students repeatedly say that they “do what they have to do to get by” so they can graduate, as the students understand the societal necessity for at least a high school diploma (p. 191). Miron and Lauria’s (1998) data confirmed that students at both schools exhibit resistance and

accommodation, which confirmed their agency and the strategic choices the students make in regard to their education. Their case study of the two schools also confirmed the importance of positive racial identity and the positive impact of caring teachers and community support. Most relevant to my study, Miron and Lauria's (1998) study denied the stereotype that most low-income African American families do not value education. Even in the Neighborhood High school where students were much less likely to succeed academically, the students saw the value in education. "Although frustrated in their desire for a quality school, students consistently voiced to the interviewers an insistence on education as a property right (Apple, 1985). They construe a high school diploma as a ticket to the outside world of cultural and economic mobility" (p. 207). Throughout the review of agency-related research, it was apparent that racial/ethnic identity (REI) and agency were not easily separated, and both were factors in their academic persistence. Further, a strong REI often contributed to group agency, which is discussed below.

### **Identity and Racial/Ethnic Identity**

Just as agency and social structures are inextricably intertwined, identity is also interconnected and impacts African American student persistence. Identity motivates action; "one pursues opportunities to enact one's claimed identities and thereby validates them for oneself and for others" (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007, p. 108). Just as agency helps people to act on the world, developing and claiming one's identity is inextricably linked to agency, to act on their claimed identity. Students possess multiple identities, but ethnic identity is an innate driving force for African American students' academic success. Adedun's (2008) study found that ethnic identity is a strong predictor of

academic achievement for urban African American adolescents. Despite the importance of ethnic identity for African American students, societal norms and structures currently promote White identity. Thus, African American students develop their identities in light of majoritarian norms and stereotypes. Holland and Lachicotte (2007) defined identity as “a higher-order psychological function that organizes sentiments, understandings, and embodied knowledge relevant to a culturally imagined, personally valued social position” (p. 113). African American students develop both agency and multiple identities in response to how they understand themselves in relation to others, societal norms, expectations, beliefs and structures—their culture and context.

Holland et al. (2007) articulate how identity is a combination of the personal self as it develops and interacts within social processes and systems. Thus, a strong REI is developed through interaction with society and through social relationships. The literature points to the salience of a positive REI in contributing to African American student persistence. However, there is conflicting research as to the benefits of a positive racial identity and academic achievement. Some researchers (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1991) argue that when African American students de-emphasize their race, becoming “raceless” or “acting White,” they achieve more academically. Even though Ogbu’s theory of acting White has occupied the African American research literature, most educational researchers have all but dismissed Ogbu’s theories. Proponents of the Ogbu’s oppositional culture theory failed to acknowledge that when African American students rejected the dominant Eurocentric ideology of schooling, they were, in effect, exerting their own agency and embracing their culture (Lundy, 2003). Many researchers (Welch

& Hodges, 1997; Wright, 2009; Chavous et al., 2003; Oyserman et al., 2001) argued that the development of a strong and positive racial-ethnic identity aided in the academic persistence of African American students. Lundy (2003) asserted that the difficulty for African American students arises when they are unable to maintain their Afrocentric cultural location within the social structure of school. O'Connor (1997), Lundy (2003) and Hillard (2003) found some African American students viewed educational achievement as a means to resist White power structures and to form group agency.

Lundy (2003) explained:

[W]hen Black students express a preference for their own culture and unmask the dislocation of their peers, they are exerting their agency. They have, in effect, chosen to be the subject in the creation and the telling of their personal narrative rather than the object in the European experience—the Other. They have challenged, in the most fundamental way, the Eurocentric bias in determining academic success (p. 464).

Ogbu, Fordham and others argued an affinity and connection to African American culture and cultural values prevents African American students from succeeding in school when compared to their White peers. This line of thinking assumed that “the root of the African American condition lies in their deviant values, which can only be remedied by acquiring the habits and values of White America” (Lundy, 2003, p. 464-465). Although the Eurocentric nature of education and other social structures undervalued non-White identities, some studies have shown that a positive racial identity aided in African American students’ academic persistence and attainment.

Some researchers argue that achieving a defined ethnic identity means the individual shows pride in his/her ethnic heritage and he/she derives self-worth from embracing his/her ethnic, racial and cultural heritage. Moreover, embodying a positive ethnic identity influences positive self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bennett, 2006). Researchers confirm that African American youths who achieve a positive REI can use it to combat psychological distress from daily interactions in a race-based society (Bennett, 2006, Cross et al., 1991, Yasui et al, 2004). Bennett (2006) argues positive self and reference group identities emerge when students are socialized to have positive REIs:

The emergence of these identities may provide a buffer against racist and otherwise negative messages from mainstream society. Furthermore, a positive self and reference group identity may enhance one's ability to function across multiple cultural contexts. The capacity to resist racist and otherwise negative messages from mainstream society, along with the ability to navigate in and across multiple cultural contexts, has been found to be a significant factor in the motivation, achievement, and prospects for upward mobility of African American youth (Bowman & Howard, 1985) (p 483).

Just as African American students' salient identities cannot be defined by only one category, even REIs can be multidimensional and influenced by various factors. Students possess multiple social identities they derive from different group memberships. Some of those identities are marginalized and others are not. People determine the salience of their identities (i.e. being African American vs. being a woman), and they are intersectional and fluid.

Oyserman, Harrison and Bybee (2001) conducted a study of students of color who were in middle school. Their study included African American, Hispanic, Native American and Israeli students. They found that students who connected their racial/ethnic identity (REI) to their academics tended to get better grades because it reduced their risk of feeling disengaged. African American students who felt positive about being both Black and American excelled in school, even when they reflected on racism in society. Further, students who had a strong sense of their racial-ethnic identity had better grades than students who did not identify as strongly. “This finding might suggest the value of students having a positive self-concept that attests to their knowledge of their group membership, as well understanding the value and significance placed on being a member of their racial-ethnic group” (Wright, 2009, p. 129). Chavous et al.’s (2003) research supports the relationship between a positive racial identity and academic achievement. They administered the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) to over 600 12<sup>th</sup> grade African American students. Four groups emerged when examining the racial-ethnic identity of the youth including: buffering/defensive group who felt positively about their group affiliation as African American but felt society did not value their race; the low connectedness/high affinity group who felt good about African American people, but were not as interested in race; the idealized group also felt a strong connection to their race and ethnicity, and believed society also valued African Americans; and the alienated group both felt little connection to their race, had negative feelings about their race and believed society felt the same. Chavous et al. (2003) found that the youth who had the most positive group affiliation, both the buffering/defensive

and idealized groups, also had the strongest positive academic attitudes and were most likely to attend college. The two groups differed as to why school was important for their educational attainment; the buffering/defensive group believed education was important for their future success, whereas the idealized group related their education to their personal relevance. Chavous et al. (2003) confirmed the importance of a healthy REI and strong and positive connection to the African American community since these strong group affiliations showed more positive academic adjustment (Wright, 2009).

Nasir, McLaughlin, and Jones (2009) examined African American high school students and their development of race and academic identities at an urban public high school. They used focus groups, case studies, interviews and survey methods over their two-year study. The two focus groups included: 11 African American students labeled as connected and 9 African American students labeled as disconnected. Those labeled connected had positive relationships with peers and teachers and attended class and completed schoolwork. Those labeled as disconnected were at risk of dropping out. After participation in the focus groups, seven students were followed and observed to serve as case studies, including a minimum of 56 hours of observation. They also included a survey in which 121 students (68 African American) participated. Based on extensive qualitative data, Nasir et al. (2009) identified two distinct versions of African American identity, one they call “street savvy” and one termed “school oriented and socially conscious” (p. 86). The street savvy identity consisted of a “‘thug’ and ‘gangsta’ identity and includes wearing popular clothing styles, speaking Ebonics, and not seeing one’s African American identity as being connected to school”, whereas the school-



oriented identity involved “being connected to school, community, and a cultural and historical legacy, and seeing oneself as a change agent and positive force in the community” (p. 86). The authors noted that aspects of both identities could be intertwined and different configurations of the two identities were available and possible for the students; some students might endorse certain aspects of each identity, for example.

Nasir et al. (2009) described two student narratives, Claude and Connie, who identified with the “street savvy” racial identity. The researchers found that these two students’ identities related to their neighborhood and school contexts. They both lived in low-income, high crime areas and their schooling experiences did not support a positive racial identity. Their schooling “reality was a place where students were largely invisible, where academic work was not demanded, and where students were allowed to fail. Students like Claude and Connie did not have access to information about graduation or college” (p. 91). Next, Nasir et al. (2009) discussed two students who exemplified the “school oriented identity”, including Alonzo and Adrienne, both high school seniors who had a strong sense of community, including local, national and historical in terms of what they considered their African American community. Also, both students had a strong desire to help others and give back. Both Adrienne and Alonzo’s African American and educational identities were fluid and congruent; “[b]ecause they viewed being African American as being committed to the positive development of family and community, a strong academic identity became a part of their racial identity” (p. 95). Alonzo and Adrienne’s academic success was in part thanks to being identified early by school

counselors and administrators as strong students, so they were placed in the informal advanced placement track. Thus, Alonzo and Adrienne's academic identity development was shaped by the opportunities and experiences they were given in school, and their families, peers, teachers and community influenced the development of their African American identities.

Like Carter (2005, 2008) and Oyserman et al. (2001), Nasir et al. (2009) found that Alonzo and Adrienne did not "act White to succeed academically. Rather, they were able to maintain a strong sense of themselves as part of an historical legacy of African Americans and draw on that to support their academic achievement" (p. 100). Further, the fact that the students were speaking Ebonics, listening to rap, hip-hop and R&B, wearing urban clothing, were not related to their school orientation since nearly all students participated in African American cultural practices. Relevant to my conceptual framework's emphasis on the benefits of a positive racial identity in supporting academic persistence and attainment, Nasir et al (2009) found that the "street-savvy youth were less aware of themselves racially and what that means in a social, political, and historical context further underscores the relation between racial and academic selves...[which] may confirm finding in the literature that shows that Afrocentric identities are protective and supportive of school success" (Nasir et al., 2009, p.101). In summary, Nasir et al. (2009) reinforced the significance of the schooling environment and opportunities afforded the students within their school contexts. Alonzo and Adrienne experienced a school context that celebrated and affirmed the African American cultural history where they received positive messages about the possibility of academic achievement and

access to college, whereas, Claude and Connie's schooling experience did not afford them the same opportunities or positive messages. Nasir et al. (2009) found that the students who were acutely aware of their African American identities and espoused an Afrocentric identity, could also possess a strong academic identity.

In another example, Sirin and Fine (2007) discussed multiple identities that are not always joined. Sirin and Fine (2007) used a mixed method approach, including focus group interviews, surveys and identity mapping to chronicle the lives of Muslim American youth in the post-911 era. Their research described the hyphenated selves, which referred to the "identities that are at once joined, and separated, by history, the present socio-political climate, geography, biography, longings and loss" (p 152). More simply, they examined how individuals construct and reconstruct their concept of self, given challenging social and political circumstances. Muslim youth experienced great challenges in their identity formation in light of the 911 attacks including persistent racism and anxiety. According to Sirin and Fine (2007), the concept of hyphenated selves is applicable across minority groups because it highlights "how cultures form and reform in context; how culture must be studied in relation to history, questions of power, class and gender" (p. 160). Further, the hyphenated selves concept can explore the influence of historical, cultural, social and political influences on identity formation.

Martin (2007) and others (Berry, Thunder, McClain; 2011), used counter-narratives to examine how African American identity intersect with mathematics education. Martin interviewed over 100 parents and students and highlighted a few individuals' counter-narratives as a way to show readers the struggles that many African

Americans endure to maintain and merge their African American identities with their mathematics learner identity. One learner, Keith, believed his African American status and identity in relation to his desire for math literacy, “and the meaning assigned to them by Whites, created boundaries (both real and perceived) that limited his opportunities in the larger social structure, and in mathematics in particular. Yet Keith did not accept these boundaries passively but instead exhibited a range of positive, agency-related behaviors” (Martin, 2007, p. 147). Martin’s interview participants displayed positive African American identity formation and agency in their desire to improve their math literacy. They served as examples of African Americans whose struggle for educational opportunities (in this case, math literacy) extend much deeper than the context of school alone. “This struggle is often linked to a desire for meaningful participation in the larger opportunity structure” and is part of the African American narrative tradition of “literacy for freedom and freedom for literacy” (p. 147). Martin maintained an important point in African American’s construction of counter-narratives; despite the oppression and limited opportunities within the mainstream structures of American society, many African Americans still believe in the larger opportunity structure, or the meritocratic myth.

Berry, Thunder, and McClain (2011) studied thirty-two 5<sup>th</sup> through 7<sup>th</sup> grade African American boys who were considered successful in mathematics, as measured by high passage rates on standardized math tests and high grade point averages in math. Berry et al. (2011) acknowledged the many studies that examined the underachievement of African American boys in mathematics, but instead examined how these African American boys’ math identities were developed and the role of community, culture and

math experiences. Through focus group interviews, review of academic records, observations and math autobiographies, Berry et al. (2011) found there were four factors that contributed to positive mathematics identities, including: the development of computational fluency by third grade; extrinsic recognitions; relational connections; and engagement with the unique qualities of mathematics. Extrinsic recognition means that the boys used outside authorities, such as grades, tracking, gifted identification, and standardized test scores as proof that they were successful in math.

Relevant to the importance of social support systems mentioned in my conceptual framework as a factor in academic persistence and attainment, Berry et al. (2011) also found that relationships between teachers, families and out-of-school time programs positively influence these boys' math identities. For example, one student wrote in his math autobiography "my mom actually was the first person to tell me I was good at math. It felt good because my mom told me it can lead to a good education" (p. 16). Berry et al. (2011) found that the boys constructed racial identities in response to their perception of how other students were engaged in school. Teachers seemed to play a role in student engagement, as the boys discussed how teachers treated various groups of students differently based on ability, race and gender. The African American boys felt isolated in their math classes and felt a sense of "otherness" since there were so few students like themselves in their math classes. These African American boys were also very aware of the negative stereotypes surrounding African American students and education. One African American male described his perception of those racial stereotypes and his own identity, "I know that African American males aren't usually, don't achieve too well in

math and stuff. But I feel that just because like statistics show that African Americans don't do as well in math, don't achieve more, I still felt that we can do good" (p. 19). Berry et al. (2011) described the struggle to maintain a positive racial identity in light of perceptions and stereotypes of other people. However, these boys had a strong critical race consciousness and understanding of their racial identities inside of the structures of education. They were also able to maintain a positive racial identity and academic identity at the same time. Berry et al. (2011) and Martin's (2007) studies about African American boys in mathematics are relevant because they highlight how students can possess multiple identities and maintain an awareness (or critical race consciousness) of how those identities play out within the structures of education and society. Next, I discuss the role of culture and context in the development of students' counter-narratives and academic persistence.

### **Culture & Context**

Students' identities and agency are developed based on interactions with members of their community, their families, friends, and other social support systems. Their physical environments, the culture of that community and environment and the personal context of their lives all play a role in the development of their multiple identities and agency. Thus, students' culture and context cannot be separated from the other categories that affect their persistence and must be examined closely. The culture and context in which they find themselves strongly influences agency, identity and academic persistence. The two most significant factors of culture and context are social support systems and their neighborhood, the physical environment in which they live and go to

school. African American students' social support system, including: parents, community, family, teachers, administrators, etc., contribute to students' development of a positive ethnic identity and strong academic performance. According to Noguera (2003), who cited Foster (1997), Ladson-Billings (1994) and Lee (2000), "the performance of African Americans, more so than other students, is influenced by a large degree by the social support and encouragement that they receive from teachers" (p. 449). When the African American students' social support system values African American cultural norms students experience a consistent appreciation for their cultural identity. Thus, social support systems who respect, value, and acknowledge African American students' cultural identity and are responsive to students' cultural needs, are the most successful in helping African American students develop strong racial identities. For example, African American students develop shared interest, trust and experience with their teachers when their teachers show compassion, care and cultural knowledge (Lewis, James, Hancock & Hill-Jackson, 2008). In order to accentuate a positive ethnic identity as a predictor of student persistence, schools should find meaningful ways to intertwine African American culture and cultural values in the curriculum, school environment and school events. Students who live in a safe neighborhood, in an environment where people value higher education, are more likely to persist.

Culture is defined in various ways. Honold (2000) cites various authors (Hutschemaekers & de Vijver (1990), Hofstede (1980), Ratner (1997), Boesch (1991, 1996), Thomas (1996), and Shore (1996)) to summarize some important definitions:

- Culture defines members of a group as distinct from members of other groupings.
- Culture creates an orientation system and a field of action for these members.

- Culture manifests itself in cultural models. These may be internal cognitions or external artifacts and institutions.
- Cultural models are acquired through interaction with the environment.
- Culture does not determine the behavior of individuals but it does point to probable modes of perception, thought, and action. Culture is therefore both a structure and a process. (p 328-329)

To summarize, culture helps to define membership in a group and helps to orient people to a system, which helps them to act on the world. The physical environment and individuals' behavior helps to create the culture. In this way, culture is fluid. Context refers to the physical environments in which the students are raised, their family and other social support systems, and their socio-economic status, among other factors within context. Next, I discuss in great detail the importance of social support systems in the persistence of African American students. I talk about the culture and context in which students are raised and the influence it has on students' development of future orientation, specifically ability to set and achieve goals and make plans for the future (Stoddard et al. 2010).

### **Social Support Systems**

Much educational research discusses the importance of social support in the educational persistence and attainment of African American students. Social support is broken into three categories, for the purposes of this paper including: mentors, teachers and counselors; parents and family; and community support. Teachers and school counselors often play the role of caring adults who help to create these culturally relevant school environments. Outside of traditional school settings, parents, family members, and other non-familial adults often serve as formal or informal mentors, in supporting



African American students in academic persistence and attainment (Coard, Foy-Watson, Zimmer, & Wallace, 2007; Kumpfer, & Bluth, 2004; Kumpfer, Alvarado, & Whiteside, 2003; Aktan, Kumpfer, & Turner, 1996).

**Mentors, Teachers and Counselors.** Madyun & Lee (2010) studied approximately 3,000 middle school students in a large Midwestern school district in the United States; the researchers indicated that African American students who succeeded academically tended to have strong relationships with non-familial adults, inside or outside of school, who served as important role models during their adolescent period. Owens et al. (2010) studied urban African American male students' perceptions of school counselors; their findings suggested that counseling services positively influenced educational achievement. However, a limited number of counselors resulted in students' needs being unidentified and unmet. Furthermore, African American students suggested that having a male counselor would be helpful in learning safety strategies in the midst of school violence and solving negative peer pressure (Owens, Simmons, Bryant, & Henfield, 2010). School counselors often maintained the role of mentor and the mention of male counselors complemented other research that determined the need for stronger father or adult male figures in the lives of African American youth (Condly, 2008; Madyun & Lee, 2010).

Miron and Lauria (1998) studied two different high schools in the same urban community and found that students' perception of their teachers' support was important in the students' academic achievement. The students at the magnet high school found their teachers to be extremely supportive not only in their academic pursuits but also in

the roles of mentors and friends. In contrast, the students in the other urban school experienced teachers whose main concern was discipline and providing the students 'busy work', as they described it. One difference to note is that the magnet school was all African American, whereas the other urban school had other ethnicities including: Asian/Pacific Islander and White. The African American students at this school were much more apt to discuss how teachers treated students of different races differently, including lower expectations for African American students compared to Asian and White students. The negative feelings and experiences with teachers at Neighborhood High was vastly different than the students' experience at City High. The students' comments at City High praised their teachers and felt privileged to attend school there; "the teachers are very helpful because, if we have a problem, they are not only our teachers but...are also a friend and a counselor toward us" (p. 200). In the City High, students felt very connected to their teachers, the local community and the broader society. The relationship with their teachers and school community led the students to make accommodations to the school's practices.

White and Kelly (2010) examined the role of school counselors and dropout prevention and found that school counselors significantly impacted academic performance, school attendance and school completion. However, finding adequate counselors and providing a sufficient number of counselors to meet the students' needs remained a challenge for many schools. According to a research study of an urban high school, researchers found an extremely inadequate student to counselor ratio of one counselor to five thousand students (Alonso, Anderson, Su & Theoharis, 2008). The

school examined in this research study serves as an example of dire student to counselor ratios prevalent in many urban schools; such a lack of counseling services means there are insufficient numbers of counselors to positively impact educational outcomes.

School counselors were responsible for identifying ways to help African American students succeed academically (Tillman, 2008). Counselors who work closely with African American families were more likely to positively impact students' educational outcomes through community-family-school partnerships. These partnerships placed the school counselor in the role of cultural broker and liaison in support of African American families (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Culturally responsive school counselors built connections with African American families more successfully; similarly, teachers who understood culturally relevant pedagogy and were able to develop student-teacher relationships improve African American students' academic performance. Educators who lacked knowledge in cultural competence and pedagogical responsiveness were unable to meet the needs of African American students; lack of knowledge in cultural and pedagogical responsiveness were viewed as two major detractors of African American students academic advancement (Lewis, James, Hancock & Hill-Jackson, 2008). Many other researchers (Foster, 1995, 1997; Howard, 2001, 2008; Irvin, 1991; Lynn, 2002, 2006; Lynn, Bacon, & Jennings, 2010) have linked teachers' cultural competence to successful interactions between teachers and African American students. "Teachers who were the most successful with African American students respected and valued students' culture and possessed sophisticated understandings of their own culture and its relationship to the construction and

implementation of a liberatory approach to teaching in humane and equitable ways” (Lynn, Bacon & Jennings, 2010). In a study targeting teachers who teach low-income African American adolescents, researchers determined that teachers often serve as cultural mediators and activists for creating positive change in the lives of the African American youth (Mitchell, 2000).

**Parent and Family Involvement.** Although schools and religious organizations can often provide strong adult role models for African American youth, family support can help children cope with adverse circumstances. Stable and complete family structures ensured at-risk children developed resilience (Condly, 2006). Lack of a father figure or strong parental role models can lead to weak educational outcomes, which is a common phenomenon for African American students. Madyun and Lee (2010) revealed that there is a negative association between the proportion of female-headed households and the achievement of African American male students after studying the relationship between under-achievement of African American male students and the enormous growth of female-headed households. Madyun and Lee’s (2010) research discovered that when African American male adolescents lived in neighborhoods with a high proportion of female-headed households, their educational attainment was negatively affected. Larger percentages of female-headed households led to educational failure because African American male adolescents had fewer chances to learn how to cope with the adverse environment and cultural pressures, knowledge that a male role model would provide (Madyun & Lee, 2010). Not only do African American youth often lack a male role-model, they may have little access to their mothers since many of these youth are

unsupervised after school, referred to as latchkey kids, whose parents work many jobs to support the family, with little time to assist with school work or promote educational enrichment in the after school hours.

Since their families worked long hours to support the family, these children were often negatively influenced with an overwhelmingly trend towards violence and crime, as well as increased substance abuse with alcohol, tobacco and drugs (Maruyama, 2003; Mott et al., 1999; Mulhall, Stone, & Stone, 1996). Research (Osgood et al., 1996; Posner & Vandell, 1999; Steinberg, 1986) showed that children who were left alone, who are unsupervised after school, had an increased likelihood of risky behavior, including falling prey to peer pressure, engaging in antisocial behavior and other risky activities in which they would not normally engage if they were supervised. Not only were latchkey kids more likely to engage in risky behavior, being alone after school leads to “lack [of] developmental and social benefits and diminished social capital that are derived from less-frequent parent-child and adult-child interactions and decreased access to parental networks” (Casper & Smith, 2004, p. 285). Also, many schools did not have the resources to provide low-cost or no-cost after school programs or activities to alleviate the need for children to be left alone at home and families are often unable to subsidize after school care (Hirsch, Pagano, & Roffman, 2001). If children are left on their own after school, they do not have access to extra-curricular activities or an adult support system to assist with their homework or to monitor their time spent out of school.

Certainly, parents who are actively involved in students’ academics positively influence African American students’ educational outcome. Jeynes completed a meta-

analysis of 41 studies and determined there is a considerable and consistent positive relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement among urban students (2005). For African American students to value education, they need adult role models who support and encourage their educational activities. Pursuit of higher education not only requires a delayed sense of gratification, it also requires forehand knowledge that many African American families have not encountered because many have not attended post-secondary education. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, approximately 17.5% of African Americans had a bachelor's degree or higher, whereas 30.7% of White Americans had a bachelor degree or higher. Adult role models play an extremely important role in student academic achievement; if role models value education, their students have a greater appreciation for education and greater incentive to achieve. For example, the reading achievement of urban African American high school students was positively influenced by the amount of hours spent completing homework and by parents' expectations of their child's future educational attainment (Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow & Martin-Glenn, 2006). If the family structure is complete and parents are able to take an active or somewhat active interest in their children's education, Lauer et al.'s study indicated educational achievement would be positively influenced.

**Neighborhood (Physical Environment) and Community.** Despite parental involvement, many African American children are raised in unsafe and unhealthy communities, evidenced by the increased risk of violent death and homicide as the leading cause of death in young African Americans (Tillman, 2008). Strayhorn's (2009)

research indicated that African American males' living arrangement, neighborhood setting, or community influenced their educational aspirations. With respect to socioeconomic status and academic achievement, African American men in suburban neighborhoods and schools had higher aspirations than those in urban schools (Strayhorn, 2009). Further, the statistics show that nearly 9 out of 10 African American students attending urban schools in the 11 urban districts in the National Assessment of Educational Progress database on urban school districts were not meeting proficiency rates in reading and math (Lewis, James, Hancock & Hill-Jackson, 2008).

When considering how urban schools can contribute to safe and healthy environments for students, after-school programs are often touted as effective. A literature interview conducted in 2008 revealed that after-school programs were a promising strategy to increase the social and academic wellness of young urban African American males (Woodland, 2008). The U.S. Department of Education funded similar afterschool initiatives such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers to contribute to the development of school-centric community (ed.gov, 2011):

This program supports the creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The program helps students meet state and local student standards in core academic subjects, such as reading and math; offers students a broad array of enrichment activities that can complement their regular academic programs; and offers literacy and other educational services to the families of participating children.

Although funding for this program is limited, 21st Century Community Learning Centers assist high-poverty and low-performing schools, often urban schools, in providing extra services to aid students in educational achievement. Another similar example is the Chicago Public School's Community Schools Initiative (CSI), which was a groundbreaking effort to create a framework for community schooling within a large American urban school system. The CSI developed close partnerships with 45 lead agencies, allowing the school to remain open after normal school hours to provide resources such as gyms and computer rooms for the entire community's use. They welcomed parents as full partners; CSI implemented social and family support services and significantly improved the urban students' educational outcome while successfully creating a relatively safe and secure environment for urban students (Whalen, 2007). 21st Century Community Learning Centers are often considered afterschool or out of school (OST) programs. Afterschool programs provide a safe place for students to go after school so they are not left at home alone. Research on thirty-five OST studies indicated that these programs had positive effects on the achievement of at-risk African American children in urban settings, including increased time spent on reading and math and time to 'catch up' in their academics (Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow & Martin-Glenn, 2006).

Davis (2006) used narrative to examine the lives of 24 African American males to shed light on how these males constructed the meaning of their masculinity and male identity in and outside of schooling experiences. Davis made clear this study is not comparative, but rather is meant to document the voices of the African American youth



in his study, noting that their experiences were based on their context and social location. Further he noted, “narratives of young men serve as a rich approach to capture their perspectives on race and gender, and the role of schooling in their social development” (p. 290). The study participants all participated in the YouthBuild program, which is a nonprofit organization that helps out-of-work and drop-outs rebuild their lives by giving them classroom and job training. The 24 participants in Davis’ study were graduates of the YouthBuild program. Their narratives were reflective, since they were asked to think about their earlier schooling experiences and their decision to drop out of school. These African American males’ stories were representative of what is often cited in research literature regarding African American urban youth, including: difficult home lives, limited access to financial resources, living in poverty, and turning to the streets and criminal activity, such as selling drugs, to get by. Davis highlighted the importance of masculinity for African American males “as a way that young men ‘perform’ to enact some personal power given their limited social and learning positions in school” (p. 298). However, the performance of this masculinity was what teachers and administrators often perceived as deviant behavior. Davis cited how African American boys’ masculine behavior was often misunderstood by female teachers and other adults who misinterpreted them as disruptive, violent, etc. Davis’ study highlighted the importance of alternative educational opportunities, like the YouthBuild program, for students who were not successful in the rigid system of traditional education. Further, the personal narratives of these African American young men provided an opportunity for them to share their voices and experiences “on their own terms and from their own perspectives”

(p. 302), the hallmark of narrative research.

Not only does the physical surroundings of the community affect students' educational opportunities, members within the community can influence educational outcomes. Walker (2002) reviewed over 30 years of research from 1935 to 1969 with the hope of dismantling the assumption that African American schools were subpar because of lack of resources or due to a lack of similarity with White schools. Walker interviewed former teachers, students and members of these African American communities surrounding the segregated schools and found "seamless connections between these schools and the African American communities that supported and sustained them in spite of a larger political and social context of racism, racial violence and severe oppression" (Stuart Wells et al., 2004, p. 62). Walker was able to show how African American communities were able to positively impact their local communities even within the context of segregation and the Jim Crow era.

Carter's (2003) individual interviews with 44 low-income African American youth provide a glimpse into how these youth negotiated schooling through the lens of cultural capital. Carter described how when researchers discuss cultural capital, they were in-fact, referring to dominant cultural capital and often failed to consider non-dominant cultural capital. Dominant cultural capital is linked primarily to White, middle and upper class attributes. Whereas non-dominant cultural capital, for African American students in his study, included ways of being that help accentuate their "Blackness", such as language, dress, music, etc. Carter reminded us that "cultural capital is context-specific and its currency varies across different social spaces where struggles for

legitimation of power exists” (p. 137). Carter’s interviews showed that some students were able to maneuver between dominant and non-dominant cultural capitals, depending on the context. “For example, in one setting, youth might employ dominant cultural capital instrumentally to gain academic and socioeconomic mobility. In another setting, they might utilize their non-dominant cultural capital to express in-group affiliation” (p. 138). Of Carter’s interview participants, he found two females who were able to negotiate both forms of cultural capital, which helped with their achievement. Carter’s study uncovered and reaffirmed that teachers often served as gatekeepers and students who did not use the dominant cultural capital, were apt to have more difficulties in their schooling. Carter summarized that more research is needed to understand why some students choose to switch between cultures, and why others do not, and in the final summation, mentions the agentic nature by which students choose whether or not to adhere to the dominant or African American cultural capital, or switch between the two. Students develop their cultural capital, agency and multiple identities based on the culture and context in which they find themselves.

Outside of the academic school setting, Barrett (2010) explored the influence of religious involvement on the educational outcomes of urban African American adolescents. He discussed how religious involvement shaped students’ habitus in ways that strengthened educational outcomes, including: educational resilience, attainment, and achievement. Religious settings generally provided a safe environment and supportive adult figures that positively influenced African American youth (Barrett, 2010). When African American children were provided a safe and supportive environment with caring

adults, they were able to concentrate more fully on their academic achievement without safety or security concerns. Students were more apt to pursue education if they saw the benefits and utility of their education on their future success. Based on my conceptual framework, and the research discussed above, when students have a positive racial identity, critical race consciousness and a strong social support system, they are more likely to persist in school. Carter (2005, 2008), Perry (2003) and MacLeod (1987, 1995) documented the importance of students' beliefs in the utility of schooling for upward mobility. As previously discussed, valuing school and future orientation is developed through interactions with culture, community, physical environments, and social interactions (Stoddard et al., 2010). For example, if a student's parents value school, it is much more likely the student learn to share those values.

**Future Orientation – Goals and Utility of Schooling.** According to Stoddard et al. (2010) “future orientation is an individual's thoughts, plans, motivations, hopes, and feelings about his or her future. It provides the basis for setting goals and making plans for the future. A hopeful sense for the future can facilitate positive development and successful transition into adulthood” (p. 239). Students develop their expectations about the future starting at a young age with interactions through culture, education, family, social class, and religion. To reiterate the importance of positive social support systems, caring adults, and responsive and reliable parents facilitate a future orientation that is positive (Kerpelman et al., 2008). Future orientation is less about the behaviors they engage in or avoid, and much more about how they envision their futures. Environmental factors, like poverty and violence, can negatively affect a positive future orientation and

instead induce hopelessness and defeat. Thus, African American students who are able to develop a positive future orientation are more likely successfully transition into adulthood with clear goals and tangible plans for their futures. Further, future orientation is a protective factor to aid in success when high levels are reported. This is important because the converse is true; when future orientation is low or absent, it contributes to failure (Stoddard et al., 2010). Through interactions with their environment, social interactions, and their culture, students develop a set of future goals and values. Previous research draws a link between students who value and believe in the utility of schooling as part of their future orientation are more likely to persist.

In Carter's (2008) study, study results revealed students had positive attitudes and beliefs about the utility of schooling, as a result of having positive racial identities and critical race consciousness. Carter's (2008) findings "support Perry's (2003) notion that African Americans have a long history of viewing education as a vehicle for upward and economic mobility" (p. 20). Carter (2008) also found that all twenty students had a desire to pursue higher education, as most of them understood that a high school diploma alone was not the best option for their futures. A few of the student counter-narratives discussed the importance of higher education, networking for career success, proving people wrong that African American people can't go to college, and being a role model for other African American people. Further, these students' connectedness to the African American community, awareness of racism as a potential barrier to their success, and belief that they could be African American and persist in school, shaped their views about schooling as a necessary process for moving ahead in life (Oyserman et al., 1995).

MacLeod (1987, 1995) chronicled the lives of two groups of teenage boys, one group White – the “Hallway Hangers” and one group African American – the “Brothers”. His ethnography revealed the “Hallway Hangers” shared anti-achievement beliefs and resistance to schooling. They did not see schooling as an opportunity structure, but rather saw little opportunity for social mobility. The African American “Brothers” had a sharply contrasting view of schooling; they were optimistic toward their education and belief in achievement. Given that the “Brothers” and “Hallway Hangers” lived in the same housing project, the differences in beliefs were quite striking. Unlike the “Hallway Hangers” the “Brothers” regularly attended classes, did not smoke, drink or do drugs or get arrested. One of the “Brothers”, Derek, clearly articulated his belief in the benefits of education, “I know I want a good job when I get out. I know that I have to work hard in school. I mean, I want a good future. I don’t wanna be doing nothing for the rest of my life” (1987, p. 98). Most notably in MacLeod’s study is how the African American males bought into the achievement ideology, which MacLeod defined as “behave yourself, study hard, earn good grades, graduate with your class, go to college, get a good job, and make a lot of money” (p. 152), while the “Hallway Hangers” resisted this achievement ideology. Despite beliefs in the achievement ideology and benefits of education, the “Brothers” did not ultimately achieve the level of success they had envisioned for themselves because of greater social and structural inequalities.

O’Connor’s (1999) examination of youth she deemed resilient, understood the social constraints they faced, but despite these barriers, they all possessed a strong racial/ethnic identity and believed in the dominant narrative in America. The students

believed in the value and importance of education, hard work and effort in their ability to ‘make it’ in America (O’Connor, 1999, p. 608). Further, all of the students in O’Connor’s (1999) study indicated a desire to attend college, plans to obtain professional careers and believed these goals were within their reaches. O’Connor was quick to point out that these six resilient youth had a history of academic achievement, so their optimism toward their future could have a direct link to their past academic successes. However, optimism in and of itself did not lead to academic achievement (1999). The resilient youth in O’Connor’s study not only understood the utility of schooling for upward mobility, they had positive racial/ethnic identities, strong social support systems, mentors and models of success. Moreover, when these high-achieving, optimistic students experienced school incidents of racism, their caretakers confronted the teachers or filed formal complaints, exhibiting agency and power, whereas the other students’ caretakers in O’Connor’s larger study never challenged the school’s authority (p. 623). The resilient students in O’Connor’s (1997, 1999) studies confirmed all aspects of the conceptual framework I outline and also discussed how these students developed counter-narratives that aided in their persistence.

### **Summary**

Chapter Two was a review of the literature around persistence, organized by the conceptual framework and drew on a number of theories, especially CRT and intersectionality to elaborate the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework explained features of counter-narratives for African American Academic persistence, broadly situated in the culture and context which students find themselves. Nested within

culture and context, I described the importance of agency and identity for African American students. Critical race theory and intersectionality were introduced as the basis of the theoretical framework. While examples of CRT and narrative research were discussed to provide an overview of the factors of development of African American students' counter-narratives. Social support systems, funds of knowledge, culture and context, identity, and agency were discussed and pertinent educational research was cited. It is important to note that each student may or may not draw on each of the factors in their development of counter-narrative. Although all factors may be relevant, some students may rely more heavily on one factor and another factor may not even be present in their experiences of school persistence and attainment. In Chapter Three, I describe my research methods, including an introduction to qualitative research, greater detail about narrative research, explanation of study participants and research site, an overview of interviewing and the interviewing guide, explanation of other types of data collection and data analysis and discussion of triangulation and limitations.



## **Chapter 3: Research Methods**

### **Introduction**

#### **Narrative Research**

Narrative research is location and context specific. Thus, the location of the research, the time in which the research takes place, and the context in which it occurs means that the research is unique and does not duplicative to other research. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, narratives give people of color a voice in the research process and in the research literature, voices that are often muted. Student narratives give credence to their experiential knowledge by sharing their lived experiences and serves as a way to empower them to share information about their lives and racial subordination.

#### **Chapter Organization**

I begin this chapter by focusing on how qualitative research and narrative inquiry specifically advance knowledge around persistence. In subsequent sections, I describe the procedures for data collection, review the approach to interviewing, the collection of artifacts to enhance the interview content, and how identity mapping was used to understand the participants' journeys. Finally, the process for analyzing each narrative is described.

### **Research Design**

#### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is a method of inquiry used in various academic disciplines and is often difficult to define because it is cross disciplinary and complex. Further, qualitative research must be defined within the complex history in which it was

developed, often making it difficult to generalize or establish uniform standards (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Despite the difficulty in creating a definition, Denzin and Lincoln (2005), broadly defined qualitative research as:

A situated activity that locates the observer in the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self...qualitative research requires an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world...qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 3.).

Generally, qualitative researchers study a specific phenomenon to understand behavior and the reasons behind those behaviors. Critics argued that qualitative research is not scientific, only subjective or exploratory (Huber, 1995; Denzin, 1997). However, the environments qualitative researchers study are not static and require analysis of lived experiences, which is where the value of qualitative research trumps hard sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Qualitative research is especially valuable in education due to the changing nature and numerous variables present within an educational environment. Education is not static, and when studying people, geographical place and environment affect their behavior. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) outlined the five features that qualitative research shares. First, qualitative research is naturalistic, meaning the researcher gathers data within the natural environment and the data can be understood when it is collected in the environment in which it occurs. Qualitative researchers hope to understand the

circumstances resulting in a specific behavior and to understand the historical circumstances of that behavior. The next feature is descriptive data rather than numerical data within quantitative research. Qualitative data is often words, pictures, photographs, field notes, transcripts, artifacts, memos, etc. Further, qualitative researchers should not overlook anything including: gestures, voice and language, style of dress, body language, demeanor, etc. The next feature of qualitative research as Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described is a concern with process rather than with outcomes alone. Within educational research, students' behavior and/or classroom performance are affected by many different variables, including: their teachers, families, culture, etc. Qualitative researchers want to understand how the daily activities and interactions affect the student outcomes. The fourth feature discusses qualitative research as inductive, meaning researchers do not collect data to prove or disprove a specific hypothesis, but rather the theory is determined based on the data. The final feature is meaning making, how the researcher interprets the data to understand the individuals and phenomena studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Central to qualitative research is meaning. Max Weber's interpretive sociology, which stressed the importance of understanding, is the philosophical roots of social science qualitative research. Weber was interested in "describing the meaning individuals used to understand social circumstances rather than trying to understand the social facts that compromise a positivist social theory" (Hatch, 2002, p. 8). Further, Hatch summarized that all qualitative researchers want to understand the "meaning individuals construct in order to participate in their social lives" (2002, p. 9). Qualitative researchers determine meaning through in-depth study of individuals and complex

organizations like schools. Individual stories prove useful when studying schools because they give a personal experience to a complex system. Also, stories give meaning to the chosen place and time. Qualitative research using individual stories can fill in gaps where qualitative data generalizations leave off, as a way of contextualizing individuals' experiences within the larger population. Narrative research is an effective way to explore individuals' experiences in schools.

### **Narrative Research**

According to Casey (1995), narrative research is a blanket term used to describe the overarching category for many research practices including: autobiographies and biographies, personal accounts, personal narratives, narrative interviews, personal documents, life stories, documents of life, life histories, oral histories, ethnohistories, ethnobiographies, autoethnographies, ethnopsychology, person-centered ethnography, popular memory, etc. (211-212). Lieblich et al. (1998) described how within sociology and anthropology, narrative inquiry represents "the character or lifestyle of the specific subgroup in society, defined by their gender, race, religion, and so on" (p. 4). According to Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2008), narrative social research tends to fall into two academic traditions: humanist approach within sociology and psychology, and the poststructuralist, postmodern, psychoanalytic and deconstructionist approaches within the humanities. Unlike the humanist approach which is person-centered and holistic, such as case studies and biographies, the poststructuralist approach is concerned with "structure and content...[i]t assumed that multiple, disunified subjectivities were involved in the production and understanding of narratives...preoccupied with the social formations

shaping language and subjectivity” (p. 3). Despite the theoretical differences discussed above, the humanist and poststructuralist traditions do share some common tendencies, especially treating “narratives as modes of resistance to existing structures of power” (p. 4). Although narrative research is very interdisciplinary and the term encompasses many types of contemporary research practices, for the purposes of this paper, narrative inquiry and narrative research are used interchangeably. These terms describe a useful research technique where stories provide depth of one’s experiences and bridge communication with the broader social-contextual issues while allowing the readers access to individuals’ personality and identity. I follow the poststructuralist approach to narrative research.

Not only does narrative allow for glimpses into individual’s lives, it can also transmit cultural meaning. “People are meaning-generating organisms; they construct their identities and self-narratives from building blocks available in their common culture, above and beyond their individual experience” (Lieblich et al, 1998, pp. 7-8). Narrative inquiry allows deeper access to individuals’ lived experience, personal identity, and cultural meaning. Cultural meaning is important in narrative inquiry because individuals do not construct their identities and life experiences in a vacuum. Their interpersonal contexts, including their culture, are reflected in their self-image (Gergen, 1991; Van-Langenhove and Harre, 1993; Lieblich et al., 1998). According to Lieblich et al (1998), by “studying and interpreting self-narratives, the researcher can access not only the individual identity and its systems of meaning but also the tellers’ culture and social world”. In this way, narrative research provides individual stories as they fit within a broader cultural and social world.

Chase called narrative research a 'field in the making' (2005, p. 651). Creswell (2012) acknowledged that narrative is not always easy to define because it originated in the fields of literature, history, anthropology, sociology sociolinguistics, and education. Further, each field has slightly different approaches to narrative research. Although difficult to define given its broad usage in so many different fields, narrative research has some defining characteristics that are often present, although not all narrative projects contain all elements. According to Creswell (2012) these features include: stories collected from individuals about their lives and lived experiences; the stories explain individual experiences that may explain how they see themselves and their identities; data is gathered in myriad of ways, although interviews tend to be primary, with observation, documents, pictures and other qualitative data sources also used; the researcher shapes the narrative stories into chronological order although the participants may not have told the stories in that way; researchers may analyze the stories in many ways including structural, thematically, or dialogic; the researcher often highlights turning points, tensions or interruptions in the narrative stories; and the context as to where the stories take place or within a specific situation they take place are important to the researchers' re-telling of the stories (p 71-72).

Throughout social science research, narrative has been used. According to Elliott (2005), some of the common themes that embody these studies as the researchers' use of narrative include an interest in: people's lived experience and the nature of their experiences; process and change over time; self and representations of self. Further, the researchers often see themselves as a narrator and they want to empower the research

participants by “allowing them to contribute to determining what are the most salient themes in an area of research” (p. 6). The last point supports my choice of narrative research for this study. I want to facilitate the telling of the participants’ stories because their stories are often not heard and not a part of the majority culture. Herr and Anderson (2006) confirm the importance of narratives because they can “capture student voices and uncover the silencing that often takes place in well-intentioned educational institutions, and demonstrates how some of the multiple voices that exist within students and school communities are legitimized, while others are not” (p. 185). Many people know that the current design of schooling in the U.S favors the continued successes of White students while systematically denying opportunities for African American students to excel at school. There are many research studies that examine the reason for African American persistence issues and even narratives of their educational difficulties. However, stories of success are not as often highlighted. Taking the time to learn about how individuals’ persisted and attained in education despite many barriers provides a rich context and may coincide with larger research studies that explain persistence and attainment for African American students, or may uncover not previously discussed factors contributing to their academic success.

Milner (2008) uses narrative and counter-narratives as methodology and as tools for analysis. He conducted research in a U.S. urban school to understand how teachers counter-narratives influence them in their classrooms and how the teachers’ multiple identities, especially cultural and racial backgrounds, were represented in their counter-narratives. One of his research questions included “how do teachers’ stories “counter”

ways of knowing urban education in the U.S. and influence their interactions with their students and the learning opportunities available in the classroom” (p. 1573). Milner uses narratives as an analytical tool to make sense of the study and guide his decision-making and rationale. He explains:

I used tenets of the narrative in that I studied and observed phenomena and experiences of teachers—essentially their stories—in order to convey them in this text. I employed tenets of counter-narrative in that I was deliberate in the study to tell different types of stories, different than the negative portrayals of urban schools. I attempted to showcase narratives that paint urban schools, their teachers, and their students in a light of possibility instead of despondency. To be clear, in my view, these research methodologies (narrative and counter-narrative) are not distinctive frameworks of conducting and reporting research. Rather, they are interrelated, and I found dimensions of both central to the study and reporting of the evidence in this article (1577-1578).

Milner’s explanation of the use of narrative and counter-narratives for methodology and analysis relates closely to my own use of narrative as a method and tool for analysis. Clearly, my own point in telling the stories of the study participants was tell different stories than are usually heard of African American students, to paint the students in the light of positivity instead of despondency, as Milner states above. Milner’s study showcases urban teachers who were able to “counter, disrupt, and interrupts pervasion discourses that only focus on the negative characteristics of teachers and students in urban schools” (1573). His use of narrative and counter-narrative as both method and



analytical tool closely matches my own use of narrative inquiry and methodology.

Additional examples of narratives and counter-narratives as analytical tools are discussed in the narrative analysis section. Next access to and recruitment of study participants is discussed.

## **Access and Recruitment**

### **Research Site**

The first obstacle qualitative researchers must overcome is gaining access to the research site or community. Access is often difficult to gain due to political and social issues (Goodwin, Pope, Mort & Smith, 2011). Also, once access is gained, establishing rapport with the participants is an essential element in qualitative research (Goodwin et al., 2011). Developing rapport with students often poses challenges. Bogdan & Biklen (2007) posit that adults often find it challenging to listen to students or take them seriously because of cultural attitudes. Qualitative researchers must break the habit most adults have of directing conversations with children (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Despite these challenges, the goal is to find participants to interview who are willing to share their lived experiences on campus so I can understand their histories, community, culture and experiences.

The research site was a large public university in a large urban region in Southern California. I used the university's student affairs offices to locate a student organization whose focus is on African American students. Many such organizations exist at most universities, ranging from academic to social clubs focused on African American students. Most campuses have a multicultural or cross-cultural office dedicated to

serving students of color, so this type of office served as my starting point of contact in order to find groups of African American students who meet my participant criteria. I contacted the director of the cross-cultural center who connected me with a faculty member who taught a course whose primary enrolling students identified as students of color. The faculty member then contacted students in the class who self-identified as African American, provided them a copy of my recruitment flyer (appendix B), and asked them to contact me directly if they were interested in participating in my study. Her email yielded eight interested students, of which six were female. After some initial emails, I chose not to pursue interviews with three of the students due to scheduling conflicts and lapses in timely email response. Further, I wanted to interview both males and females, so selected both male students and three of the female students.

### **Study Participants**

Study participants were selected using purposeful sampling, in which the researcher “actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research question” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). Purposeful sampling may use simple demographic variables, but often the researcher develops a “framework of variables that might influence an individual’s contribution” (p. 523). Further, sampling requires the researcher to set boundaries and create a frame to ensure the study participants’ help explore the underlying study constructs. There are various types of sampling; the most relevant to this study include: stratified purposeful sampling, and combination or mixed sampling. Stratified purposeful “illustrates subgroups [and] facilitates comparisons”; combination or mixed sampling’s purpose is “triangulation, flexibility, [and] meets multiple interests

and needs” (p. 28). Five study participants were selected based on their willingness to participate and availability for scheduling interviews and ensuring their continued participation. All study participants self-identified as African Americans and were attending the large public university, which was the site of the research. I interviewed all five students in-depth, meaning a minimum of six hours of face-to-face interviewing, so I could gain a greater sense of their personal stories. Of the five students, I select three female and two male students.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Researchers who enter schools and examine students of color, if given the proper time commitment, should be able to understand the culture and implications of students’ knowledge, behavior and actions on their schooling outcomes. Although narrative research is interdisciplinary and defined differently depending on the theoretical stance a researcher follows, narrative research and narrative inquiry are always concerned with individuals’ stories. According to Creswell (2012), implementing narrative research consists of “focusing on studying one or two individuals, gathering data through the collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering the meaning or those experiences” (p. 70). In order to capture participants’ stories, interviewing is the primary mode of data collection.

As with other qualitative research, narrative qualitative studies do not rely only on one source of data, although interviews tend to provide the bulk of the research data. An interview is defined as “a purposeful conversation, usually between two people (but sometimes involving more) that is directed by one in order to get information” (Bogdan

& Biklen, 1998, p. 93). Beyond interviewing, I asked students to complete identity maps and I collect useful artifacts that can help to fill in gaps in the interview data. Examples of physical artifacts may include: documents such as emails, newspaper articles, letters and other correspondence; physical artifacts may refer to students' work, archival records, test scores, photographs, year books, etc.

### **Narrative interviewing**

Interviewing is a qualitative research technique that is very important to narrative research since, through interviewing and the resulting dialogue, researchers come to understand internal discourse around ideologies and identities and how they contribute to behaviors, attitudes and experiences. "Qualitative interviewing is a way of uncovering and exploring the meanings that underpin people's lives" (Arksey & Knight, 1999, p. 32). In qualitative research, interviewing is often used in one of two ways: as the primary source for data collection, or as a supplement to other techniques like participant observation and document collection. When interviewing is not the primary means of data collection, the researcher usually knows the participants prior to the interview and the interview is often less formal, but more like a conversation. There are two types of narrative interviewing, naturalist and constructivist. The naturalist approach is interested in "the temporal and meaningful aspects of the narrative form", whereas, constructivist approach focuses "on identifying meaning making *practices* and on understanding the ways in which people participate in the construction of their lives" (Elliot, 2005, p. 19). Although some researchers believe naturalist and constructivist approaches are in competition or mutually exclusive, other researchers view interviewing as a reflexive

process where they “treat interviews as both a topic and a resource” (p. 20). Interviews range from structured to unstructured. Structured interviews generally have standardized questions that are closed, whereas unstructured interviews have open-ended questions and seem more like informal and friendly conversations (Seidman, 2012). Throughout the interviewing process, I follow a semi-structured interviewing style, in which some questions are standardized across all of the study participants, but many of the questions remain open-ended, given structured interviews can limit participants’ responses. As to the benefit of more open-ended, unstructured interviews, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explained that “good interviews are ones in which the participants are at ease and talk freely about their points of view” (p. 136). Researchers should be flexible and not too rigid with interview participants to ensure they feel comfortable and at ease.

For this study, participants signed a consent form, and were thoroughly informed of the interviewing topics and process. I interviewed the study participants four to five times, with a total interview time of six to ten hours for each student. I developed a set of interview questions for each of the interviews, so all students were asked the same set of questions. Throughout the interviews, I asked open-ended questions and elicited further talk by using natural pauses and being careful to not interrupt the participants. Initial interviews included more broad and general questions to understand individual cultural backgrounds, experiences and beliefs. For example, I asked the students to describe their neighborhoods, the homes in which they grew up, their relationships with their parents, siblings and extended family members. Questions for subsequent interviews varied because I asked questions that incorporated previously divulged information. For

example, when I asked a student to expound upon their relationship with a teacher or family member, I included the previously discussed aspects of our conversation to build rapport and express my interest. Below is a general interview guide that was used to guide the first of the two to three interviews with the primary study participants. In the first interview, I collected historical accounts of the participants' childhood and background. The subsequent interviews focused much more on their more-recent and current experiences in college.

### **Interview Guide**

The list of questions below is in no way exhaustive or complete. These headings and questions served only as a starting point for the initial interviews with study participants. Subsequent interviews were based on the answers and individual stories established in the first interview, with a continual focus on the participants' racial/ethnic identity, agency, social, their culture and contexts, and the impact of these factors in their development of personal narratives. The first interview focused on background and demographic information, to really understand each individual. The second interview focused on their experience in school. During the third or fourth interview, students developed and shared their identity maps and discussed the artifacts that I asked them to bring. In the final interview (fourth for some and fifth for others), questions focused on their experiences with race and racism, as well as follow up questions from previous interviews.

#### **Background/Demographics.**

- Tell me about yourself.
- What is it important to know about your childhood and family?

- Any particularly memorable incidents or events from your childhood? Why these memories? What do they mean to you?

### **Schooling.**

- How would you summarize your experience of school?
- I'd like to hear about two or three memories that help show how you experienced school.
- Talk about your teachers, what do you remember about them?
- What role did friends and peers play in your life in school?
- What did you do after school?

### **Community.**

- Talk about how you experienced your community.
- Were there events, places, people, and activities in which you engaged? Expand on this.
- As you grew older, did you have any jobs in your neighborhood?

### **Racism.** Questions below adapted from O'Connor, 1999

- What can prevent students from doing well in school?
- Are there any people who have an advantage when it comes to doing well in school? If yes, who are they? Why do they have an advantage?
- What is the best way to get ahead in American society?
- Are there any people who have a better opportunity to get ahead today than in the past? If yes, who? Why do you think that?
- Which people have the worst chance of getting ahead and why?
- Do you think that people of all races have an equal chance of doing well in school? Why or why not?
- Would you say that African American students have an equal chance to do well in school? Why or why not?

### **Identity.** Questions adapted from Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers et al., 1998)

- How would you rate the importance of being African American for your self-image?
- How do you feel about attending a school that is predominantly White? Predominantly Asian/Pacific Islander?
- What are the biggest social inequalities facing American society today? In education?

- How does American society view African American people?

### **Identity Mapping**

As an additional form of qualitative research, I asked the study participants to complete an “identity map”. Sirin and Fine (2008) rejuvenated the idea of identity maps as a way to collect individual-level data that would not be easily achieved in their surveys or focus groups. They explained the novel approach and desired outcomes: “through these maps we tried to capture how young people creatively present their identities through drawings. The maps offered an additional opportunity to learn what goes on below the radar, that is, how identities are embedded in memory, fears, and emotions that might not be voiced in a focus group or survey” (P. 17). I incorporated this data collection technique as another way to understand the participants’ identities and selves. I followed Sirin and Fine’s (2008) instructions, which are as follows:

Specifically, we gave the participants a blank sheet of paper and drawing materials (ink pens and colored markers), and the following instructions: Using the materials provided with this survey, please draw a map of your many ethnic, religious, and social identities. This should be an illustration of how you see yourself as a Muslim American person. You are free to design the map as you wish. You can use drawings, colors, symbols, words...whatever you need to reflect your multiple selves (P. 17).

The major change I made was to replace the term Muslim American with African American, and I also removed the word religious, as its inclusion could elicit a stronger response focusing on religious affiliation as part of their social identities.



During the third interview, I asked each student to complete his/her identity map. I handed each student a blank piece of 8x11 white paper with the title “Identity Map” and the following descriptor:

Using the materials provided, please draw a map of your many ethnic, religious, cultural and social identities. This should be an illustration of how you see yourself as an African American person. You are free to design the map as you wish. You can use drawings, colors, symbols, words, whatever you need to reflect your multiple identities.

I provided the participants with a set of 32 colored pencils, a few black and blue pens, and a standard set of Crayola markers. I set all of the materials in front of them and also had a stack of white paper so they could use more than one sheet if they chose. I allowed the students to have as much time as they wanted to create the maps. Three of the students spent significant time on drawing their maps, up to 30 minutes. Two of the students, both females, spent significantly less time on their maps, approximately 10-15 minutes. Upon completion of their maps, I asked the students to explain their maps in detail and recorded the interview, along with all of the other interviews, so the dialogue could be transcribed and coded later.

### **Artifacts Collection**

During the third or fourth interview, I asked students to bring in three artifacts. I asked them to bring in items that reminded them of their schooling experience, and/or represented some aspect of their identity and sense of self. According to Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtler (2010), artifacts are various objects that can be found or produced

in schools. According to Gabrielian et al. (2008), “artifacts are pieces of material culture that characterizes the social setting” P. 157). Examples of artifacts include textbooks, athletic equipment, yearbooks, photographs, videos, homework assignments, lesson plans, etc. Artifacts can be used to strengthen interviews because they may be used to explain the nature of education within the particular environment and further describe underlying assumptions within the school or educational setting. According to Hodder (1994), artifacts are the “intended or unintended residues of human activity, given alternative insights into the ways in which people perceive and fashion their lives” (p. 304). Artifacts can be analyzed by understanding how they fit within a given context and their function within the social setting (Gabrielian et al., 2008). The main benefit of using artifacts in educational research is that the artifacts do not influence the social setting that is examined, while the major disadvantage is that it is often difficult to interpret the significance and meaning of the artifacts because making relevant connections to the context can be subjective and inferential (Hatch, 2002).

I asked the students to bring in three items they wanted to share. I asked them to bring items that were important to them. The items could represent an aspect of their personality, their personal history, their experiences in school, their family/community, their identities, etc. During the interview in which the students brought their artifacts, I asked them pointed questions so they could explain what artifacts they brought and why each was significant to their lives. The decision to include artifacts depended on their usefulness and whether their inclusion benefited the research with being too subjective. As I collected interviews, identity maps and artifacts, data analysis commenced.

## **Narrative Analysis**

Though this research primarily employs a narrative approach to data analysis, the ultimate objective of this study is to understand the characteristics of successful African American students. As problem-driven qualitative research, it is critical to use the tools that best enhance understanding of the factors at play. Qualitative research broadly calls for creating the richest picture, which warrants fluidity. As such, there are times where the analysis could be considered more ethnographic in nature since both ethnography and narrative examine how individuals interact with the world around them. However, there are several research studies similar in nature that effectively utilized narrative inquiry, which is discussed below.

Within narrative research there are four different forms of data analysis, according to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998). These include: holistic-context, categorical-context, holistic-form and categorical-form. The holistic-context mode “uses the life story of an individual and focuses on the content presented by it” (p. 13). Holistic-context mode most closely matches case studies. The holistic-form mode of analysis is used when a researcher focuses on the “plot or structure of complete life stories” and the researcher looks for the turning point or climax of the story (p. 13). The categorical-context mode of data analysis, often referred to as content analysis, is used when researchers use categories to organize the data. “Categories of the studied topic are defined, and separate utterances of the text are extracted, classified, and gathered into these categories/groups” (p. 13). Finally, categorical-form mode of analysis refers to when researchers use “discrete stylistic or linguistic characteristics of defined unites of

the narrative” (p. 13). Despite the differentiation of the four modes, Lieblich et al. explained that while doing narrative research and data analysis, categories may not always be so clear-cut and “[f]orm is not always easily separated from the content of the story” (p. 14). Based on Lieblich et al.’s explanation of the four modes of data analysis, I anticipate using the categorical-context mode of data analysis. I code my data using emerging categories.

Once the data collection is complete, the next step in the research process is analyzing the data through coding. Madison (2005) defines coding as the “process of grouping together themes and categories that you have accumulated in the field” (p. 36). First, I analyze the data to search for repetition of topics, patterns, and regularities, which become coding categories (Bogden & Biklen, 1982). Coding categories are “a means of sorting the descriptive data you have collected...so that the material bearing on a given topic can be physically separated from other data” (p. 156). The very act of coding and sorting often creates a point of view to aid in analysis (Madison, 2005). According to Bogden & Biklen (1982) there are various coding categories that can be developed including: setting/context codes; situation codes; perceptions held by participants’ codes; participants’ ways of thinking codes; process codes; activity codes; event codes; strategy codes; relationship and social structure codes; and methods codes. (p. 157-162). During the research process, I may find patterns and emerging themes throughout my research and data collection and include those categories in my notes for future use (Bogden & Biklen, 1982). After completion of coding, I continued to analyze the data, and write my with the hope of gaining some insights and conclusions on the students’ narratives.

There are several studies where narratives and counter-narratives are used as analytical tools for an alternative lens of interpreting the experiences of African American students and provide counter-narratives that challenge the master narratives of African American student achievement (Berry, 2003, 2008; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Lattimore, 2005; Martin, 2006; McGlamery & Mitchell, 2000; Stinson, 2006; Thompson & Lewis, 2005) (Berry, Thunder, McClain, 2011). See Chapter Two for further explanation of Berry et al.'s (2011) discussion of the counter-narratives of African American fifth through seventh grade boys and their racial and math identity development.

Horsford (2009) uses counter-narratives of Black superintendents to discuss their stories of segregation and desegregation. She uses Critical Race Theory for analysis of the participants' reflections of living in segregated communities. She also discusses the need for sharing the stories of Black superintendents because they are unique and informed perspectives that are noticeably absent when discussing the children, families and communities they serve. She uses a CRT methodology to present the counter-narratives within a framework that acknowledges race and racism as central to the U.S. education system. According to Horsford (2009), she uses the term counter-narrative:

[A]s an application of CRT and the product of counterstorytelling, in the form of personal stories or narratives [...] that are critical to construction and revealing formerly silenced racialized truths and realities and dismantling the prevailing notions of education fairness [...] Therefore, counterstorytelling is a valuable methodology not only in its extension or critique of majoritarian narratives [...]

but also through the voice it grants silenced perspectives that have the potential to advance our understanding of the challenges and possibilities in school communities of color (175-176).

In her analysis, Horsford finds that despite overt racism and limited educational resources, the superintendents' stories highlight their supportive families, communities, and teachers. Their stories, collectively, describe how their home, school and community connections served as strength that enabled the Black students to succeed. Their counter-narratives opposed the "the commonly held assumptions that all-Black schools were inherently inferior beyond their lack of adequate funding, facilities, and resources." (p. 177). To analyze and report on her findings, Horsford reconstructed their counter-narratives based on the interviews and responses of eight educators who attended segregated schools. Horsford's (2009) study is an excellent example of a qualitative study using narrative inquiry within her methods and analysis, while solidly situated in a CRT framework. As with my study, she reconstructs the participants counter-narratives to describe their experiences within the American educational system, especially how race and racism influenced their experiences.

### **Trustworthiness and Triangulation**

Trustworthiness requires that the researcher ensure: 1) the research questions are clearly written and the question is substantiated; 2) the study design is appropriate for the questions; 3) the sampling strategies employed were purposeful and appropriate; 4) data are collected and managed systematically; and 5) data are analyzed thoroughly and correctly (Russell, Gregory, Ploeg, DiCenso, & Guyatt, 2005). According to Guba and

Lincoln (1985), the criteria for trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Morse et al., 2002). Good qualitative research means that the researcher is constantly checking and verifying, “moving back and forth between design and implementation to ensure congruence among question formulation, literature, recruitment, data collection strategies, and analysis” (Morse et al, 2002, p. 17). One strategy that aids in the verification and trustworthiness of the study is triangulation.

Triangulation of data is a strategy that supports the principles of qualitative research. Triangulation is defined as “an attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint” (Cohen & Manion, 1986, p. 254). In data collection, O’Donoghue and Punch (2003) suggested that triangulation allows for “cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data” (p. 78). Creswell and Miller (2000), defined triangulation as “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (p. 126). These definitions explain the benefits of collecting data from multiple sources. Since I collect data using interviews, identity maps, and artifacts collection, there are multiple types of data from various perspectives and experiences. This helps with validating the data while adding trustworthiness to the quality of the qualitative research design. The comparison of data enhances its quality based on idea convergence and confirmation of research findings (Knafl & Breitmayer, 1989). Although some qualitative researchers suggest the process of member checking, where the researcher shares the data with the study participants, I did not employ this method. Instead, I

ensured my field notes were properly maintained. I initially considered the process of double-coding, where I first code the data and then after a period of time I would return to the same data set and code the data once again to compare the results (Krefting, 1991). Instead, I read through the interviews several times and revised and condensed my codes and categories continuously.

### **Limitations**

Narrative research is challenging for many reasons. The main issue with narrative research is whether the narrative reflects the author's life and lived-experience or if the narrative is co-constructed due to the author and researcher's interaction. Also, some researchers question the validity of narrative research since it is not the absolute truth, but a relative truth, as told by the author. However, narrative is not meant to be historical truth, it is rather a narrative truth. The researcher is not determining if events actually happened, he/she is trying to understand the author's experience and the meaning they derived from that experience. "Storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for the factual occurrence of the events reported as stories" (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 479). According to Lieblich et al., narrative cannot be taken at face value as an accurate portrayal of reality, because individuals' stories "allow for a wide periphery for freedom of individuality and creativity in selection, addition to, emphasis on, and interpretation of these remembered facts" (1998, p. 8). Stating clearly that the narrative truth is a relative one and taking that version of truth at face value can ease some of the negative expectations a reader might have regarding the validity of the narrative.

Another issue in narrative research is being able to express the participants'



stories with the actual meaning that the participant experienced. There are four sources for the disjunction between a person's actual experience and meaning of that experience and the story description he/she gives. The four limits include: limits of language to capture the complexity and depth of experienced meaning; the limits of reflection to bring notice to the layers of meaning that are outside of awareness; the resistance of people to reveal fully the entire complexity of felt meanings; the complexity caused by the co-creation of the texts between the interviewer and participant (Polikngorne, 2007, p. 480). The researcher can overcome some of these issues by returning to the participants to ask for clarification and ask follow-up questions to fill in holes in the text.

### **Summary**

Chapter three provided an overview of qualitative research and narrative research while introducing the intended research study. I asked for support in finding five African American students, two of whom were young men and the other three young women. I interviewed each student four times over a six week period of time, with the exception of one male student who I interviewed 5 times, to complete all aspects of the interview protocol. As I was interviewing, I began to code the transcripts to inform the subsequent interviews. The artifacts and identity maps became part of the analysis process to confirm or extend my understanding of each narrative. Since I also coded each interview, looking for cross-individual themes, the narratives became both individual stories and cross-case themes. In the next chapter, I describe my findings.

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

### **Introduction**

In Chapter Four, I outline the results of the data, including key student narratives about their educational persistence, and an analysis of their identity maps and artifacts. Chapter Four begins with a brief overview of the student demographics, an analysis of culture and context, identity, and agency, and a summary of the students' identity maps and relevant artifacts.

Upon completion of four to five in-depth interviews with each of five African American college students, data were coded and analyzed to determine the study results. The interviews and identity maps quickly and obviously confirmed aspects of the conceptual framework. For example, the importance of culture and context, specifically the significance of social support systems in educational persistence was immediately evident; while other aspects of the conceptual framework, especially agency and identity, required deeper analysis for some of the students.

### **Student Demographics**

I recruited five students participate in the research study, which included between 6 and 10 hours of intensive interviews with each student. All five students were current college students at a large public research institution in the southwestern United States. The university's student demographics were predominately Asian/Asian Pacific Islander, with less than 2% of student self-identifying as Black or African American. All five students interviewed self-identified as African American or Black, but two of them also self-identified as bi-racial, only through further prompting during interviews. Three of the

students interviewed were female and two were male. The two males were also both college seniors, graduating mere weeks after our interviewed were completed. Two of the females were juniors and one was a sophomore. Two of the students, one male and one female, transferred to the university in their third year after attending a local community or junior college. Two of the five students self-identified as low-income, based on times of resource scarcity and times of shelter and food insecurity. Two of the students lived on the cusp of working poor and middle class, and one of the students would be considered middle income, coming from a self-described affluent community. The lowest income students interviewed spent the majority of their lives solely living with their mothers, although one of the two also had an influential step-father during his elementary school years. The lower-middle income and middle income youths lived in households with both a mother and a father or step-father. Three of the student interviewed had more than one sibling, step or half-siblings, one of the students interviewed had only one sibling and the final student was an only-child. This basic demographic information is meant to provide an overall picture of the students, with further exploration into ways in which their demographics influenced their personal and educational experiences.

### **Culture and Context**

The purpose of exploring students' narratives is to gain a greater sense of how context, place and time affect students' educational experience and academic persistence. As a qualitative researcher, I must take into consideration each students' place, environment, culture, community, and their interactions with those aspects of their context to more clearly understand the entire picture of their schooling experience and

context's role in their persistence. For the purposes of this discussion, context refers to all aspects of the students' lives, their community, family structure and social support systems, and the physical environment in which they lived.

Acknowledging the positive aspects of African American families and communities provides a counter-narrative to the majoritarian belief that urban poor families and communities do not promote a positive environment or value education. It is true that nearly half of poor black children live in impoverished neighborhoods (Austin, 2013). Urban and impoverished neighborhoods, which tend to include a larger portion of African Americans, are most commonly associated with issues such as drugs, gangs and violence. These issues become the primary defining characteristics of the dominant, not the counter-narrative, which erases the resilience and fortitude of people within these communities (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Just because people live in poverty does not mean that their lives are impoverished, rather, they lack access to financial wealth. Instead, they may have access to social capital in the form of tightly connected friendships, access to a barter economy, and the benefit of lives shared across homes, generations, and contact with adults. The counter-narrative is that African American families build community and work across generations, they pass knowledge from one family to another. Their resilience comes from the social support system they built into fabric of the community. Resilience is a community endeavor, knowledge that exists inside the community is not valued by the dominant culture.

Certainly, some households do struggle with issues such as drugs, gangs and violence, but they should not define these families and communities. "What is often

invisible is that the normative characteristic of these households is not dysfunction...these people are living, working, thinking, worrying, and caring [...we must] re-present these households in a way that is respectful to issues of voice, representation and authenticity.” (Gonzalez et al., 2005, p. ix-x). Neighborhoods and communities, whether urban or not, contribute to learning because learning happens everywhere, it is a social process. “Students’ learning is bound within larger contextual, historical, political, and ideological frameworks that affect students’ lives.” The important thing to consider about these urban neighborhoods is the community interaction and the concepts of funds of knowledge which acknowledges that all people “are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., 2005, p. x). Community and family interactions contribute to the fund of knowledge and students’ learning. There is this pervasive majoritarian narrative that poor and minoritized students share a culture of poverty that impedes school achievement. This narrative has led to the development of various cultural deficit models in education where minoritized students are viewed for their deficiencies, especially related to their socialization and language practices and their orientation for academic achievement (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Rather than looking at these communities with a deficit model, they should be viewed for their resources.

By sharing students’ counter-narratives about their interactions with their social support systems and their environment, we can examine these communities through the lens of funds of knowledge. That community occupies the “space between structure and agency, between the received historical circumstances of a group, and the infinite

variations that social agents are able to negotiate within a structure” (Gonzalez et al., 2005, p. 43). Thus, community interactions aid in agency, as do sharing counter-narratives. “Embedded within the experience of narrating one’s own particular life trajectory is the extraction of deeper meanings from our own experiences. As family members narrated the stories of how they got to where they are, everyday experiences came to be imbued with insights and coherence that led to alternate forms of learning.” (Gonzalez et al., 2005, p. 12). As with Gonzalez et al.’s research, the students in this study share stories of their everyday lives in their communities that are punctuated with examples of funds of knowledge, how their community and familial interactions aided in their academic persistence. Despite the funds of knowledge within their communities and social support systems, four of the five students I interviewed, at some point in their childhoods, lived in what they described as unsafe neighborhoods. This is important to note because their ability to persist, despite the majoritarian narrative of this culture of poverty, describes the positive impact of their communities and social support systems despite their unsafe neighborhoods.

### **Socio Economic Status**

When I asked La Sondra about her neighborhood and why her mom moved her from her first home she said, “It just got more violent. I mean, I was young, but I would guess it was gang-related stuff.” When I prompted her to explain further she said, “yeah, I wouldn’t even have thought anything of it if she [my mom] hadn’t have said anything [like] come inside at this time, come inside. It’s not safe outside.” She further clarified the unsafe environment by reminding me, “I think I told you last time about the drive-by

that was like down the street.” From an outside, majoritarian perspective, La Sondra’s childhood seems unsafe because she grew up in a neighborhood with shootings, drugs and other physical violence. However, La Sondra’s counter-narrative is that in her life, she did not view her home or neighborhood as unsafe. It was life as she knew it and she did not find anything about her neighborhood remarkable. Her mother and family created a life within a bubble, where La Sondra was unaware of outward danger, because she had a nurturing mother and extended family who kept her safe and secure. So much so, she was not even aware of external danger. La Sondra’s comments confirm her family created a nurturing environment that is counter to the dominant narrative of African American communities that are viewed as unsafe and dangerous. Even though the dominant, external perspective is one of danger, children who live with families that create safe spaces where their children can enjoy their childhoods and are not ripped apart (or even aware) of the external violence.

Some of the narratives included stories of family members and friends who were arrested, beaten up, threatened with violence, and involved in drugs or other violent crimes, mimicking the majoritarian narrative of African American communities. However, the counter-narrative is the fact that the vast majority of these stories were unremarkable and not significant to the students’ lives, sense of self or sense of well-being. They brushed them off and made clear that these experiences did not have a significant influence on their lives. Although none of the students were directly involved in violent crimes, all four of them witnessed violence, arrests, and other unsafe activities. La Sondra, witnessed her father’s arrest:

Yeah, I watched the whole thing. He had picked me up from school, when we lived in Moreno valley. We lived in like when we first got there it was an ok neighborhood, but towards the end it was kind of a bad neighborhood so that's why my mom wanted to move. So um, he picked me up from school and then took me to my friend's house who lived directly across the street and then I guess he went and did whatever he did and came back to the house to look through everything so I guess there was like DEA, FBI kinda stuff there and they had the jackets on and stuff and we were like watching from the window.

As I prompted for more details, she explained that her family would never fully disclose why he was arrested, but she said it was drug-related, that her mom initially met her father because he was her aunt's dealer (her mom's sister). La Sondra described the arrest and subsequent visits to the prison to visit her father in a very nonchalant way. When I asked her about the arrest, she simply said, "yeah, I think I was just too young to care." Further, La Sondra's nonchalant attitude further provides evidence to her counter-narrative that her mother and extended family created an insular, safe and secure environment where even major events like seeing her father's arrest, did not affect her in any significant way.

Four of the five students interviewed discussed issues of violence, drugs, arrests, family member incarcerations, and bullying, but the fifth student, Gail came from a community where she did not experience or witness violence, overt racism or outward inequities. She grew up in a middle to middle-upper class suburb in the Pacific Northwest. She lived in the same ranch-style home her entire life in a community where



the majority of people identified as White. Unlike the other students, the vast majority of Gail's high school classmates attended college:

Gail: I lived in a suburban area, with like mostly White people, I'm probably, I feel like I'm one of like 100 Black people maybe [...] Yeah. I think, I don't remember if I was the only Black kid. There might have been one other one, I don't remember. There were no Asian people or brown people.

Stacey: Do you remember your parents talking to you about college?

Gail: I remember them saying like, if you want to do this then you need to go to college and towards maybe sophomore year of high school, like the way they talked about it, it was implied that I was going to go but it was never like, they weren't pushy about it, yeah.

Stacey: Did you get the sense that they just kind of expected you would go?

Gail: Yeah. Yeah, it was like their expectation.

Stacey: Did most people in your high school go to college?

Gail: Yeah.

The culture and context in which Gail lived the majority of the students pursued higher education. Gail's family is middle-class, so she did not experience the same issues as lower-income African American families. According to Pattillo (2013), middle-class African American families have more in common with middle-class White families, such as owning their own homes, having gone to college, having stable jobs and less likely to be unemployed. Gail's parents owned their home, they had some higher education, and they did have stable jobs. Gail did not experience the many environmental inequalities

the other students experienced, thus her access to resources and seeing her classmates go on to college removed some of the barriers to access that some African American students face.

In comparison to Gail, Jayla experienced many environmental constraints that limited her access to resources and education, but despite systemic barriers, Jayla persisted. Jayla lived in the lowest income area of a large metropolitan city on the west coast. Growing up, she always lived with her mom and from time to time would live with other family members, like her grandparents, usually due to her mom losing a job or not being able to afford rent. When I asked Jayla what could be done to help African American students attend college, she described inequitable environments and resources:

There's no way that that's [going to college] going to be able to work considering my resources, my stature, my abilities, my surroundings, my environment. That's a big thing too, the environment. [...] Quality of air, water, food, usually there's liquor stores [...] so it's just like even for me to even be able to breathe or live or eat well that's a problem. So, those environmental that stuff has to change.

Jayla eloquently described the environmental inequalities she and many other African American people face due to systemic inequalities that can negatively impact their future orientation and ability to persist in school. Jayla described, what Ladson-Billings (2006) describes as education debt, the “cumulative effect of poor education, poor housing, poor health care and poor government services create a bifurcated society that leaves more than its children behind” (p. 10). Jayla points out the environmental inequities that many African American experience. When students lack access to basic necessities of life and

live in unsafe and unhealthy environments, it requires much more effort to persist academically in school. (Tillman, 2008; Strayhorn 2009). However, despite the fact that four of the students I interviewed lived in often unsafe environments, they all managed to persist and gain access to a high quality four-year institution. What was clear from the students' narratives is that they often did not view their own neighborhoods or lived-experiences as unsafe, because their families provided a safe environment and childhood, counter to the dominant narrative.

It is important to mention Gail's outlier experience, growing up in a middle-class neighborhood where the majority of her peers attended college, because her middle-class status positively influenced her persistence. She did not experience the same level of educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) as the other four students I interviewed, although educational debt is cumulative and generational. However, her neighborhood, context and culture were not the only drivers, as her older sister, growing up in the same environment, never went to college. Gail lived in a cultural context in which attending college was part of the normal activity. It was not just the physical wealth of a middle-class neighborhood, but rather the social milieu where education was taking place.

Despite the fact that four of the five student interviewed fall within the majoritarian narrative of the culture of poverty, of persisting despite the odds, it is important to recognize the counter-narrative. In this case, the counter-narrative is to consider the funds of knowledge approach (Gonzalez et al., 2005), the great value the community support provided to aid in academic persistence. These four students who grew up in poor neighborhoods surrounded by violence, drugs and insecure access to

resources possessed other social and cultural capital, specifically their social support systems that insulated them from the dominant view of the unsafe environment. Their families, community members, peers, teachers, mentors and friends nurtured them in their lives and educational endeavors, so they were able to view themselves as talented and capable.

### **Sources of Funds of Knowledge**

Of all the factors positively influencing African American student persistence among the five students interviewed, a strong social support system was the most enduring and significant factor for all of the students. Noguera's (2003) research emphasized the importance of social support and teacher involvement in positively influencing the performance of African American students. Carla O'Connor (1997) discussed how "resilient youths seemed to have received distinct messages (via the actions and ideologies of their significant others) which conveyed that oppression and injustice can be actively resisted and need not be interpreted as a given." (p. 621). In O'Connor's work, she emphasized how the messages that African American youth received from their significant others "conveyed the agency that resides (even when dormant) within marginal communities". In this small sample, I quickly confirmed the significance of a strong social support system in the persistence of all five students interviewed. As a broad category, social support systems aided in students' persistence, but the type of social support influence varied. Michael summarizes the significance of social support in academic persistence, as well as the value his family placed on education:

I have a very good support system that value education and that came from our culture, our [Nigerian] culture values education. I think that's the single most reason why I succeeded because the support system told me that if you don't get an education there is nothing you can do in society. Like literally nothing. And that has been engrained in my head since childhood. Just doing the best in school and I would get punished for it if I didn't and I'd get punished if I didn't listen and I feel like that's what the Black society needs. A father and a mother figure to tell kids this is what you need to do to succeed because you won't be taken seriously in society if you don't have an education. I feel like that's the single most thing that we can do in the Black community to fix the problems that we're having.

Michael's statement not only acknowledges the importance of social support and family support, he also views education as an equalizer to fix some of the African American community's problems. His comments contradict the majoritarian narrative of how African American people don't value education. In fact, low-income parents value education just as much as wealthier parents do (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

In Chapter Two, I categorized social support into three groups, mentors teachers and counselors, parents and family and community support. Based on the interviews and vision mapping, the organization has expanded to include the following four categories of social support: parents; siblings; mentors, teachers and counselors; and extended family.

**Parents.** Each student had a unique home life and family dynamic, yet each of their parents (or parent) positively influenced their academic persistence, through

encouragement, and sometimes punishment. All five students received consistent and constant support from their parents, which compliments Jeynes (2005) assertion that parent involvement positively relates to academic achievement among urban students.

Jerome grew up in a working poor household. He bounced around from apartment to apartment, sometimes living with relatives. As a toddler, Jerome lived with his mom and dad, but that was short-lived. Jerome's mother and father divorced when he was only three years old. Jerome recounts, "my first legitimate memory of him was him pulling a knife on my mom. That's what got us to leave, so you know, in the back of my mind I was like, oh, he ain't nothing to me". After this violent incident, Jerome did not reconnect with his father again until late elementary school.

From an outside dominant perspective, Jerome's early experience witnessing his father's violence might be a seminal experience in his childhood. However, like La Sondra's mother, Jerome's mother created a safe and secure environment, protecting him from his father and providing for him and his two siblings. When I asked Jerome to tell me about his mom, he responded:

The best woman I know, you know. She worked, like I said, she worked a lot, but you know, it was what she had to do, you know? She still made time for birthdays and Christmas and throw all these kind of parties and keep the house clean and cook dinner when she came home, made sure there was stuff there for breakfast in the morning. Like, she did everything you know? I think, you know, I've inherited a lot from her, just like her mannerisms and stuff like that even though, I guess you could say she wasn't around as much but still she left an impact.

Jerome clearly articulates his pride in his mother for holding his family together and supporting them. Jerome's mother's role as family provider and doer of everything shows the complexity that many single African American mother's experience. "The complex interplay between Black motherhood and family provider role under oppressive conditions and economic restructuring highlights the importance of understanding Black mothers' resilience, strength, and adaptations in managing these role strains" (Mendenhall, Bowman, & Zhang, 2013, p. 77). Undoubtedly, Jerome's mother instilled in him some of her strength, resilience and adaptive nature to aid in his academic persistence. Although his birth father was not present in Jerome's life for many years, he had a positive male role model in his step-father.

Soon after Jerome's birth father left the home, Jerome's step-father moved in and lived with Jerome and his family until Jerome was in late elementary school. Jerome fondly remembers his stepfather, who he called a "pivotal force" during his elementary school years. His step-father was a positive male role model who was home to care for Jerome and his two siblings afterschool and was cohesive glue for his family, while his mom worked:

Moms worked all the time, so we, like, she would work from eight to four, come home, make dinner and then she had a night job from like six until like two in the morning. So we didn't, like, we didn't see her as much as we wanted to except for like weekends and stuff, but you know, we understood that she was working. My stepdad, I guess he was a more pivotal force [...] when he left we sad, like we did a lot of things like family wise that we liked, as a family a lot of time on the

weekends [...] like we all just kind of hung out and I think that's kind of what kept, because at that time, me and my brother, we didn't fight as much. Me and my sister, we were probably, that was the closest we've been, you know? Was during those times and stuff. So like as a family I think I want to say we were pretty cohesive and then after he left like my brother started doing more of his own thing.

Jerome's strong familial connection with his step-father, mother and siblings is a powerful example of the importance of social support. Jerome's statement offers a counter-narrative that low-income and at-risk populations have lower achievement due to family stress and lower parental educational levels (Davis-Kean, 2005). Jerome certainly experienced family stressors and his mom, dad and step-dad did not have higher education.

Despite his mom worked long hours and was only home to make dinner, her influence on Jerome's academic persistence was evident:

My mom, she was always pushing like do well in school and like when report cards would come out, before it was like letter grades, it was like the plus and all of that stuff, so mine would always be a bunch of plusses and stuff and she was like keep it up keep it up and like, after awhile she started like, okay, you have a certain amount of plusses I'm going to get you this money. Money became also my incentive to do good.

Jerome's mom remained a cheerleader but also clearly voiced her expectations that he would attend college. "She was like oh that's, you're going to college. [... Your brother] is



going to go to college, you're going to go to college, your sister's gonna go to college, you know, so it was just like that.” Jerome’s mom valued higher education, which was evident through her praise and through her blanket statements about all of her children attending college. Further, Jerome’s mom’s role as supporter and encourager is an example of a counter-narrative to the pervasive view of single African American mothers, where the absence of fathers is viewed as the reason for the failure of African American boys. There is a recurring theme that African American mothers are “unable to provide the appropriate and necessary supports and guidance for their boys” (James, 2012, p. 12). Jerome’s mother’s positive influence and role in his life is an example of how single African American mothers should be viewed for their value rather than their deficits.

Like Jerome, Jayla grew up in a working poor neighborhood. She lived with her mom, with times when she also lived with other family members and her grandparents. She never had a father figure in her life. Like Jerome, Jayla’s mom also played a pivotal role in her decision to attend college. “I’m here because my mother didn’t go to college...yeah, just because she did high school but she didn’t go to college but she really wanted to so [me going] was the next best thing.” Because Jayla’s mom never attended college, she really pushed for her daughter to attend. Further, she took an active role in academic decisions on behalf of her daughter. Jayla describes her mother’s role in academic decisions:

I wanted to go to my local high school, which is where all my friends were going, my mom said no. She really wanted me to go somewhere where my academics

would go up [...] so that school was like the best choice and plus she heard that the school was good, it was real good and then on top of that, she always looked at like the academics of the school and the school was new at the time too.

The dialogue above outlines the high degree of Jayla's mom's involvement with her daughter's education. She researched good schools and made the critical decision to send her daughter to a school with higher academic standards. Despite her mom not having a college degree and coming from a low-income background, Jayla and her mom viewed education as a way out of their difficult financial situation and environment. When I asked Jayla why she decided to go to college she said, "Because for me I didn't have another option and this was like the best, this was the best choice for me at the time considering that I was homeless before I came here. So coming here and having food and shelter was like the best thing for me despite the fact that I was going to be in debt." The fact that Jayla's mom encouraged her to go to college is an example of a counter-narrative to the dominant view of unmarried African American mothers of female-headed households, which are often viewed as dysfunctional and producing damaged children (Griffith, 2006).

Of the five students I interviewed, Michael was the only student whose parents had college degrees. His father came from Nigeria to the U.S. to attend college and his mom, also from Nigeria, completed her nursing degree while Michael was in elementary school. Michael's family valued education and it was an overt expectation that he and his siblings would attend college. "They didn't talk to me about it but I knew I had no choice. [...] cause my dad went to college and my mom went to college at the time too [...]"

Yeah, it was never a question in high school. Like I just knew that after high school I'm going to have to go to college.” Since both Michael’s parents went to college, and his older sister went to college, he knew it was an expectation that he would also attend college. Michael’s family is representative of the African American immigrant population in the U.S., who tend to have more education and higher incomes compared to native African Americans. African American immigrants are one of the most educated immigrant groups in the country (Gordon, 2013). Michael’s parents, both immigrants from Nigeria, obtained college degrees in the U.S. Unlike Michael’s parents, La Sondra’s mother did not go to college.

Despite not attending college herself, La Sondra’s mother played an active role in her daughter’s education by building relationships with her teachers and counselors:

Her and my counselor were cool, so she was like, even though she worked all the time, she was still like involved with like me and school and stuff. Like when I first had that English class that I was struggling with, like, she like called the teacher and asked "why does she have this grade?" and like that's when I started to like, I was already like working on it with her but in like, in AVID<sup>2</sup> we'd have to get progress reports and we'd get them signed by our parents every two weeks, so when she saw like 86, saw it trickling down she called the teacher and was like, what's going on?

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<sup>2</sup> Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is a global nonprofit organization that operates with one guiding principle: Hold students accountable to the highest standards, provide academic and social support, and they will rise to the challenge. For more than 30 years, AVID has prepared students for college readiness and success (<http://www.avid.org/about.ashx>).

La Sondra described her mom worked a lot, but still made the time to develop relationships with her teachers and counselors to ensure La Sondra's academic success. She paid attention to La Sondra's grades and when she noticed La Sondra was not doing as well in a course, she took the time to contact the teacher to discuss her concerns.

La Sondra's mom kept a constant focus on her daughter's education, even during summer vacation. "I remember, even in summers when I didn't have school I would always have a summer work book, like, I would have to do, like a few pages every day before I like do something fun like with my mom and even if she was at work and I was home with my grandma she would call me and ask if I did my summer work book." Her mother's consistent involvement in her daughter's education instilled a value of education in La Sondra.

There is a belief within the education community that African Americans do not have the time or the knowledge to participate in their children's schooling (Garibaldi, 1992), or do not value education because they are trapped within the culture of poverty (Anderson, 1990; Murray, 1984). This deficit model has plagued educational research since the 1960s (Valencia, 2012).<sup>3</sup> Although this deficit thinking is prevalent, there are studies that support the role of parents in the academic achievement of African American students. Gutman & McLoyd (2000) found that African American families living in poverty differed greatly in their parenting styles, which produced both high and low achieving students. Their research uncovered was that parents of high-achieving students

used specific strategies to assist their children with homework and held conversations that were more supportive than parents of low-achieving students. Baker et al (2012) discussed how African American parents who set consistent bedtimes, read to their children more frequently, and kept more books in their homes were more likely to have children who performed better on kindergarten learning scores. Although Baker's study seems to fall in-line with the dominant narrative of parenting La Sondra's mom and the other parents of the students interviewed provided counter-narratives because their stories are in opposition of the deficit model. They consistently supported their children's educational pursuits in active ways that sometimes mimicked the dominant narrative, while countering the deficit model of African American parenting and education. It is also important to explain there are a lot of ways to parent children to be successful students. In the case of La Sondra, she was surrounded by a supportive family and community, which is essential to building a network where children are about to learn and grow.

Feeding into the deficit model, Madyun and Lee's (2010) research, articulated a correlation between under-achievement of African American male students and female-headed households. Although only one of the two male students I interviewed grew up in a female-headed household, Jerome saw his mom as his support system and his motivation to persist. Further, two of the other female students I interviewed spoke strongly about their mothers as their main source of support and did not view being from a female-headed household as a negative. La Sondra never viewed not having her father as a deficit, "because she can just pull off both roles without like, I don't know I don't feel

like I really need a father.” She emphasized how her mom was so capable of filling both roles, she never missed her incarcerated father. Further, for Jayla, Jerome and La Sondra, who grew up in single-mother households and whose mothers did not attend college, their mothers and family members instilled a value of education. “Despite having been denied equitable educational opportunities themselves, these adult family members socialized young Black [youth] to value school.” (Harper & Davis, 2012, p. 117). Besides their mothers’ integral role, Jerome, Michael and Gail were significantly influenced by their siblings.

**Siblings.** Of the five students interviewed, all but one student had siblings or step-siblings. Jayla is an only child and La Sondra has three step-siblings when her mom remarried when she was in middle school. Jerome has an older half-brother and a younger sister. Gail has one older sister. Michael has an older sister and a younger brother. For all students with siblings or step-siblings, their siblings influenced their education in positive ways. Siblings often serve as role models (McHale et al., 2012; Brim, 1958). In adolescence, siblings contribute to academic engagement (Bouchey et al., 2010). For Jerome, Gail and Michael, their older sibling directly influenced their educational aspirations.

Unlike Jerome, his half-brother turned to the streets instead of concentrating on school. Despite his choices, he always instilled the importance of education in Jerome. “My big brother he was more I guess, the street head, like he would hang out on the streets he knew the people and stuff like that. His thing was to push me away from that so [...] his thing was to like, make sure you keep up in school, so, like, in that way, like, he’s

always looked out for me.” Jerome’s brother always looked out for him and pushed him toward academic pursuits, rather than the street life he had chosen for himself.

When I asked Jerome how he became interested in education, he responded with praise for his brother’s direct involvement:

I mean initially I still say that my brother was kind of like the gateway for [education] because he was like come home teaching me his stuff, that kind of thing, and then I would just be able to pick up on it and go... he would speak so highly of me to [the teachers], like oh yea, my little brother coming in and he’s smart, look out for him and that kind of things so obviously their curiosity is peaked.

Jerome’s brother not only gave him work to do at home, which challenged him academically at an early age, he also spoke to teachers who would teach Jerome in future years, helping to give Jerome credibility and building a positive view of Jerome even before he started in their classes. Because Jerome did so well with his brother’s homework, subject matter years ahead of his physical age, and his brother’s positive feedback, Jerome was very confident in his academic abilities at a very young age. Jerome’s brother echoed his mother’s and family’s value of education. Jerome’s belief in education was “shaped by messages that grandparents, parents, and generations of family members consistently conveyed to them, their siblings, and their cousins” (Harper & Davis, 2012, 117).

As with Jerome, Michael’s older sibling also played a significant role in his academic persistence, specifically his college readiness. Michael viewed his sister not

only as a mentor, but also as an example of academic achievement to strive toward; “my sister was always this like person you like reach or look up to because she's obviously doing everything correctly. She had all the AP classes, she did like three sports. She won that [...] if you're a scholar/athlete in three different sports then you win this award if you perform well.” Although Michael looked up to his sister, he also felt some inferiority because his parents praised her, he felt, much more than they praised him or his brother.

Despite feeling like he could never live up to his sister’s greatness, he harnessed those feelings through his competitiveness:

That whole competitive nature has always been in, like always been in me. I don't know where it came from maybe it's just like my nature or because my dad always told me to strive to be the best, my sister was the best, she was like the ceiling or something so I always wanted to like get to where she was. But like, yeah, I saw my sister go to college and it was like, okay, so now I have to go to college.

Michael explains his competitive nature that was a driving force in his higher education aspirations and the positive influence his sister’s success had on his own desires to achieve academic success. His sister’s success not only served as motivation, he also relied on her knowledge of the college application process. “I mean the only mentor I feel like I really had was my older sister. Just because she kind of went through the process [...] my sister was the one who was like guiding me, okay, you have to like, write your personal statement.” Michael’s statement describes his view of his sister as both a mentor to pursue higher education and as a guide through the college application process. Harper



& Davis (2012) confirm the importance of siblings to inspire younger siblings and cousins; witnessing firsthand accounts of family members going to college to encourage younger family members to attend college. In Harper & Davis' (2012) study, one student clarified the importance of having siblings and other African American family members to look up to, to inspire "the next generation to continue the cycle of raising our collective social status through educational attainment" (p. 115).

As with Michael and Jerome, Gail's older sibling also influenced her own academic persistence. However, unlike the other two, her sister's academic failures served as an example of what not to do. By witnessing her sister's academic failures, Gail clarified what she wanted for her own life, and knew it was the opposite of what her sister experienced. "I think [her difficulties in school] had like some effect, like I know I couldn't get bad grades or like, get behind like in college because she's like, first she was going to college full time and then she was doing college and work and then she just went to work." Her sister's academic failures served as a motivator for Gail because she knew that isn't the life she wanted for herself. For Jerome, Gail and Michael, their siblings served informally as mentors and teachers. Because they were the older sibling, their own lived-experiences influenced their younger siblings whether they took an active role like Jerome's brother or simply served as an example of what not to do, like Gail's sister.

**Mentors, Teachers and Counselors.** As previously discussed, each student's parents influenced their academic persistence. The only other category of social support that influenced nearly all the students are people with whom they interacted in their schools—teachers, mentors, and counselors. Confirming Madyun and Lee (2010) and

Owens et al. (2010), caring adult role models and school counselors positively influenced African American academic achievement in the students I interviewed. Three of the students, La Sondra, Jayla, and Jerome participated in a college-preparatory program, which required weekend trips to visit colleges, and other professional development opportunities to prepare and walk students through the college application process. Some of the students also mentioned the importance of individual teachers or counselors, which aided in their academic persistence.

As discussed above, Jerome's brother helped him create positive relationships with teachers early on because his brother spoke highly of Jerome to the teachers even before he entered their classes:

It was pointed out at an early age that there was something, it was like okay, this kid thinks, let's keep it going and then kind of like pushed that and from teacher to teacher I feel kind of like they spread the word, there's a gifted student in your class, look out for him kind of thing. Cause there was a lot of times, like even with my brother teachers, as I went to like middle school and stuff, they knew me before I came in and they were hope like, oh I hope I get his little brother.

Jerome describes how teachers looked out for him, that they viewed him as gifted, and looked out for his best interests along the way. He described how many of his elementary school teachers tried to challenge him by giving him higher-level work and gave him the space to excel. "My second grade teacher, like she was the same way in regards to like pushing me [...] So if she saw that I was bored [...] she'd take that extra time to like, teach me something new, or like okay, I'm going to teach you what we haven't learned in

class yet.” Jerome was singled out early as a gifted student, and the teachers took an early interest in finding ways to challenge his academics. Unlike the experiences of many gifted African American students, Jerome never felt dissuaded to see himself as a scholar and never felt the need to camouflage his giftedness (Ford & Whiting, 2010). There could be various reasons for his pride in his academic prowess; his family support and his teachers’ support certainly contributed to a positive view of his academic giftedness.

In high school, Jerome’s Algebra teacher became a formal mentor with whom he continued his connection all the way through college. His teacher placed Jerome in the role of mentor in his algebra class. Jerome continued to complete his work early, so once he was done, his teacher made him help other students with their work. At first, this annoyed Jerome, but later he realized it taught him patience and helped the other students do better in class. All students need role models and the availability of mentors is important for minority student achievement (Griffin, 2012). Jerome’s role as mentor was not only helpful for his classmates, but his teacher played the role of mentor for Jerome in return. Early on, his teacher asked Jerome to stay after class and they conversed about the afterschool club the teacher coordinated. His teacher singled Jerome out not just as academically gifted, but as a leader for his student organization. “So basically the goal of the club is like to, help minorities get into colleges. So like, through him like we’d do a lot of tutoring, but after school homework sessions.” Jerome quickly joined the organization, which helped students of color learn about higher education and also tutor high-need students. Since meeting him freshman year, Jerome’s mentor became an integral part of Jerome’s high school success:

He's just kind of been, like he's always been there, you know? Like if he saw, like, oh I'm getting into trouble, or he felt like, alright, you know, you're hanging out too much. Like I need you to focus, get your act together, you know make sure everything's on track like, I would have to bring him my transcripts, or like, you know, every quarter so he can see, make sure my grades wasn't slipping and stuff.

Jerome's mentor regularly checked on his academic success, and although Jerome didn't mention it directly, he alluded to being impressed with his masculinity and personality; "he has dreads, full beard and stuff, big dude. Like his mannerisms are kind of, they're funny now, but at the time I was just irritated, like why you always making me do extra stuff you know?" Jerome did not have a present male figure in his life after elementary school, and his mentor was a strong and supportive male role model and mentor to Jerome. Research confirms that a strong masculine identity leads to a positive self-concept and better outcomes in a variety of areas, including academic achievement (Harper, 2004). Jerome looked up to his mentor and his comment about his role model being a "big dude" with dreads and a full-beard alludes to Jerome's view of him as ultra-masculine.

Like Jerome, many different teachers assisted Jayla in her academic persistence, especially in guiding and supporting her in pursuit of dance:

Through elementary school it was my high school teacher [...] my teacher basically was like oh you're really talented you should try out for this program called Gifted and Talented where they put it on your report card, in the school and I tried out for that and I got into the Conservatory of Arts at Cal State LA so you

go every weekend and you have to take two classes and they had dance, singing and acting, and then, my primary was acting but then I took dance.

For Jayla, her dance talent directly influenced her academic persistence. She found dance after joining the Conservatory of Arts, which her teacher prompted her to join. In High School, Jayla also had influential teachers who were instrumental in her development; “my drama teacher [...] he really helped with like speaking and knowing your voice and like listening to whatever that inside voice is.” Jayla mentioned several other teachers who positively influenced her educational pursuits, especially her dance talent. She also joined college preparatory programs including Upward Bound and ACT/SAT prep programs to prepare her for college. She participated in a weekly college-readiness program and recalls the female program director who aided her in her pre-college readiness. “I went every Saturday and they always talk about like college and how to get there and what is it and what do you need to do to get there, I wanted to go, I had like specific colleges that I wanted to go to so she would help me with like, with the SATs like they did pre-SAT prep, pre-ACT prep stuff like that. I did that, we also went to go see colleges.” Jayla’s experience with this college preparatory program helped her learn the language of higher education and the steps she needed to achieve to pursue higher education. According to Seftor et al. (2009), who conducted a longitudinal study of Upward Bound, students who participated in the program were more likely to enroll in a four-year institution and it had positive impacts on students’ higher education goals and aspirations.

Like Jerome and Jayla, La Sondra also attended a college preparatory program. La Sondra's mother became friendly with her counselor who encouraged La Sondra to enroll in the college preparatory program. "They do workshops, they teach you about admissions and financial aid and like you take a tour of schools." The college preparatory program not only helped La Sondra figure out how to navigate the college application process, it also kept her on track academically; "we'd have to get progress reports and we'd get them signed by our parents every two weeks, so when [my mom] saw like 86, saw it trickling down she called the teacher and was like, what's going on?" La Sondra's statement shows the positive impact on the college preparatory program and also evidences her mother's commitment to her educational success. Harvill et al. (2012), confirm that college access programs improve college readiness and enrollment, especially for underrepresented students.

**Extended Family.** Interestingly, only one of the five students discussed the positive impact of her extended family, members outside of their immediate households. The extent to which La Sondra's extended family influenced her persistence is important to note. Numerous times in the interviews she mentions how her mother used her extended family as an example of what not to do. "[My mom] would use everyone else as an example. So she'd be like you don't want to live how they live and since they didn't go to school, like you need to go to school." I prompted La Sondra to explain to whom she was referring as 'they'; "her brothers and sisters. They were kinda like, I guess what she would describe them like living off the government kind of thing, and they didn't really have a nice house or a nice car or anything material I guess." La Sondra regularly

discussed how her goals were simple, to be comfortable, to live in a nice house. Her mother's consistent reminders about how La Sondra didn't want to live like her extended family resonated with her:

Yeah, I don't want to live like that! [...My mom] would always say, you don't want to live pillow to post because like her, like her nieces and nephews would always move from like house to house because they were never stable kind of thing. That was her saying. So she would always say that and they didn't go to school, like education is key.

I was not familiar with her mom's saying "pillow to post", and some basic internet research yielded the correct phrase is "pillar to post", which insinuates someone who is forced to keep moving from one place to another (Cambridge Dictionaries, 2015). La Sondra confirmed that in the back of her mind, she always kept her mother's warning about the importance of continuing her education so she would not have to live like her extended family.

According to Jaeger (2012), extended family members do positively influence children "by providing material and affective support to parents and children" (p. 1). La Sondra's grandmother served as her caretaker in the summers, and her aunts, uncles and cousins were ever-present in her life. La Sondra's extended family not only served as an example of what not to do, but many of her family members provided positive reinforcement and encouragement in regards to her academic success. "when I'd go around to my cousins and uncles they'd be like congrats on the honor roll and stuff [...W]henever I was around like my grandma's friend or like my aunt's friends they'd be

like you're doing to so good in school.” La Sondra saw her extended family’s positive reinforcement as a motivator to continue to do well in school; “every time you go around your family, like how's school? How are you doing? You want to be able to say like I'm doing good, you know?” La Sondra stated many times that her family’s praises, positive reinforcement and regularly asking her about her education contributed to her desire to continue to do well. La Sondra’s close relationship with her extended family is reflective of many African American families. There is a strong cultural history and tradition of close extended family relationships among African Americans. Further, there is a tradition of the extended family provides support, assists with coping against negative experiences, and a serves as a resource for social capital (Stewart, 2015).

In Chapter Two, I categorized social support into three groups: mentors, teachers and counselors; parents and family; and community support. From the interviews and vision mapping, I concluded that community support was not as great an influence among the interviewees as parents and family, and teacher/mentor support. What became apparent was the significance of parental influence on all of the students, sibling influence for three of the students, and extended family influence for two select students. Mentors, counselors and teachers also played a positive role in three of the five students’ persistence. The importance of strong support system was apparent, but their role is not limited to aiding students in persistence. Often, social support systems also influence identity development and formation. Specifically, African American culture is transmitted through social interactions (Nasir et al, 2009).



## Identity Maps for Counter-Narratives

Each of the students discussed various aspects of their identities, although questions in the final interview focused on race and ethnicity questions. The students other multiple identities emerged during the interviews. In this section, I discuss the salient identities that emerged during the interviews, and draw on the students' identity maps to show visually how the students classify their multiple identities.

### African American Identity Development

As discussed in the literature review, a positive racial/ethnic identity correlates with academic persistence (Wright, 2009; Charvovs et al., 2003). Although all five students made mention to their ethnic identities, the saliency of an African American identity was apparent and strong in four of the five students interviewed. For the outlier, La Sondra, she embraced cultural aspects of her ethnic identity, namely food and religion, but she did not discuss a pride in identifying as African American or clearly articulate the importance of her ethnic identity in her sense of self.



Figure 2. La Sondra's Identity Map

There are numerous reasons she may not have clearly articulated the importance of her ethnic identity. Because she has lived in an African American-centric context her entire life, she may not be conscious of it outside of mainstream (White) culture. La Sondra spent so much time with her extended family, they no doubt transmitted cultural values, which is an important part of her identity. “Family membership holds implicit meaning and explicit expectations and is an important part of African American identity. Members are held together by a set of common values including interdependence, mutual aid, resilience, communalism, and collective responsibility” (Stewart, 2015, p. 216). Despite La Sondra confirming the importance of her family to her sense of self, she did not disclose a lot of personal details in her identity map. It is unclear as to why she withheld personal information; perhaps because she believed so much in the collective and communal aspects of her African American family or perhaps because of my role as research or stereotype threat.

Due to stereotype threat, “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Steele & Aronson, 1995), she may be unwilling to share other aspects of her identity. She may also not want to expose these aspects of herself due to research complications of my status as a White woman. Numerous times, she confirmed she did not experience racism, only demeaning comments from other African American people. Most notably, she talked about people in her life (i.e. her father and a female friend) who said she was prettier because she was light-skinned. She also talked about her mother’s hair color and her hair color; the spectrum of browns on the page relate to the difference between her (White) mother’s hair color and her own hair

color. “It's like a spectrum. Cause if you put like, like cultural, social and ethnic identities and I feel like people identify people when they look at their like, color of their skin or their hair color.” La Sondra acknowledges during the interviews that she is half-White, but views herself as African American. The dialogue above could be interpreted that she views herself as African American because that is how other people see her.

La Sondra's identity map relates to her ethnic identity in that she discusses how important family, food and religion was in the development of her identity. On the plate, she drew traditional 'soul food', with mac and cheese, corn bread, greens, etc. I prompted her to share more about why she drew food:

I mean I guess every time you're with your family you eat, so like every time like, even with any large group of people, like anytime you're with a group of people you eat. I like eating, I like socializing, so. [...] Well, I mean, church and my house and my family are very important to me so, I feel like these are like, pretty basic drawings to show that and like, the food, like, like I said before, it like connects the family. Everyone comes downstairs when there's food. Like you're always around everyone. Like I'm, like we don't eat alone kind of thing. So. I think that's pretty much all.

Throughout the interviews with La Sondra, it was evident how important her family support system was to her life, her academic persistence, and her sense of self. La Sandra's family support, especially growing up with a single mother, is an example of a counter-narrative arguing against the negative influences of growing up in a single-mother, female-headed household. Harrison et al (1990) confirm family socialization is

the most influential and lasting influence on children's functioning and competencies as human beings (Marshall, 1995). Further, La Sandra's extended family support may have aided her mother in positive parenting behavior. According to Taylor (1996), mothers who have kin and extended support are less likely to perceive their maternal role as negative and also promote positive parenting behavior.

She also discussed the significance of religion in the development of her identity. Witty (1992) discussed how some African American parents use religion for ethnic socialization (Marshall, 1995). When I asked La Sondra to explain why she drew a church, she discussed why it was important to her:

La Sondra: I don't know. I mean that's like a part of religion. Like it is important. People who are religious it's important to them, I think like for me. [...] I mean it gives purpose to being here. [...] I see it more like, I think a lot of people see religion more community wise, like cause you're always there like with your church members or your family, but I see it more individually, like as a personal relationship. Like a lot of people that I know of, they think that the community aspect is very important but I think I value the individual aspect more. [...] Like it teaches you, I think religion teaches you a lot of like morals and values and like I agree with the morals and the values that it teaches so that's why it's like, plays a role in my life.

As I prodded La Sondra to dig deeper, to explain more about her multiple identities, she retorted that the person she is, her identities, were influenced by her family and her religion, supporting Nasir et al.'s (2009) assertion about the importance of support

systems in the development of racial/ethnic identity. Even the plate of food relates directly to her family, as she said people come together around food. She continuously discussed the importance of family, and her family's influence on major decisions in her life. For example, she chose to go to college within an hour driving distance so she could return home each weekend to be with them. It is unclear if La Sondra was unable or unwilling to discuss in greater detail the role of her ethnic identity in her sense of self, personal development and how they related to her academic persistence. However, it is important to discuss La Sondra as an outlier in the research.



Figure 3. Jerome's Identity Map

The other four students strongly identified as African American or Black. Jerome's identity map, pictured above, shows the complexity of his multiple identities. He asked for a second sheet of paper to add more identities that didn't fit on the first

sheet. On the first sheet of paper, to the left, he listed roles, identities and ability including: race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other roles he played in the lives of other people: boyfriend, friend, and son. On the second sheet of paper, to the right, he lists character traits or dispositions, adjectives to describe himself: actor, loner, believer, fighter, leader, great, and cheap. When I asked Jerome to describe the two different maps he explained:

I guess, more-so like how I'm defined or like what I identify as then those would be the words or like the categories where I would place myself. [...] Yeah, I feel like more-so on this side than this side. Like this [left] side would be I guess more like social, religious, you know, like all of those other identities, and then this part here [right] would I guess define like, more my inner self. So it's like this is how I would relate as it goes to like everything that society has to offer in regards to you know, like your social identity, religious identity, etc, etc and then this part would be more like I guess my inner self.

Based on Jerome's comment, he describes how the left side of his map are his social identities and roles he plays in society, whereas, the right side is his inner self that might not be as evident to the outside world.

Related to his racial/ethnic identity, Jerome explained the subcategories he listed under 'Black':

Elite refers to like, my current standing, so me being, getting ready to graduate college, valedictorian in high school, and that where it as, like where I grew up, as compared to that I would be considered an elite because I made it, you know?

This is technically making it, so, in that way I'm very much an elite. I would say hoodlum, like, and equate that to like, mostly because, like I still kind of have those mentalities so it's like although I have become an elite I haven't you know, shaken or disregarded where I'm from, like that character is very much still there. In regards to angry, like, just situations that I've witnessed growing up and things like that, being Black, I mean I couldn't compare it to being Black here at [this university], like, there is anger there, you know? I can't say necessarily resentment, but it's like, you know, you get tired of getting treated a certain way or people looking at you a certain way or assuming things that may not necessarily be true, so it's like, it is that anger there, but like once you can acknowledge that anger and stuff you can overcome it so it's like it's still there and I've definitely acknowledged it, but.

The passage above shows the complexity of Jerome's identity as Black, how he understands his privilege and elite status by being a college student at an exceptional university, yet he still holds onto, what he refers to as 'hoodlum' identity, coming from the ghetto. I asked Jerome to explain further why angry falls under Black:

Like as far as people say we've come like you still, I'm still regarded as below you. Like we're at the same university so what makes you above me at this point? Like my successes in high school, like, are, like beyond some of those who are here but you're still looking at me like that you know? So it's like, it, you know, it is anger there, it's like acknowledge me as a person first, like. What? Me being Black doesn't make me less than you, like no matter how much society wants you

to think that, like it doesn't. But, yeah, so, like that's the anger side and the hoodlum.

The passage above shows Jerome's awareness of systemic inequalities and his unwillingness to buy-in to it. He does not let the system define him as less-than showing his pride in himself and his identity as Black. When I asked Jerome how important being Black is to his identity he said, "I would say a 10. Like, cause it's provided me with a lot of struggles but that was also like, things that pushed me you know? Like it gave me challenges, it was like, I like to be the underdog kind of thing in this motivates me to get to the top faster. It's like no, keep believing everything that you hear, you know?" Jerome used racial discrimination and the inequality he faced as a motivator to do better. In the U.S. the underdog is "hoped for, rooted for and feels a sense of self-satisfaction when [he] has beaten the odds ...when competing, the underdog hopes against the odds and usually has a type of fight or grit that accompanies the struggle" (Kasun, 2015, p. 283). Kasun's (2015) study of Mexican American families relates well to Jerome's use of the underdog mentality because it informed their everyday life choices and action, leading to a grittiness that helped them persist and survive. Their underdog mentality was rooted in their economic and social positioning, which relates a lot to Jerome's own economic and social status. Like these families, Jerome used the underdog mentality as motivation to fight against his oppressors and to empower him to act.

In terms of where he positioned certain bubbles, it could have been random, but it is worth noting his African American and Male identities are very close to his name. Further, college student has the most arms attached to it. Given his current position as a



college student, it certainly makes sense that his college student identity and status was significant to him at the time of the interviews. Based on all of the interviews with Jerome, ethnic, gender and fighter identities appeared to be significant in his development. Jerome felt positive about his African American identity, although he understood the societal barriers associated with being African American. Jerome experienced many situations in which he experienced discrimination and racism based on being African American. He talked in detail about how people at convenience stores would follow them around:

So in regards to discrimination, no, like that definitely wasn't the first time [but I became more aware starting in] 4th or 5th grade, going into 6th grade. Yeah, we'd go in [to a convenience store] and you could tell, like people would follow us. Like even at that age we knew. So I was like, alright, watch this. We walk in, then the people at the cash register they'll stop, look up, say some little code over the thing and then all of a sudden all of the workers are in the aisle somewhere. It's like alright, damn, I just wanted some candy, right? Why? And then as we got older you know it became more like, prominent like, yeah, it kind of just started getting out of hand where it was more like, annoying. So like we'd call them on it and they'd be like, no, that's not it at all and it's like then why when we walk in do you start following and patrolling the aisles?

Jerome's comments signal to his awareness of racism as well as his annoyance and questioning the reasons for the discrimination. He felt strongly in fighting back against the racism by confronting the workers and questioning why they were being treated

unfairly. His behavior speaks to his confidence, belief in himself, awareness of racism but unwillingness to allow others to treat him unjustly. Systemic racism is a part of the everyday experience for African American men in the U.S. and speaking up against the oppression is an empowering way to resist the imposition of racism (Ward, 2013).

Despite experiencing discrimination and harassment, he viewed himself in a positive light. He understood the way society viewed his Blackness and how he viewed himself, which is evident in the arms leading from Black: hoodlum, strong, enduring, handsome, elite, and angry. Jerome balanced and struggled with this duality, the way society views him and how he views himself. “Me being Black doesn’t make me less than you, like no matter how much society wants you to think that, like it doesn’t. But yeah, so, like that’s the anger side and the hoodlum.” This statement emphasizes how Jerome understood society’s view of him as a Black man, but also struggled sometimes to avoid embodying that stereotype, when his anger and ‘hoodlum’ behavior, as he calls it, emerged. The cultural stereotype of the angry Black man is far-reaching and widespread. “Black men are commonly stereotyped as frightening, scary, and menacing, black men in mostly white environments find themselves managing this image to minimize its resonance with white peers. Thus, they may face pressure to avoid behaving in ways that reflect this stereotype.” (Jackson & Wingfield, 2013, p. 275-276). Jerome was aware of how his behavior sometimes swayed toward the stereotypes and he worked hard to manage his emotions.

He was especially cognizant of this stereotypical behavior as an elementary school student and he worked tirelessly to learn to control his anger and fighting

behavior. His 'hoodlum' behavior was a defense and survival mechanism due to being from a low-income, crime, gang and drug-ridden urban area. Being a good fighter was important for survival, but also a sense of pride. He talks proudly about his brother's status as a fighter:

[Where I'm from], if you scared or if you don't have confidence in your fighting ability, you have guns and stuff like that where you jump people and stuff, but like [my brother] has always been like a one on one fighter. Like because he wasn't always like the tallest guy or the most muscly but like, he hung with all the big dogs [...] we were hanging out, like he would fight them and he would, you know, like, give them a run for they money, so like, he just became known for that.

Jerome learned the fighting mentality early, as early as kindergarten when his brother gave him a hard time for crying. He quickly learned how to translate his sadness into anger and violence. "Like I don't stay sad for long, I just get mad [...] Like the sadness is a weakness, to like shed tears and all of that, that's weak, we can't do that, so then it just translated into anger which is like oh, but I have to let this out too, so then they just came out physically. So it was like alright, you pissed me off I'll punch you. I'm not going to cry about it." Jerome's fighting mentality was co-created through the culture and context in which he was raised and also society's view of African American men. American society and media often depict African American men as dangerous, angry, hyper-masculine, thugs, violent, hypersexualized, and superathletes (Ford, 2011). Jerome learned early from his brother that it was weak to cry and that fighting was a sign of

respect and power. In that way, Jerome and his brother are both fulfilling the stereotype of African American masculinity.

Although Jerome's fighting, during school, was problematic during his elementary school years, his teachers saw enough promise in his academic abilities, that he was often able to slide by with minimal punishment. "I had a lot of teachers who looked out for me because [...] but at the same time there's was still like, I guess the hood mentality, so it's like I was still getting into trouble. [...] So you know, they said okay, we have to work on that, but he's still smart. So I guess in that way they didn't want to give up on me, you know?" Jerome's multiple identities were evident in his identity map and in during our interviews. Early on, he talked in great detail about his anger and fighting. I was surprised to see he included this on his map, but despite his academic persistence, he acknowledges the 'hoodlum' mentality is still a part of who he is. He viewed his fighting identity in mixed light. He still sees fighting as a means to gaining respect and also as a necessity in the unsafe environments in which he lived and grew up. He also sees fighting as a way to be a protector for his friends and family. His fighter identity seemed to pull him in two directions. On one hand, he understood how fights negatively affected his schooling experiences and persistence, but at the same time struggles with the values his community places on fighting. Jerome, nonetheless, felt the need to posture as tough. According to Majors and Billson (1992), Jerome's "cool pose", embodying African American male stereotypes, is self-protective and "allows black men to project a confident public image when navigating various social contexts" (Ford, 2011, p. 41). Certainly, Jerome and his brother felt the need to display a strong and confident public

image because it mimicked the culture in which they grew up.

As Jerome experienced issues of racism, violence and fighting, Michael also experience racism and was the target of bullying. Michael lived in a working class neighborhood with his parents, older sister and younger brother. Within his neighborhood environment, he often experienced bullying because his parents are Nigerian. Although he was born in the U.S., he and his brother were bullied because other neighborhood kids did not view them as African American, but rather as Nigerians. It bothered Michael that he was not always accepted by the African American community and he often felt like an outcast because he wasn't usually welcomed by other ethnic groups either. He tried his best to fit into the social norms of African American culture:

I mean the Black people here don't really see me as Nigerian-American. I mean they know I am but they see me as like, just another Black person. But yeah, probably outside in society where it's like less educated I feel like if they can see me as a Nigerian-American they won't see me as an American Black person who was born here. [...] Sometimes people think I'm American Black, sometimes [...] Sometimes I want to like fit into the American Blacks and sometimes I don't because of the things that they're associated with. So like it switches.[...] Like when, like there was this study about how the most educated ethnic group in America are Nigerian Americans. I kind of want to be associated with Nigerian Americans in that case, but then sometimes when it comes to like, when I'm hanging out with people and stuff and, I want to like, feel like I'm more American and stuff and I'm part of that group, so I try to you know, do Black things and

stuff.

Stacey: What does that mean? Do Black things?

Michael: Like I remember when I was younger I used to try to dress up in Black clothing so I, my mom took me to the store and I used my Christmas money to like buy sneakers and like baggy pants and you know, baggy shirts and stuff and a hat. [...] I like dressing the way I do now because I feel like I'm professional and taken seriously but I think that's the reason why I dress to, so I can impress society, so, I like the way I dress. Back then I didn't really like the way I dressed but I wore it because I wanted to like fit in to like the Black society, but now I like the way I dress and at the same time I feel like it can get me farther in society. So that's why I always dress professionally and casual, business casual and stuff.

Despite Michaels' desires to be accepted into the African American culture, he often faces challenges of acceptance. This duality was difficult for Michael. In one sense he identified as Nigerian and other times he wanted to fit into the African American culture. This duality exists for his Nigerian vs. African American identities, but also for his identity as African American and his identity as college student at a top-tier public university. He describes the struggle to maneuver disparate environments. "I think I built like two types of Michaels or something. One that can handle all the race and you know, all the race relations in [my city] and then one that can handle college life with very little people who look like me here, so. I always change my mind when I come here." This duality is not just his Nigerian vs. African American identities, but fitting into mainstream culture in college, on a campus that was majority Asian-Pacific Islander, and

White. Michael's duality is quite common among African immigrants and their children. "Black immigrants tend to move along the continuum from a national-origin identity to a hyphenated-American or American identity...their length of U.S. residence may turn their preference to a pan-national or pan-ethnic identity [which] may not be a linear process" (Rong & Brown, 2001, p. 542). Related to Rong and Brown's (2001) research, Michael's dual racial/ethnic identities as both Nigerian and African American and uncertainty as to which identity to claim is part of this continuum many African immigrants experience.

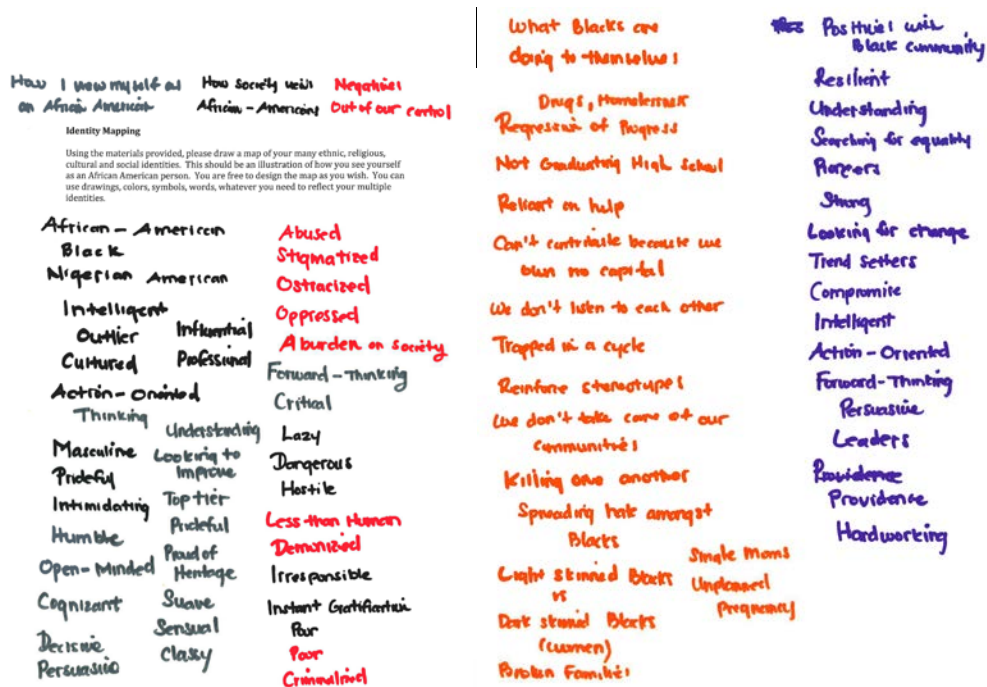


Figure 4. Michael's Identity Map

Despite his feelings of duality, Michael is proud of being African American. He understands the difficulty with continued race relation issues in America, but he has embraced his racial/ethnic identity; "so there is a problem with race in this country and

it's not even just in the country, it's the world. So, yeah, I feel like we have it hard, the hardest and I feel like it's a, I mean I'm proud to be Black because I feel like I've embraced it, it's made me strong.” Michael’s pride is evident in his comment and he further describes how he often feels his role is to fight against the racial stereotypes; “I feel like as an African-American with the stereotypes out there I kind of have to prove them wrong and tell society that's not how all African-Americans think, so I feel like that's all the reason why I'm like educated and I'm not afraid to like voice my intellectual opinion because then that breaks the stereotype that people constantly see on TV.” Michael identifies as both Nigerian and African American; he worked to cultivate both identities and found ways to manage both as significant parts of how he viewed himself. He took pride in the fact that he was elite in his status as an African American college student. Further, like Jerome, Michael feels empowered by “proving them wrong”, by being an underdog (Kasun, 2015).

When I asked Michael to describe his identity map, he explained that each of the colors meant something different. The black color represents how society views African Americans, the gray is how he views himself as African American, the red are negative stereotypes he feels are out of African Americans’ control, the orange is what he believes African American people are doing to themselves and the purple are positive attributes within the African American community.

Michael: Okay. At first the colors meant something but I ran out of colors so I just started using whatever. But I used the color black to represent how society sees African-Americans and I put Nigerian-American because that's what I am. They



see me as Black, or African-American. Masculine, prideful, intimidating, dangerous, hostile, lazy, wanting instant gratification, poor, and irresponsible. And then how I view myself: I view myself as intelligent, an outlier, a cultured, action-oriented, thinking, influential, professional, understanding, looking to improve, top-tier, prideful. So I feel like I kind of get that from the, I feel like I'm prideful. Proud of my heritage, suave, sensual, classy, cognizant, decisive, persuasive, and then the negatives that I feel are out of African-Americans control that I feel that we can't change it. Being abused, stigmatized, ostracized, oppressed, a burden on society, less than human, demonized, poor, and criminalized.

Stacey: And those were in red.

Michael: Yeah. I feel like those can't be changed, at least we can't change them. The majority or whoever influences society would have to change that. And then, what Blacks are doing to themselves. I was going to make this and put this in black but I already used black so. We use drugs, we're homeless, we're not graduating high school, we're relying on help, we can't contribute because we don't own anything. We don't listen to each other, we're trapped in a cycle, we reinforce stereotypes, we don't take care of our communities, we kill one another, we spread hate amongst Blacks. There's a light skin versus dark skin paradigm thing amongst the women. We have broken families, single moms, and unplanned pregnancies. And then the pros that I feel like we're associated with: we're resilient, understanding, searching for equality, pioneers, strong, looking for

change, trendsetters, we compromise, we're intelligent, we're action-oriented, we're forward thinking, persuasive, leaders. We believe in God and we're hardworking.

Michael's description of what African American people are doing to themselves seems to encompass some of the standard African American stereotypes, perhaps because he does not completely identify with the African American culture, although he does use 'we' in this section. There are other times during the conversation where he distances himself from the African American identity by using 'they' to refer to the negative stereotypes associated with African Americans. Further, there are moments in his self-reflection where he cannot connect to the African American experience, which he articulates when discussing the effects of slavery

Because I feel like we, this new generation of people, but we haven't gone through slavery in what, 200 years? So I feel like, I don't want to say it's a clean slate or anything like, there's a lot, the effects of, you know, the appreciation of race, and slavery, there's still those effects but since we haven't gone through it, like I don't understand why people say, like, the world was created, like the way the world is now is a result of slavery but I don't feel like I've directly gone through it and I don't think anyone has directly gone through it, so by blaming their problems on slavery I feel like it's incorrect. The system was created out of that idea that races should be like separated and stuff and there's a higher race and a lower race, but I don't feel like, feel like oh, because of slavery I can't, my family isn't educated anymore or something. I don't see that as like a direct result.

Michael does not buy into the systemic challenges African American people face as a result of a history of oppression and discrimination. The passage above speaks more strongly to his Nigerian-American identity in that he believes he has an equitable access to education. Throughout the dialogue, it is clear Michael flip-flops between an African American and Nigerian identities.

Michael: And my culture, my culture is rooted in education, so the people who, the Nigerian-Americans, or the Nigerians who come here and become Americans are the ones who are the most ambitious so that's the reason why you see them succeed in education because the family tells them this is the only way to like survive in society is by getting an education, so. That's what my culture and what was the last one?

Stacey: I was just asking you like the role that your race, ethnicity, culture, whatever in terms of your identity.

Michael: Yeah, so, I feel like I need to prove something to society as an African-American male like this isn't how we all are. We don't all play basketball and lift weights and stuff and you know, live in the hood.

Stacey: How do you think that a lot of these cycles, these negative cycles, like you said, how do you think that can be remedied?

Michael: Just education, that's literally the only thing and changing the culture and I don't know the answer to that question. Changing the culture. I don't know if that's, it's something that's going to take a long time. You'll have to alleviate the problem in ghettos across America.

Stacey: Whose responsibility is that?

Michael: That's both of our responsibilities.

Stacey: Both who?

Michael: Both the majority and the minority.

Of the students interviewed, Michael's identity map strongly articulates racial/ethnic identities, but not simply a Black or African American identity, but also his Nigerian identity. Although I did not view Michael's in-person responses or demeanor to be prejudice of African Americans, re-reading the transcripts and viewing his identity map in greater detail, it could be argued that Michael is both confused by the duality between being viewed as African or Black vs. African American and also prejudice against his perceptions of the African American stereotypes and experience. Given the time I spent with Michael, I believe he is simply still in the midst of developing his racial/ethnic identity and finding clarity in how he manages both a Nigerian and African American

identity within society rather than being prejudice against African Americans

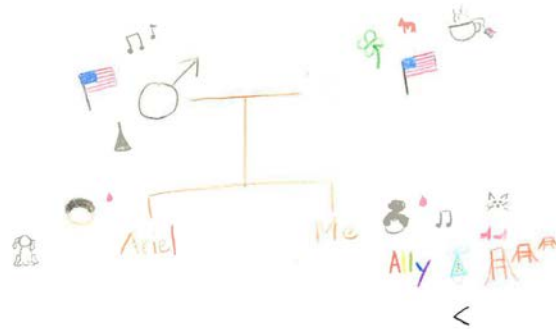


Figure 5. Gail's Identity Map

Gail's identity map included each of her immediate family members. When I asked Gail why she included all of her immediate family members in her identity map, how she created a family tree, so to speak, she said, "They are a part of who I am and even my sister has shaped me to some degree." Gail's choice to include her family in such detail on her map could speak to their strong impact on her or could also signal her discomfort with disclosing too much about herself and instead deflecting to her family.

She talked about the importance of her ethnic identity, clearly articulated as bi-racial in her drawing. She points out that her father has some Native American heritage and her mother is predominantly Irish. She also includes her father's love of music, jazz

and funk, which she discusses in the interviews. When I asked Gail how she identifies, this was her response; “I mean I acknowledge that I'm half White but it's, I don't know. I definitely identify a lot with my Blackness and how it affects my life in some ways. [...] even if I was wealthy that doesn't change the fact that I'm Black and that people have assigned certain stereotypes to me.” Gail articulates her understanding of society’s views of her as an African American person. She elaborates that most people see her as African American and don’t often know she is biracial. However, within the African American community, she is viewed as bi-racial. Gail’s statement brings to bear the difference between bi-racial and bi-cultural. Sue and Sue (2003) argue a person may be bi-racial, but not bi-cultural, meaning they do not identify with both cultures. Bi-cultural refers to factors which impact whether a person identifies culturally with their bi-racial categories. Given Gail’s inclusion of her mom and dad’s race and ethnicities, it seems clear she does culturally identify with her multi-cultural categories. Yet, her statement alludes to the fact that society views her as African American, so society may ignore her multiple cultures.

Her identity map articulates her ethnic identity with the ‘one drop’ of red. The one-drop rule is historically rooted in the Jim Crow segregation and southern slavery, but still has significance in shaping African American identities (Khanna, 2010). When I asked her to explain it she stated:

It's like you know where mixed race people we're only, people only identify us as Black.[...] Well, it has a lot of historical meaning [...] if you had one drop of Blackness in you then you were Black even if you didn't look it. But now it's more like if you look Black even if you're mixed race you're only identified as Black.

Gail does acknowledge she is bi-racial, but others view her as African American. In this way, her addition of the one drop in her diagram describes how others view her as African American, even though she explicitly draws all aspects of her cultural identity through the inclusion of her mom's Irish clover and her dad's Native American teepee.

She also talks about how within the African American community she is viewed as having 'good hair' whereas her sister does not have good hair. Although this may seem like a small, even insignificant detail, Gail includes a small drawing of herself, with her hair poof, as she called it, because she was proud of her 'good hair'.

Gabby: This is supposed to represent her kinky hair because she has my dad's hair whereas I have like a mix of my mom and dad's hair. [...] People consider my hair good hair and her hair bad hair. [...] I definitely hear people say that about like Black people hair. If it's really kinky then it's not good.

At the same time, she did mention she thought it was silly that she was praised for her long, curly hair, while her sister had to keep her hair natural, in a more traditional African American style. Gail's identity map acknowledges the importance of all her ethnic identities, as both African American and White. I asked Gail to explain the 'one drop' rule and if that is how she viewed herself or how everyone else sees her. She responded:

I feel like it's more like how everyone else sees me and it's also, usually when I'm around other Black people they can tell or they guess that I'm mixed but if they're not Black then they assume that I'm just Black.

Gail's statement above describes how other people see her and how she navigates both her African American and White identities depending on with whom she interacts.

Throughout her interviews, she signaled a stronger affiliation to her African American identity through her relationship to her dad's culture.

Despite moments in the interviews and in the map itself, where she signals a strong identity, there are moments where she feels less-than, to the point of including a less symbol on her diagram. When I asked her to explain the less symbol she commented:

Gail: Yeah, it's supposed to be like, I guess mostly when I'm around my Asian friends it's like I'm less valuable, like, like when we go out, it's they get more attention or, or like the thing about people like around on campus or somewhere from outside.

Stacey: So is it like almost like an invisibility you feel like?

Gail: Yeah.

As some of the other interviewees mentioned, being on a predominantly Asian campus often left them feeling alienated and lonely. It is interesting though, that Gail includes this on her map because she specifically talked about how she chose to associate with Asian friends and had an Asian boyfriend, but still felt invisible when around him and his friends. Moreover, Gail is majoring in Korean and had previously taken Japanese language courses. Despite feeling less-than, she is intrigued by other Asian cultures. Gail's feelings of "less than" and invisibility are not unique to the African American female experience. "[B]lack women in American have always had to wrestle with derogatory assumptions about their character and identity. These assumptions shape the social world that Black women must accommodate or resist in an effort to preserve their authentic selves and to secure recognition as citizens" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 5). Gail is



aware of assumptions that are placed on her because of her race and she acknowledges her less-than status as an inability to “secure recognition” among her peers. It is unclear to me why Gail would choose to spend time with people who make her feel invisible, but perhaps she is uncomfortable with finding or embodying her authentic self. As with Gail, Jayla struggles with her ethnic and gender identities at various points in her life.

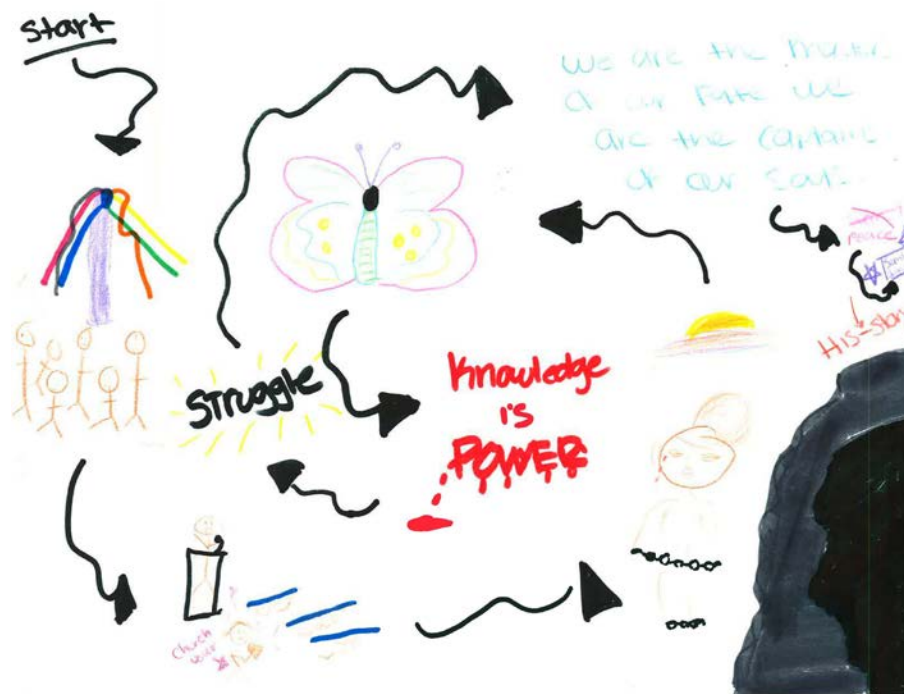


Figure 6. Jayla’s Identity Map

Jayla’s identity map clearly articulates her ethnic identity and the societal constraints she feels as an African American woman. In Figure 6, Jayla draws various symbols to describe her identity and the process of self-transformation. The image that immediately stood out to me was the female she drew, in chains and with tears streaming down her face. Jayla describes:

I feel like as Black women we're always used for, like we're always looked at as far as what our bodies can do rather than what our minds can do and I feel like I've really focused one, like coming to this school so that I can change that myth and I put chains because I was restricted. There's a lot of restrictions to being Black for one and then a woman for second because you can only be in certain spaces at certain times. [...] When I worked at Dominos there was like a restriction on what a woman can do. There's always like that gender dynamic or you can't carry this because you're a woman or you can't do this because you don't know this much. Like as if you're incompetent because you're a woman or not strong enough because you're a woman. There's a little pizza tray that weighs like five pounds. So there's that and I put the chains represent those restrictions. Like the gender dynamics, the race dynamics and then also me being young because there was a lot of restrictions as in what I could and couldn't do and I kind of like used that as like my basis.

Jayla describes the various ways she feels oppressed, as a *woman*, as a *Black* woman and as a *young* African American woman. Jayla also articulates how African American women are sexualized, “I drew it with breasts which I don't have that are that big, a really tiny waist and then hips that are really big because usually the female Black body is looked at for their breasts and their butt as assets to why they can exist and as if they couldn't do anything else other than like sexual matter.” Like Jayla, in Harris-Perry’s (2011) focus group with African American women that she identified two main stereotypes of African American women, either as oversexed, or as fat mammies. There

is a common stereotype that African American women are promiscuous and sexually immoral. I pressed Jayla to explain where she sees those stereotypes and she continued:

I see it all over TV for one. Two I see it here because there are sometimes when you come in for work and they want you to dress a certain way so there's like, the hair thing too. I drew it in a bun, like a poof bun because like if you come in with your, some jobs and some stories I've heard from my friends, if you come in with your hair in a bun then they're like you should go change it to make it more appropriate. As if like, cause like, afro bun type thing, it's like why isn't that appropriate? Like why isn't natural hair appropriate to have it in the way that's not refined and straight and why is that inappropriate. But when she came like with her hair, it was a little wavy but it was straight down and they were like okay [...] I know when I came in for my job when my hair was poofed when I had, it wasn't in a bun it was out and they're like, oh you look different and then when I came in another day and my hair was straight they were like oh you look so pretty so it's like okay so different is bad, pretty is good? That type of thing. So you just notice those type of features.

Jayla's White female boss's comments about Jayla's hair reinforces White, Eurocentric ideals of beauty and is a clear example of a microaggression Jayla experienced in the work-place, as a student worker on a college campus. (Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000). Although microaggressions, like Jayla experienced, are a part of African Americans' daily experience in society, she also depicts the deeper and darker history of the African American experience since slavery.

In the far right corner, she draws a large black blob, which she described to be the history of African Americans. The following is her description of the dark corner in her drawing:

So I feel like this darkness represents what's there and what has, like, and what we have contributed to the world in a sense that people kind of push to the side or like, neglect or that we don't know about and that also just for me period the fact that I don't, I can't trace back[...] Like that just represents the restriction of what I can and can't do in this world because of my ethnicity[...] it's basically history and I'm saying that like there are some that are there in that darkness and we don't know their names because of whatever reasons. Because they jumped off the boat and we don't know them or they died or were hung, or bitten or, dismantled in some way that we couldn't recognize them. But because of them I'm here type of thing and then also because of like the history or the stories that cannot be told and also the history that's covered up now, like today that day and age. In my high school I didn't learn nothing about black history. The only thing they said was slavery happened and then they were free and now we have like buildings started like the industrial. I forget what it's called.

Stacey: Revolution.

Jayla: Yeah, the revolution. So I was like okay, that was it and then when I came here it was like no, they, there's history before and after. So it's just like that fog that's over the reality of certain situations.

This dialogue highlights how Jayla interprets African American history as hidden and

forgotten. Jayla, as a student of African American history, knows that “invisible things are not necessarily not there” (McHenry, 2002, p. 4). Rather, those in power choose which stories are told.

Jayla discusses this invisibility of African American’s stories when she writes “His-Story” in her drawing, “And I put history as like in *his* story because we were never able to tell our story from our point of view type of thing when it's put in the books and if it's not.” Jayla’s explanation of “His-Story” is in reference to how African American stories are often muted or not included in history books. Rather, White people, especially men, historically, have controlled the stories that are told in society:

Jayla: I wrote it as his-story because usually history is told by someone who didn't go through whatever the history is and it's always told by someone else not the person, not the first person point of view. And I feel like, I'm talking about my ethnic background I feel like our story is definitely not told by us so like it's an acknowledgment that it's his story not ours and it should be ours.”

Stacey: Who is he?

Jayla: He as in, what is the word for it? He as in them as in the, the elite class or White upper middle class.

Jayla’s comments regarding “his-story” highlight her awareness of racism and the structural barriers to power within American society. Lack of inclusion of African American narratives in social studies and history text books is a well-documented phenomenon (King, Davis, & Brown, 2012). She also demonstrates her awareness of struggle through the word itself. She describes struggle as “my push to get through

everything that I'm starting to come into learning also to take care of myself in a sense cause I feel like there's a mental and physical health that you have to pay attention to.” She also mentions how the struggle is part of her picture of herself; “the tears is just like the struggle which comes up later. [...] If being a woman, an African American woman and then the stereotypes that are assigned to that identity and how they have basically become like something that I had to learn in order to get through.” Her struggles include understanding her identity as an African American woman within racialized society and also her basic struggles to take care of herself.

Jayla’s identity map shows a path with arrows that include her journey to understanding herself and her identity. She articulates her search for knowledge. When I asked Jayla to describe the “knowledge is power” and why it was bloody, she explained:

Knowledge about my history. Knowledge about knowing, my history as in knowing that how we were brought over, cause I'm actually doing a piece right now, a dance piece and it's about slavery, a lot of it was about slavery and a lot of our moves come from slavery. So we do like that, which would be slinging our head as if we were being hung. So a lot of it is sentimental like now that I know about it, it's kind of like, okay, yeah, I know what this is but then it's hurtful to think of doing that to your, like I'm literally doing it to myself but to think of that happening to someone else is really painful. So like, yes I know my history and I can stand on it and it's like a foundation but it's still like painful to me even though it didn't happen to me it's still like a reflection of what we have to go through today and the fact that I have to like, act it out in a sense and I can, not

myself, but my race is the only people that can understand that pain in a sense. Jayla's explanation of "knowledge is power" describes the importance of knowing her history, "knowledge is power which is what I feel the more I've learned the better I become in how I've been able to like identify myself and then also teach others. It's been really helpful but it's painful because there's stuff that you don't want to hear about so I put the exaggerations." When I ask her how important she would rate being African American for her self-image, she responded:

It is who I am so I feel like it's highly important for me to understand where I am in society and how I function and how my race functions and then to understand how to take care of myself within the system. Because there are a lot of things that I have to go through that the next person doesn't. So I feel it's really important.

She discusses the importance of understanding how her race and ethnic identity affect how society views her and how she can live within the system.

Jayla discusses how important it is for her to have a clear understanding of her own identity, to be able to articulate how her identity interacts with society and how society views her. "If being a woman, a black woman and then the stereotypes that are assigned to that identity and how they have basically become like something that I had to learn in order to get through. Like it's been like my counseling in a sense. Like I've had to counsel myself on, I learn about it itself and then counsel myself on how to get through it in a sense." Jayla describes the difficulties understanding her own ethnic identity based on how society views her as an African American woman and the stereotypes she faces.

Despite the stereotypes and difficulties, she sees knowledge as power, “I feel like I’ve really focused on, like coming to this school so that I can change that myth [about Black women].” Jayla believes that by learning about her racial/ethnic history and embracing her racial/ethnic heritage, she can help educate others and make for a brighter future. Although her picture includes dark images of a woman in chains, blood running from the “knowledge is power”, and the black blob to symbolize racial oppression, Jayla also includes an image of a sun and a butterfly.

The sun symbolizes a brighter future, “I put the horizon as there’s like some bit of light because there are people working towards that goal to like teach people what history is and to help people get through and stuff so there are things in the working so there’s like a light.” Although she doesn’t explain the butterfly as part of her transformation and identity development, she does describe more layers within the symbol of freedom:

And then the next thing is social and I put a butterfly because I feel like I’m a social butterfly and like to have fun cause I’m always talking to people, I’m always out there. And then the Black face is kind of like a sense of like the stereotypes cause it limits how many people I can speak to or the time I can speak to certain people or how I can speak to certain people because of what they think I am before I get to speak. And it hinders me in how, in the relationships that I make so I can only make relationships with a limit depending on what their ideologies are of my race before they meet me.

Although Jayla did not describe the butterfly as part of her transformation from chains to freedom, a butterfly represents rebirth and transformation. Despite this positive symbol,



she deluded it by giving it a Black face:

And then the next thing is social and I put a butterfly because I feel like I'm a social butterfly and like to have fun cause I'm always talking to people, I'm always out there. And then the Black face is kind of like a sense of like the stereotypes cause it limits how many people I can speak to or the time I can speak to certain people or how I can speak to certain people because of what they think I am before I get to speak. And it hinders me in how, in the relationships that I make so I can only make relationships with a limit depending on what their ideologies are of my race before they meet me.

This passage describes the significance of Jayla's African American identity in how she approaches relationships and how central her race and ethnicity are to her identity. She understands the constraints that her African American identity might have on how she is perceived in the world. Despite knowing and embracing these struggles, Jayla remains optimistic about her future.

Her Identity Map concludes with the following quote, "we are the masters of our fate we are the captains of our souls." Jayla continues:

it is the ending of Invictus, which is a poem, I forgot the guy's name who wrote it and it's really, I am, but I change it to we are because I'm really, I really learned that community makes a difference. So I really couldn't do anything by myself. It really takes a village to raise a child, cause I've, even though I've done everything by myself I've used like certain people to help me get that, get far so I kind of used that.

Interestingly, this quote comes from a William Ernest Henley poem published in 1888. Henley's poem was about the challenges he faced after his leg was amputated due to tuberculosis complications and his triumph over his sickness and near death (Nakayama, 2015). Although this poem was written by a White man in the 1800s, Jayla found strength in this poem because she viewed the statement as empowering – that she controls her own fate, her own soul, and can overcome obstacles in her own life. Further, she changed “I” to “we”, which signifies her belief in the African American community to empower within. O'Connor (1997) discusses how resilient youth possess “not only insight into human agency at the personal and individual level but also a basis for interpreting African American individuals and collectives as agents of change” (p. 621). Jayla's belief in individual and collective power within the African American community signals her own confidence in her ability to act on the world, to have the agency to create positive change.

### **Social Connections Produce Agency and Persistence**

Of all five student interviewed, each displayed individual agency, their ability to act on their will (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995). Each student's agency was impacted by their belief structure and was formed through their lived-experiences. Agency can positively influence students' aspirations to achieve educational persistence (Mcintyre, 2006; Noguera, 2003). O'Connor (1997) discussed how resilient youth can work effectively within the system and believe they could possibly change the system so it is more responsive to their needs. Just as with O'Connor's (1997) research, the students I interviewed believed their actions could “produce desired social outcomes despite

structural limitations [...] with experiences which may have developed robust sense of human agency, these youth were less likely to be daunted by their acute recognition of race, class, and gender-based constraints and had reason for making continued efforts in school” (p. 622). Given that all of the students displayed academic promise, their success influenced their agency and the belief that they could be successful within the system despite race, class and/or gender constraints. When I asked Jerome what contributed to his success, as defined by getting into college and graduating he said:

Honestly I would say, my determination because while I did have a brother who pushed me, you gotta stay in school, my mom was like, you're going to college, I still didn't have to be either of those things. It was like my own determination, my motivation, like, to, you know, to be a success that kind of got me into that mindset to perform accordingly, so, like those would be the two main factors.

Jerome belief in himself gives him agency and motivation to act on his behalf (O'Connor, 1997). Not only did all of the students display an internal motivation, all five of the students displayed academic promise early in their schooling and were proud of being labeled as good students.

### **‘Good Student’ Identity & Academic Promise**

Seeing themselves as academically gifted gave the students a positive self-image. They enjoyed being at school because of the praise and accolades they received from their teachers, parents, siblings, extended family, peers and broader community. Two of the students, Jerome and La Sondra, were invited to skip ahead a grade during elementary school. Both of their families declined, as the students wanted to stay with their

classmates. The students discussed the importance of education in their economic mobility and future career success (Carter, 2008; Perry, 2003).

Jerome experienced a lot of special attention in school because, early on, he was labeled as gifted. As early as kindergarten, teachers were giving him advanced work to ensure he was being challenged academically. This continued through elementary school. “I had a lot of teachers who looked out for me because like, I was always told to like, oh you're smart, you're really gifted and stuff like that because like the little test they give us I would always, I was like the top scorer in all of those and stuff like that so it was like oh you're very gifted.” Being labeled as gifted provided advantages for Jerome, including more advanced assignments, and allowing him to go and read fun books when he completed his work early. In high school, his academic promise manifested by enrolling in advanced placement courses and acting as a tutor and mentor for his classmates, all of which gave Jerome confidence and seeing himself as a leader and elite, as written in his identity map. Being labeled as gifted affects achievement motivation and can shape students' beliefs about their intelligence. Students labeled as gifted shapes their motivation outcomes, namely persistence and achievement (Snyder et. al, 2013).

Gail talked about how important her grades were to her, how once she received actual letter grades, she would tack her report cards up all over her room. She was proud of her academic successes; “I think well, I was always happy with my grades and then I guess I started around 4th grade because that's when we started getting letter grades so it seemed more significant. Yeah. And yeah, I was just proud of my grades.” Gail also talks about how her sister skipped a grade, and was very smart, but didn't do very well in

school. In high school her sister went through difficult times academically and emotionally, including a suicide attempt. When asked how her sister's attempted suicide affected Gail, she said it made her parents extra vigilant about Gail's grades and her personal life. This annoyed Gail, as she had never given her parents any reason to doubt her academics or her safety and security. Gail always wanted to do the opposite of her sister, and once her sister started being labeled the 'problem child' she did whatever she could do to fly under her parents' radar. Gail was proud of her good grades, but it also meant her parents would give her more freedom if she continued to do well academically. Both internal motivation to do well and external motivation, in her parents trusting in her, impacted Gail's agency to do well in school.

Like Gail, Jayla always did well in school; "Yeah, my grades are always good. I always had like perfect attendance, GPA certificates, if I've done contests and stuff I've got medals and trophies and stuff like from good academic performance." Jayla discusses several times when she got into trouble with teachers or was reprimanded for her behavior, but never for her grades. Her grades remained exemplary throughout her schooling experience. Jayla's academic promise and skills in dance both influenced her agency and ability to pursue higher education. Through dance abilities, she received invitations to try out for dance schools at prestigious schools across the country. At the school she finally selected, she did receive a scholarship to attend and pursue dance. Dance and good grades both influenced Jayla's agency because it highlighted her academic promise to universities, teachers, and her family who helped her attend the college interviews/tryouts.

Michael also showed academic promise early in his schooling, unlike a lot of students in his school:

Oh yeah, like I was good in school. Like I never really had a problem, I never had to go to summer school or anything. Like a lot of kids at the school had to go to remedial school and it was the same kids that did our house, so I never had to experience that, so I guess that's kind of they picked up I wasn't in the summer school so he must be one of those smart kids, so. When I spoke I didn't really speak Ebonics or anything that they spoke. I didn't have the dialect or anything. Like I spoke like this. I wasn't using the big vocabulary or anything, but I knew basic grammar and stuff so I guess that's how they picked up that, you know, they should be picking on us or something.

This passage is interesting because Michael describes how he stood out from other African American students in his school, how he never had to attend summer or remedial school. He also explains how his language usage differed from students in his school. He spoke without a dialect, differently than his classmates who he says spoke Ebonics. Michael talked a lot about being bullied throughout elementary and middle school. He related the bullying directly to not being accepted by African American students due to his heritage as Nigerian, although he was born in the U.S. Despite being bullied, Michael viewed his strong academics and proper vocabulary as something of which he should be proud. The importance of academics was instilled in him at an early age, by his family and his Nigerian culture. His own academic promise, coupled with his strong social support provided him the agency to pursue higher education.

La Sondra also showed early academic promise. Her school asked if she wanted to skip second grade, but her mother chose to keep her with her classmates. La Sondra always performed well in school. “Since I was little I was always getting awards and stuff.” She viewed her grades as important and was proud of her academic accomplishment. Her family would praise her for her strong academic performance; “when I would like get honor roll and stuff and when my family would hear about it, they would like call me and congratulate me and stuff, so I guess that like motivated me and stuff, like this is awesome.” From La Sondra’s comments, it is clear her family’s recognition of her accomplishments was a motivator for her to do well in school. La Sondra liked the positive reinforcement and attention she received from her family. La Sondra’s academic promise influenced her agency to continue to do well in school.

### **Future Orientation & Goal Setting**

As discussed in Chapter Two, future orientation is an individual’s ability to plan, motivations and feelings about the future. People who have a hopeful sense of the future are better able to transition to adulthood (Stoddard, 2010). Future orientation was apparent in all five students interviewed, although their goals and motivations were different. For Jayla, giving a voice to her community and being stable were her drivers. For Jerome, his goals were financial security and career-focused. For Michael, career goals and competition seemed to be his drivers. For La Sondra, financial security seemed to be her motivator. For Gail, it was to pursue higher education like her friends.

Even as a college student, away from him, his father’s expectations weighed heavily on Michael. His father’s expectations strongly influenced Michael’s own career

goals and future orientation. As previously discussed, Michael viewed his sister's success as something to which to aspire and his father's expectations remained a driving force in Michael's academic persistence and future career goals. "Like he didn't tell me to be a lawyer or anything, but. I feel like he kind of gave me a choice. Like he says, 'oh no, I want you guys to do whatever you want but make sure it's something you like and something that will make money or make you happy.' I know that's a load of crap. It's like I need, you have to be a lawyer, a doctor, an engineer, so." Michael placed a lot of pressure on himself to be successful, to live up to his sister's level of success and to please his father. At the same time, Michael was goal and future oriented. In his identity map, he wrote the phrase action-oriented. When I asked him what action oriented meant to him he said, "someone who's not afraid to go out and pursue what they want or to go after their goals and aspirations." Even if Michael's father's expectations were his driver, Michael still had agency to pursue goals and aspirations, including academic persistence. Michael, as a graduating senior, discussed the possibility of attending law school, but he planned to take a year off to make sure law was the right path for him. Despite the impetus for his motivation and future orientation, it was apparent Michael had set high expectations for his future and goals to attain.

Jayla also displayed a strong future orientation and ability to set and work toward goals. Early on, dance was her motivator. Early on in our conversations, she talked a lot about being a professional dancer and working for a prestigious dance company. As our conversations continued she also talked about other career goals, including advocacy for her community:



I'm thinking of going to grad school just to be able to communicate and speak up for those who can't. Not necessarily just for the Black community but just speak up and also deconstruct the knowledge that they're building. There's a lot of stuff that is out there that says that Black people are this way when we're not. Like we can't even speak for ourselves that type of thing. Like there's wrong information so basically battling the wrong information and the idea that race, battling racism basically.

There were times when it was unclear exactly what Jayla's future goals were, but it was always apparent she had a lot of future goals and a strong future orientation. At times, Jayla's future goals seemed a lot more simplistic than combating racism, centered on finding peace; "I'm just going to keep my eye on that prize, like I'm gonna, I just don't see that as like a succeed-able goal but just being at peace with yourself and having self-worth and being able to get through the day, I feel like that's good enough." Jayla's comment here still speaks to her strong future and goal orientation. She didn't clearly define "eye on the prize" but always speaks about the future and meeting her goals.

Of all the students, Jerome had clear and defined goals. Some were financial, and some were career focused. When I asked Jerome what the best way to get ahead in life is, he spoke a lot about goal-setting and future orientation:

I can only speak for myself, the best way to get ahead is to like, find something that's worth fighting for, you know? Like something that's worth reaching for you know, so if like, success, like, what kind of success are you reaching for? Like what do you want to do and like hold onto that cause that's been a driving force

for me as well, you know? Like, what do you want to do? Like what do you want to get out of life? And push for it, do what you can to get there.

When I asked Jerome why some African American students are successful and others aren't, he reverts back to his belief in goal-setting and always thinking about the future. "They never find an in because they don't ever have a solid goal. It's like if you establish a goal for yourself, make it happen, like, regardless of your circumstances and stuff like that, you can make it out of any situation. Like, just, this is a self thing, like motivate yourself if you can't find motivation elsewhere." Jerome had several goals and motivations.

Despite times of home and food insecurity, Jerome's mom remained a driving force in his future orientation and academic goals. His mom worked a lot, but her influence remains one of Jerome's main motivations.

Jerome: She's still my driving force...like to do better for my mom. Like, my thing as a kid was like, I'm gonna get you a house, so, like I can't do that and live on the street or, I can't do that and deal drugs. Like, I just had a good sense of what's right and what's wrong, you know, at an early age I guess. So you know, I know that I gotta do and I need to be successful, so my mom's gotta get a house.

Even now [about to graduate from college] that's still a goal.

He talked a lot about doing better for his mom, specifically buying her a nice house. This quote not only speaks to Jerome's ability to set and maintain goals, but the influential role his mother played in his hopes for the future.

When I asked Jerome about his future career goals, he told me early on he had hoped to become a chef. However, he learned that chefs often don't make a lot of money, so he shifted his focus on some day owning a restaurant. He chose to attend college and major in business to set himself up to achieve the goal of becoming a CEO and owning his own business, rather than becoming a chef. When I specifically asked him why he chose college he said:

for the pursuit of money because I was like with a degree I can make a lot more money, so, it was like me being a chef, that would be fun, but I also know how much they make, so, let me establish [myself...] like executive chefs make like \$105,000, you know? And I'm like I think I want to make a little more than that, so, you know, that's kind of where I'm at right now. Future CEO, I'm gonna run something, and then I'm gonna open a restaurant, I mean take over a thing, that's kind of my goal.

In this passage, Jerome clearly articulates his reasons for pursuing higher education and his foresight in the importance of a college degree in the pursuit of money vs. becoming a chef. He displays a strong ability to set goals and a well formed future orientation.

Of all the students, Gail was less certain of her future goals beyond college. She valued education as an important part of her identity and future goals. "Well I knew I wanted to go to college and, yeah, I don't know I just knew that I wanted to go to college and I wanted to get started as soon as possible so I wanted to stay on track." Gail clearly set goals and was future oriented in terms of her desire to attend college. Her friends also served as motivators in her goal to attend college. "Three of my close friends were all,

like they're very studious and I look up to them and like one of them goes to [a good college]... and my other friend goes to [a good college], so, since they were my closest friends and they were doing what I wanted to do I guess I looked up to them.” Gail’s pursuit of higher education speaks to her future orientation and goal setting.

### **Extracurricular Activities**

Guest & Schneider (2003) discuss the positive association between extracurricular activity participation in high school and academic achievement. Further, the positive effects of participation influence future adult outcomes such as: educational attainment, wealth, and career status. All five students discussed a strong connection to their social networks in high school through their involvement in extracurricular activities. Jayla participated in dance academies and a college preparatory course; Jerome was the lead in a school play, participated in academic school clubs and attended a college preparatory program; La Sondra also participated in a college preparatory program; Michael was part of math club and attended a college preparatory program; and Gail was part of a program she described to be like the Girl Scouts. The relevance of extracurricular activities on their academic persistence was especially apparent when Jerome and Jayla shared their artifacts.

When Jayla brought in her artifacts, she brought two items: her ballet point shoes and her weekly planner. Jayla described the importance of her ballet shoes on many levels. First, she did not take many years of ballet, so when she was finally able to hold the proper form in the point position, she was very proud of her accomplishment. Second, she described how dance was the way she made it to college. “It was more of, I’m in a

dire situation and I need to do something about it type of thing and then dance was my way in. Like that was basically how I got into this school.” Thus, dance played a significant part in Jayla’s admittance to school. Jayla was also involved in several other extracurricular activities including AVID (see p. 111), which she said was an incentive to do well in school. “I was in AVID when I was in high school so I had like weekly progress reports and we would like, we would like, we had like incentives. So if you get like an improvement in your grade from week to week you get something, so, I think that’s another like driving factor that made me want to do good.” Beyond AVID, Jayla was also involved in Upward Bound, another college preparatory program to help Jayla think about her future schooling options. Jayla was also a member of drill team and an actor in several of her school plays. The reason Jayla brought in her weekly planner was because she discussed how many activities in which she was involved and also the number of jobs she held in high school and college. Given her high level of involvement in school extracurricular activities while also juggling school and working close to full-time, Jayla prided herself on her detailed organizational abilities to manage so many priorities.

Jerome brought in his high school poster from the play Grease. He played the lead and he was featured on the poster. This artifact was interesting for several reasons, first, it surprised me that Jerome would keep this poster and actually bring it to college with him. It was apparent he was very proud of his role in the play. When I asked Jerome to discuss the poster, he said:

This is a poster of Grease. This is more symbolic of like, later on down the line

and like, yeah, that was my first play [which surprised a lot of people...] Yeah, cause, especially if you saw me then because I was the type to wear the big hoodies, long t-shirts, baggy jeans and stuff and then you see me like in Grease, I had tight pants, the little tight leather jackets doing flips and singing and stuff. It was fun though. It was real fun.”

Jerome was not only proud of being a part of the play, it appears from his explanation that he was proud of himself for breaking out of the norms and expectations people had of him. He might have generally portrayed what he called his “hoodlum self”, but it seems he was happy to show people another side of himself. Further, Jerome actually called himself an “actor” on his identity map. He told me he saw himself as an actor in the literal sense, he sincerely enjoyed acting, but also in the figurative sense that there are many times in his life when he had to put on an act. As previously discussed, Jerome was also involved in a college preparatory program and an afterschool clubs. Jerome talked at length about a high school mentor who influenced his high school performance and helped prepare him for college. Jerome’s mentor was helpful because he pushed Jerome to try harder academically and also to join student organizations, one of which was a college preparatory program. Jerome’s mentor took a very active role in his education and extra-curricular pursuits, all of which aided in Jerome’s academic persistence.

Matthew was also involved in several extracurricular activities in school. He was part of computer and history club. He also participated in one year of track, mostly because the teacher who ran computer club and history club also coached track. It is evident this teacher was special and popular amongst the students; “there'd be a lot of

people in his room all the time, almost 50, he would spend his lunch break with the students [...] I overlooked Computer Club because the same, the teacher who ran History Club also ran Computer Club [...] I did a little track in 9th grade because my computer teacher, taught me how to write, type, also did like the track and field.” Matthew was influenced by his computer teacher to be more involved in school and Matthew also joined other clubs as time went by. He was the treasurer for student government, and he participated in the Math, Engineering and Science Achievement program. Although Matthew’s artifacts did not relate directly to his extracurricular involvement like Jayla and Jerome’s did, Matthew’s artifacts spoke to other aspects of his social support system. Namely, he brought in a watch his sister had bought him. He talked at length about the importance of his sister in his own achievement. He idolized her and spoke highly of her in terms of her academics and career trajectory. He also praised her for her assistance in helping him with his college application processes. Beyond the watch his sister gave him, Michael brought in a bottle of iron pills. He described to me how he had sickle cell anemia and that he did not like to tell people about it because he did not want people to view him as weak. Relating back to his identity map, Michael discusses masculinity and how African American men are supposed to be masculine. I wonder if his unwillingness to discuss or disclose his illness has a lot to do with his desire to appear strong and masculine.

Although Larysha’s artifacts do not relate directly to her extracurricular activities, like Matthew, one of her artifacts related directly to her social support system. She brought in several pictures of her extended family and her cousins. She talked at length

about their significance in her life, which was evident in her identity map also. Larysha's family does relate back to her education directly because she mentioned several times how happy she felt when her family was proud of her educational achievements. Larysha also participated in a college preparatory program. She also participated in National Honors Society, ran track and played tennis in high school. Interestingly, in her first two years of high school, she was not involved in any extracurricular programs, and then she was invited to join National Honors Society;

I think that's what made me make the change [to become more involved in extracurricular activities] because they like invite you to be in it. So once I was in it, I started to meet people who were like in the honors classes and stuff and then like my counselor was like urging me to go into like honors classes so I started to do that. And I was in, I ran track, I played tennis, I only joined sports because my counselor was like you need to put something on your college application. I was like ok, whatever.

Although Larysha's reason for joining sports was purely due to her college applications, she also discusses pride in being a part of National Honors Society and how that lead her to making new friends and joining honors classes, all of which positively influenced her academic persistence.

The students I interviewed showed a strong connection to their schools and communities through their involvement in extracurricular activities. This confirms Steele's (1997) identity research that states: "to sustain school success one must be identified with school achievement in the sense of its being a part of one's self-definition,



a personal identity to which one is self-evaluatively accountable [...which...] translates into sustained achievement motivation” (p. 613). It is clear that all of the students I interviewed were vested into their schools through their involvement in extracurricular activities. Further, they maintained a strong self-definition and identity as “good student”, all of which aided in their academic persistence.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Through in-depth interviews, students discussed various aspects of their early lives, including details about their families, friends, schooling experience, identities and other factors that influenced their academic persistence. The student narratives quickly revealed the significance of their social support systems in their academic persistence. Clearly, social support systems, including: parents, siblings, extended family members, teachers and mentors, positively influenced persistence in all five of the students. Each student experienced different personal interactions with their social support system that affected each student uniquely, but all students’ social support systems positively influenced their persistence. For one of the five students, the middle-upper class environment in which she was raised and went to school influenced her educational aspirations and persistence. Each of the students discussed aspects of their identities. All students discussed aspects of their racial and ethnic identities (REIs). Four of the five students clearly articulated the importance and positive impacts of their African American identities. It is unclear if the fifth student did not feel as positively about her REI or if, due to stereotype threat, she was unwilling or unable to communicate this aspect of her identity with me, as a White female researcher. All five students displayed

agency, although the driver of their agency differed, from academic promise to future orientation. Students' agency and identity development were influenced by the culture and context in which they found themselves (Nasir et al., 2009). Specifically, their strong social support systems influenced their REI formation, their future orientation and their belief in themselves. These individual student narratives explain the ways in which culture and context, agency and identity interacted to produce academic persistence in these five African American students. In the final Chapter Five, I discuss the findings, offer recommendations for educators and policy-makers, and suggest future research.

## **Chapter 5: Summary, Recommendations and Implications**

### **Introduction**

Counter-narratives are stories about people outside of the majority, who are often overlooked in the research literature. Their stories challenge the dominant narrative because they examine, critique and counter the majoritarian narrative (Harper & Davis, 2012). Counter-narratives, as told by African American college students, provided detailed, place and context-specific examples of African American academic persistence and attainment. I defined these students as successful and ‘making it’ because they were able to maneuver the racialized American educational system, to gain access to higher education and persist to attend a prestigious public institution of higher education. Their stories highlighted struggles and successes in their daily lives, how they interacted with their communities, teachers, peers, families, and schooling system, and how they developed their multiple identities and agency. Although their stories provide only a snapshot of their lived experiences, their counter-narratives showcase African American student success, voices and stories that are often silenced or forgotten in the American educational system. The five students in this study are certainly not representative of all African American students or their schooling experiences, but they do provide place and context specific examples of African American students who are ‘making it’, who are persisting within a system teeming with racism, discrimination and daily microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Chapter Five provides a final discussion of findings presented in Chapter Four that appear to bolster academic persistence: culture and context, identity and agency. A

greater discussion of the identity maps will be included to explain their significance to the overall research study. The identity maps the students drew, coupled with their explanation of their maps highlight the multiple counter-narratives they each carry, providing greater detail and understanding of their various identities, life experiences and histories. As Segalo, Manoff & Fine (2015) discuss, critical methodologies, like identity maps allow the participants “to carve a counter-narrative that does not play into the dominant narrative that speaks of equality and democracy, but instead acknowledges and highlights the interweaving of their continuous struggles” (p. 346). Also as part of the discussion section, limitations are addressed. Recommendations for parents, teachers, mentors and counselors, and educational researchers follows limitations. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research and a final conclusion.

### **Discussion**

This study was meant to explore and understand the connections among agency, identity, and culture and context that contribute to African American academic persistence. My findings did suggest that these factors aid in students’ persistence in school. The development of agency and identity are inextricably linked to the unique culture and context in which students lived and attended school. Each student had unique social support systems, environments, home lives, family structures, mentors, teachers, counselors, peers, and siblings. Each student also has his/her own specific abilities and life circumstances that influence the social contexts in which they operated and in turn, affected the students’ understanding of self and opportunity. Situated within rich cultures and contexts, each student developed identities that contributed to their agency, which

produced academic persistence. The identity maps the students created provided a rich examination into how the students understand their own multiple identities, especially as it relates to their race/ethnicity.

### **Conceptual Framework Revisited**

In Chapter 1, I discussed my conceptual framework, which included features of counter-narratives for African American academic persistence. I contended that specific socio-cultural characteristics and processes shape the ways in which African American students develop their own counter-narratives to persist and gain access to higher education. Specifically, agency, identity, culture and context interact to produce persistence. Each component encompasses a complex and interactive set of factors. Identity broadly includes the multiple identities a person enacts to pursue opportunities in life. I focused heavily on ethnic/racial identities and gender identities, among others (Lundy, 2003; Welch & Hodges, 1997; Wright, 2009; Chavous et al., 2003; Oyserman et al., 2001). According to Bennett (2006), neighborhoods, parenting, and racial socialization significantly influence ethnic identity development. Both agency and identity development are heavily influenced by the culture and context in which students find themselves (Nasir et al., 2009). Agency is an individual's ability to act on the world, to make choices that are shaped by opportunities, cultural norms, and the context in which they are situated (Noguera, 2003). Context includes place and time-specific factors, such as students' social/economic status and the physical location and neighborhood in which they live. Culture also impacts identity development and agency. "Culture can be seen as the medium of human development which [prepares humans] for

interactions with the world” (Cole & Parker, 2011, p. 135). I argued that all of these components coalesced to aid in African American students’ development of counter-narratives and educational persistence. Students construct and develop counter-narratives, identity, and agency in response to their culture and context including: racial microaggressions, which are subtle insults, that may be verbal, nonverbal and/or visual, directed toward people of color, and institutional discrimination they likely experience (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Quijada Cerecer, 2013).

In further analysis of the conceptual framework, I believe I confirmed several aspects of the framework. First, it was apparent the importance of the students’ culture and context, specifically the significance of their social support systems through the funds of knowledge they provide to their African American children. Further, it was clear students developed robust identities that aided in their persistence. Their identities were developed starting at a young age and were co-created with their families and communities. Identity is an incredible part of who people are and how they manage and frame their lives and life experiences, including their academic pursuits, if they so choose. Students who maintain a positive racial identity in light of perceptions and stereotypes of others and who have a strong understanding of their racial identity within the structures of education are better able to persist (Berry et al., 2011). Four of the five students I interviewed clearly articulated how their race/ethnicity impacted their lives and life-chances. Although not all of them had experienced racism, all but La Sondra described a robust understanding of the opportunity structure for African American students, the challenges they have or will face because of their race and the systemic

inequalities in education and in broader society. At the same time, all of the students, including La Sondra, were proud to be African American, which mirrors Berry et al.'s (2011) research that a positive racial identity and race consciousness aids in persistence.

### **Identity Maps**

Visual methods, like identity maps, provide a means for amplifying unheard voices. Segalo, Manoff & Fine (2015) examined embroideries that South African women created to produce counter-narratives about their Apartheid life experiences. They found the women who created these embroideries were able to highlight inequalities they continuously experience in their lives while also emphasizing the need for social justice and rejecting dominant western ideologies. "The women's artistic creation in the form of embroideries as a way to tell their own stories and situate themselves allows them space to imagine life differently and remind us of how *Being* can be conceptualized in various ways. The women's stories remind us of the importance of remembering." (p. 350). The visual research method of using embroideries allowed these women space to create their counter-narratives to grapple with the inequalities they experienced. This article is relevant to my use of identity maps because it confirms the relevance and importance of visual and critical methods to privilege the voices of those who are often silenced and oppressed.

The benefits of critical visual methods like embroideries and identity maps is that they honor local knowledge and struggles, challenge dominant lies, reveal the concealed pain and complex subjectivities and demand social justice. Further, they contest dominant narratives, inviting revisions and giving space for participants to think about their

histories and futures (Segalo, Manoff & Fine, 2015). Initially, I included the identity maps as another form of qualitative data to help triangulate the findings. Beyond the visual representation, the interviews associated with the students' explanation of their maps was some of the richest data collected. Asking the students to describe their maps and why they wrote or drew certain things served as segue to discussions of race, racism, their view of their African American identities and their family histories.

When I asked students to create their identity maps, I prompted them specifically to draw a map of their many ethnic, religious, cultural and social identities. I specified that the illustration should show how they see themselves as African American people. They were given markers, colored pencils, and pens to draw or write whatever they wanted. Confirming previous research, there is a known difference between drawings of girls and boys (Lijima et al., 2001). Boys tend to draw moving objects, using colder colors, whereas girls use brighter and warmer colors, drawing things like flowers and people. According to Lijima et al (2001), there is a strong gender differential when children free-draw. Boys draw more masculine things like trucks and other vehicles, and girls draw more feminine things like butterflies, flowers, and the sun. Also, girls use many more colors in their drawings, whereas boys tend to stick with one or specific colors in each area.

Of the five identity maps collected, there is a clear difference between the male and female drawings. The males both used black as the first color they selected to draw their maps. Michael used other brighter colors, but only after first selecting black and gray, whereas Jerome used black only. All three females used multiple colors and also



integrated their colors into the totality of the drawing rather than categorizing by colors like the males did, all of which mirrors Lijima et al.'s (2001) findings, which could support the gender differences. Further, Jayla's picture included a butterfly, which fully matches Lijima et al.'s (2001) assertions. Two of the females used color pencils, the third female used both markers and colored pencils and the males used markers. Jayla used both materials, which helped to accentuate her message. For example, her person was drawn lightly with a brown colored pencil, whereas her chains were drawn with a thick black marker. It appears she used the more saturated markers to draw attention to certain aspects of her drawing. The black hole, the black chains, the bloody red 'knowledge is power'. She discusses these in detail, which I described previously in Chapter Four.

Jayla's drawing is an excellent example of one of the benefits of visual methods that Segalo, Manoff & Fine (2015) discuss in terms of allowing participants to think about their histories and their futures while providing them the space to think about past discrimination and sharing their counter-narratives. Jayla explains the bloody red 'knowledge is power' as "knowledge about knowing my history as in knowing that how we were brought here [as slaves...] I know my history and I can stand on it and it's like a foundation but it's still like painful to me even though it didn't happen to me it's still like a reflection of what we have to go through today." Jayla's identity map includes her cultural history through the inclusion of the May pole and the chains to represent cultural heritage and her ancestral struggle with slavery. Jayla's drawing, more than any of the others, shows a very vivid depiction of her cultural history, her present and her future

hopes for her life.

Of all the identity maps, Jerome's seems the most introspective and self-aware, partially due to the fact that he includes several descriptors and thinks about his sense of self while also thinking about how his identity interacts with other people. In that way, Michael's map also places him in the broader society, specifically around how others view him as African American vs. Nigerian. Both Michael and Jerome appeared to understand their role in society as Black men and how society viewed them as such. On the other hand, Gail and La Sondra spent less time thinking introspectively and instead thinking about themselves in relation to their families and communities. Gail provided a few specific details about her identity, but specifically included family members in her personal identity map, which seemed to suggest she does not think about individual self very often but rather how she relates to her broader world and society. Both Gail and La Sondra discuss the importance of their family in their sense of self and who they are directly correlates with the relationships they have with their family. This family and broader community connect seen specifically in Gail, La Sondra and Michael's maps affirms Segalo, Manoff & Fine's (2015) findings that their embroideries often included narratives of "their childhoods, family relations, school experiences and life in their communities. In this way they show how suffering was widespread in the different spheres of their lives and not something experienced alone" (p. 349). Although I would not argue all of the maps show the same level of suffering or struggle as widespread, the collectivist lived-experiences are similar. At some level, all of the participants' identity maps included aspects of the broader society, family and social relationships.

Throughout the interviews, students discussed various identities, but the identity maps they drew were most helpful in understanding how the students self-identified and what aspects of their selves were most important to discuss with me as researcher. All of the students took pride in being good students. They enjoyed the praise they received from their families, teachers, siblings, or friends. The five students all possessed strong school/student identities. Not all the students used the term ‘gifted’ to describe themselves, but it appears all of the students were academically gifted. Although all of the students seemed to earn the label of good student pretty easily, other aspects of their identities were less clear or salient. Three of the five students expressed strong racial/ethnic identities as African American, with Michael teetering between a Black (Nigerian) and African American identity. La Sondra was less open or willing to discuss her African American identity, although she certainly expressed aspects of her ethnic identity, like importance of her family and kinship, religion and soul food, all of which represent strong cultural aspects of the African American community. Through the review of literature, it is clear that a strong African American identity aids in academic persistence, but identity alone does not produce persistence. Students’ identities are created within the culture and context in which they live and interact. The interplay between identity and culture and context also influences their agency – their ability to act on the world.

### **Sources of Funds of Knowledge**

Throughout the interviews, what surprised me the most was the importance of family, teachers, mentors, siblings and their broader social support in developing the

students' identities as 'good student'. Most apparent to me was the importance of family in aiding students in academic persistence and attainment. Gonzalez et al.'s (2005) funds of knowledge approach to framing marginalized communities is very relevant to the counter-narratives the students told. Often, African American communities are viewed only for their deficits like being unsafe, dangerous, poor and 'bad' (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Funds of knowledge perspective acknowledges the lived experiences of their community, giving power to the knowledge and connectedness embedded within their community and culture. The student interviews clearly articulated through their counter-narratives, the power of their social support systems. Their teachers, counselors, parents, siblings and peers are sources of funds of knowledge to help the students persist in school, to help them develop strong identities and agency.

As with Gonzalez et al.'s (2005) research, the students' stories of their everyday lives in their communities were punctuated with examples of funds of knowledge, how their community and familial interactions aided in their academic persistence. Despite the funds of knowledge within their communities, four of the students lived in what they described as unsafe neighborhoods at some point in their childhoods. This is important to note because their ability to persist, despite the majoritarian narrative of this culture of poverty, describes the positive impact of their communities' funds of knowledge, despite their seemingly unsafe neighborhoods. These counter-narratives display the great value of community support provided to aid in academic persistence. These four students who grew up in poor neighborhoods surrounded by violence, drugs and insecure access to resources possessed other social and cultural capital, specifically their social support

systems' funds of knowledge that insulated them from the dominant view of the unsafe environment.

For some of the students, like Jerome, his mother was his driving force, and his motivation. Certainly, parents who are actively involved in students' academics positively influence African American students' educational outcome. Jeynes' (2005) meta-analysis of 41 studies found a considerable and consistent positive relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement among urban students. All of the students discussed how their parents were actively involved in their educational process in one way or another. Some of their parents spent significant time ensure their children received the best education. For example, some of the parents spent significant time finding the students better schools, contacting their counselors and teachers to ensure they were excelling, completing homework assignments with their children, requiring them to do extra work in the summer, and sending the students to college preparatory programs. This quote from Jayla describes how actively involved her mother was in her academics, "she really wanted me to go somewhere where my academics would go up [...] so that school was like the best choice and plus she heard that the school was good, it was real good and then on top of that, she always looked at like the academics of the school." Beyond ensuring Jayla had a strong high school education, she instilled the value of higher education and made it clear to Jayla it was her expectation. "I'm here because my mother didn't go to college...yeah, just because she did high school but she didn't go to college but she really wanted to so [me going] was the next best thing." The other students told similar stories about their parents' expectation of

them attending college. Their social support systems provided a culture where education was valued, and reiterated in their daily lives. But social support alone is not enough to produce persistence. If it were, Jerome and Gail's older siblings would also have gained educational attainment. The different levels of educational attainment within the same family structure could be due to many other factors. The context in which their siblings lived could have been different, the level of teacher, parent or mentor involvement could have been less. It is possible the history, context, and opportunities were different for their siblings because of external factors that varied and interacted with the siblings' histories and psychological development.

Beyond families, teachers and counselors can play an active and significant role in students' ability to persist. Madyun & Lee (2010) studied approximately 3,000 middle school students in a large Midwestern school district in the United States; the researchers indicated that African American students who succeeded academically tended to have strong relationships with non-familial adults, inside or outside of school, who served as important role models during their adolescent period. Owens et al. (2010) studied urban African American male students' perceptions of school counselors; their findings suggested that counseling services positively influenced educational achievement. White and Kelly (2010) examined the role of school counselors and dropout prevention and found that school counselors significantly impacted academic performance, school attendance and school completion.

Jerome and Jayla both described close relationships with teachers and counselors during their primary and secondary school years. Jayla's teacher encouraged her to sign

up for the weekend dance academy that helped to hone her dance talent, which ultimately led to a dance scholarship to the university she attended. Jerome talked at length about a high school mentor who influenced his high school performance and helped prepare him for college. Jerome's mentor was helpful because he pushed Jerome to try harder academically and also to join student organizations, one of which was a college preparatory program. Jerome's mentor took a very active role in his education and extra-curricular pursuits. He checked in regularly to ensure Jerome was on track "Like if he saw, like, oh I'm getting into trouble, or he felt like, alright, you know, you're hanging out too much. Like I need you to focus, get your act together, you know make sure everything's on track like, I would have to bring him my transcripts, or like, you know, every quarter so he can see, make sure my grades wasn't slipping and stuff." Griffin (2012) explains that minority students who have access to a mentor will achieve better academically. Especially for Jerome and Jayla, strong teacher, counselor and mentoring relationships positively impacted their academic achievement. Michael, Jayla and La Sondra also participated in college preparatory programs, which no-doubt aided in college readiness and future orientation.

### **Agency**

All five students exhibited agency to persist in school. Their capacity as agents was directly influenced by their environments, sources of funds of knowledge, and the context in which they lived. Their ability to act on their lives and make choices was, at times, limited by aspects of their culture and context. For example, Jayla wanted to attend her local high school, but her mother wanted her to attend another high school. Within

the context her mother placed her, she was able to pursue her dance and drama interests. Despite some limitations, the participants acted in response to the social and cultural interplay of their daily lives. It is impossible to separate structure from agency, and it is clear their social interactions with teachers, counselors, their parents, siblings, and peers all influenced the student's agency.

The aspects of agency most apparent in the students were their future orientation, which refers to setting goals for the future and considering the future in their decision-making processes. Further, the students all possessed a strong belief in their academic competence, which was instilled in them through social interactions in schools and amongst their families and communities. They exhibited strong academic promise from a very early age and their teachers, counselors and families identified them as 'good students' early on. The students took pride in their academic abilities and none of them mentioned ever feeling a need to hide their academic prowess (i.e. peer feedback of them 'acting white' (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986)). This pride in their abilities, leading to a strong future orientation was largely created through positive reinforcement from friends, teachers and parents. La Sondra mentioned several times that she enjoyed the praise she received from her extended family when they asked her about her grades. Gail acknowledged her report cards were like gold stars for her. She hung her report cards on her wall because she was so proud of her letter grades. Jerome mentioned his mom paid him when he received good grades. These positive reinforcements and social support positively influenced the students' belief in their academic abilities, aiding in a stronger sense of agency.



While all students maintained a strong identity as student, they also made plans for their future, both of which helped them develop agency. All of the students interviewed acknowledged an understanding of the struggle for equitable opportunities for African American students. This awareness aligns with O'Connor's (1997) study of African American high school students whose knowledge of struggle did not affect their academic persistence, but may have contributed to their agency and academic motivation. The students I interviewed spoke eloquently about their experiences and understanding of racism and social constraints for African American people. Given their own knowledge of their community's struggles, while at the same time possessing a strong sense of their own academic promise and future orientation, all of these factors may have aided in the development of a strong sense of human agency.

According to McIntyre (2006) and Noguera (2003), agency can influence students' educational aspirations toward higher academic achievement. O'Connor (1997) confirms resilient youth understand how to maneuver within system. They believe their actions matter, even in light of structural limitations. She found the youth in her study were not deterred by the structural barriers, rather they developed more robust senses of human agency in response to those limitations. Further, they were acutely aware of race, class and gender constraints, but didn't feel daunted by those constraints. Like O'Connor's resilient youth, the study participants I interviewed discussed in great detail their own understanding of the structural constraints they had to contend with as African American youth. He discussed issues of race, class and gender, but did not let those structural barriers negatively affect their sense of resilience or agency. Jayla's desire to

attend graduate school mimics O'Connor's (1997) comments that resilient youth believe they can change the structural constraints impeding them; "I'm thinking of going to grad school just to be able to communicate and speak up for those who can't [...] just speak up and also deconstruct the knowledge that they're [oppressors/majority] building. There's a lot of stuff that is out there that says that Black people are this way when we're not."

Jayla's desire to pursue a Master's degree so she could speak for those who do not have a voice shows her own belief in her agency to create change within the system.

### **Limitations**

Qualitative research allows for deeper understanding (Hatch, 2002). Despite the richness of narratives obtained in this study, there are several limitations to consider.

First, data was collected through interviews, identity maps and artifacts collected directly from the students. I met with each student four times (Jerome, five times), but did not observe them in classes, meet their friends, go to their homes, speak with their families, which would have created a rounder picture of the students. Relying solely on students' own words without any corroboration from former teachers, parents, family members, siblings, friends, etc., it is possible that the interviewees provided incomplete accounts in these face-to-face interactions with me, to save face in front of the researcher. In all qualitative studies, the researcher influences the collection and interpretation of data.

Interviews do not reflect the actual experience, but rather augment it. Interviews can alter meaning and change people (Finlay, 2002). Meanings are created through the negotiations between the researcher and the interviewee, and also influenced by the social context. My status as a White woman, a Ph.D. student, an employee of the university, the

way I interacted with the students, or the types and manner in which I asked questions all could have influenced how the students responded. If another person had asked the very same questions, the answers could have been quite different.

The five students within the study had great diversity of backgrounds, given the small sample size. However, had more students who shared more similar backgrounds participated in the study, there may be more opportunities for comparisons. Another limitation is that all students were selected from the same elite public university. Given all of the students were from the same state in the U.S., their contexts may have been more similar. The data may have shown more variation and could have been richer had the interviewees been selected from a variety of universities in various parts of the country, to understand if/how the student experiences differed by location and context.

Another limitation, but also opportunity, was the inclusion of Michael. Although he self-selected to participate in the study and said he identified as African American, in reality, I should have been clearer in my original recruitment materials, asking only for students who were at least third or fourth generation African American. Michael was a first generation Black immigrant, and according to Gordon (2013), “black immigrants bring with them experiences and perspectives similar to those held by other immigrant groups, as compared to native blacks, by the dominant American culture, including many of the negative stereotypes of native blacks and the black subculture” (pp. 186-187). Not only do Black immigrants carry negative stereotypes of African Americans, first and second generation immigrants perform better in school than native Black people. By the third generation, Black immigrants show similar schooling achievement as native Black

Americans (Rong & Brown, 2001). Although Michael provided useful data about the Black immigrant experience, I question whether his data should be included, as it is not representative of the African American experience, with the same history of oppression. However, I chose to include Michael because he self-identified as African American. Further, there is value in understanding his experience while he grappled with his multiple racial/ethnic identities as Black, African American, and Nigerian. Further, it was useful to share his story as he struggled to understand his role in American society as a Black person, an African American in some contexts and Nigerian in others.

### **Implications for Practice**

#### **Parents (and Families)**

There is a consistent positive relationship between parental involvement and student academic achievement (Jeynes, 2005). Parents who participate in their children's schooling, who attend parent-teacher conferences, who assist their children with homework, who spend time reading with their children, who have high expectations for their children's future educational attainment, aid in African American student academic achievement (Lauer et al., 2006). Parental involvement was an enduring factor in the student interviews. Particularly for the three students from female-headed households, they praised their mothers for their significant involvement, for pushing them to pursue their academics, and even touted their mothers as the reason they wanted to succeed. These stories of mother as motivator and mentor is a great example of a counter-narrative, when considering Madyun and Lee's (2010) study that revealed a negative association between female-headed households and the achievement of African American

male students. Madyun and Lee's study is not unique and encompasses some of the negative stereotypes of African American females and female-headed households. Despite this research, the student narratives provided counter examples of African American student success regardless of growing up in a female-headed single-mother household.

K-12 schools, districts and the broader educational system should consider targeted programs to engage parents directly in their children's schooling. Especially those lower-income and under-served students' families require a greater level of support from the school system to help them understand how they can best support their students' educational experiences. If schools can take the time to explain how parents can best support their students, how they can be more engaged and involved in their children's learning, there would undoubtedly be better educational outcomes for students with active and engaged parents.

### **Teachers, Mentors and Counselors**

There is no question that teachers, mentors and counselors can have a profoundly positive impact on students' educational persistence. Jerome's early elementary school teachers are a great example. They provided him with extra coursework to meet his demand for more challenging coursework. His high school teacher and mentor pushed him to help other student, in turn, challenging him to work harder and develop his leadership skills. Teachers, mentors and counselors can have a positive impact simply by telling their students they are good students. Berry et al. (2011) described how simply telling students they are good at something can improve their efficacy and can change the

way they perceive themselves. This level of teacher/mentor involvement is low cost, but highly effective and supports Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1992) classic study that identified 'gifted' students. These randomly-selected students who were labeled gifted were perceived more positively by teachers and, in turn, performed better. Teachers, mentors and counselors can provide positive reinforcement and high expectations for students, which aids students in greater efficacy, agency, identity as 'good student' and belief in themselves.

Teacher training and educational programs should provide ample professional development and cultural training for working with communities of color. Teachers who have a foundational understanding of the unique culture of African American students and some of the challenges they may face in the structurally inequitable system can offer resources and support for the students and their families. Teachers with strong cultural competence are better equipped to effectively teach students, interact with the students' families, address student achievement gaps, and meet accountability standards (NEA, 2008). The benefits to cultural competence for teachers are numerous. Thus, pre and in-service teacher training, educational programs and professional development programs should include cultural competence as a central tenant.

Further, schools should offer opportunities, like Upward Bound or college preparatory programs because they are effective at aiding in academic persistence. According to Seftor et al. (2009), who conducted a longitudinal study of Upward Bound, students who participated in the program were more likely to enroll in a four-year institution and it had positive impacts on students' higher education goals and aspirations.

Harvill et al. (2012), confirm that college access programs improve college readiness and enrollment, especially for underrepresented students.

### **Educational Researchers**

Ideally, these rich student narratives and my future research section spurs other educational researchers' interest in studying African American academic persistence to pursue further research. These five students' narratives, if nothing else, informed me there is so much more we need to learn in order to help all African American students gain access to higher education and to perform better in school. Although these five students were able to persist to college, it is clear their journeys were met with numerous social and contextual challenges. Further, the university they attended, at least in some ways, resisted their participation in the educational process by providing a 'chilly climate' and microaggressions. Despite the continued struggle for educational equity for African American students, it would be helpful to further delve into the factors that aid in persistence, specifically supporting the development of the sources of funds of knowledge and strong African American identities.

Further, the students' identity maps are a useful example of incorporating visual methods to strengthen qualitative research. Using identity maps to gain a greater understanding of African American student narratives is a model other researchers should employ. Not only did the identity maps create rich views of how the students viewed themselves and their identities, but also visual methods like these identity maps can give voice to counter-narratives often silenced in the American educational system. Beyond the benefits of inclusion of visual methodology in studying African American academic

persistence, I offer several other research recommendations below.

### **Recommendations for Research**

During the course of the interviews, several topics were discussed that warrant future research. The students' narratives uncovered one topic which I did not intend to discuss, which was the unwelcoming campus climate the students experienced. Given the severity of their negative experiences on campus, their comments demonstrate a need for future research. All of the students discussed how the college campus was unwelcoming. All five of the students experienced some version of racism on campus, whether overt or covert. They certainly experienced microaggressions in their classrooms, dorms, while walking on campus, etc. Given the elite nature of the university studied, it would be interesting to research similar universities to see if students experience similar discrimination and racism. Much research on African American college students focuses on historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) or predominantly white college campuses. This campus, on the other hand, is a minority-majority campus, with over 60% Asian-Pacific Islander students. Studying similar universities with majority-minority students, to examine the experience of African American students on these campuses, would be useful to see if similar universities produce similar outcomes for the students.

One of the limitations of this study was sample size. Certainly, there would be great value in studying a larger sample of students to provide more opportunities for comparison. Further, a larger sample would allow for more in-depth exploration of students' gender, socio-economic status, etc. Gender specifically, could be explored in more depth if there was a larger sample. Even with the small sample, it was interesting



how different the identity maps appeared. The male students provided more elaborate descriptions with a plethora of words, while the women provided sparser, picture-driven maps. A larger sample would allow a greater comparison along gender lines or other life-factors that influence academic persistence.

Besides a larger sample size for gender, it would also be valuable to consider geographic expansion to research whether the educational experiences of African American students are similar or different across geographical contexts. Qualitative research is valuable from a place-based and time-based perspective, but a larger sample that included geographical diversity would allow for a deeper understanding of similarities or differences among African Americans in the different parts of the U.S.

When I think about the students interviewed, I believe a separate study on first and second generation African immigrants would also be useful. Michael's experience as a first generation African American, he grappled with his identity as Black, Nigerian and African American. Certainly, it would be valuable to study immigrant students, like Michael, to understand the unique attributes of their academic persistence.

There was great value in asking students to complete the identity maps to supplement the interviews. It would be equally valuable to interview the students' parents, families, friends and/or mentors to provide more in-depth details to supplement the students' stories. Lieblich's (1998) assertion that narratives cannot be taken at face value because students might miss valuable insights into what led to their own success through their own limited frames or memories affirms the need for other data sources to strengthen and analyze the narratives themselves. Incorporating a greater level of details

as provided by people who have interacted with the students could help to confirm the students' narratives and/or provide more richness and context for the students' stories.

Another future study that would be valuable is a longitudinal study of the students interviewed for this dissertation. It would be useful to interview the students every five years to see how their career persistence mirrors their high school and college success indicators, especially examining their social support systems, identity and agency development and how those factors influenced their career trajectory or not.

### **Conclusion**

The African American student counter-narratives in this dissertation are snippets they shared with me at a particular moment of time in their dynamic and fluid lives. Their stories captured struggles and successes as they navigated the American educational system rife with discrimination, racism and microaggressions. They spoke eloquently about their families, their mentors, their teachers, and their personal experiences that led them to their positions of stature as college students at an elite university in the southwestern United States. It is clear that the culture and context in which the students found themselves included strong social support systems that aided in their identity development, their view of themselves as 'good students', and their strong future orientation, which positively influenced their agency. The most apparent counter-narrative weaved through their stories was their sources of funds of knowledge positive affect on their academic persistence --their parents, siblings, counselors, teachers and mentors influenced their lives significantly, aiding in their identity development and sense of agency, all of which aided in persistence.

As I interacted with these five students, and told them I viewed them as successful because of their ability to transcend the educational system and gain access to such a superb higher education institution, internally, I began to question whether I was correct. Despite my view of these students as successful, I wondered if broader society would deem and accept them as successful. What has stayed with me, over a year since the initial interview was something Jerome said:

Like we're at the same university so what makes you above me at this point? Like my successes in high school, like, are, like beyond some of those who are here but you're still looking at me like that you know? So it's like, it, you know, it is anger there, it's like acknowledge me as a person first, like. What? Me being Black doesn't make me less than you, like no matter how much society wants you to think that, like it doesn't. But, yeah, so, like that's the anger side and the hoodlum.

Jerome's comments solidify for me the need for the CRT framework when examining the experiences of African American students. Jerome clearly articulates the structural and systemic inequalities within our society, the inequitable distribution of power based on the color of his skin. CRT can help us understand the various forms of discrimination within education. Ultimately, we hope CRT can "identify, analyze, and transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 63). Clearly, CRT needs to be used to examine the centrality of race and racism in the American educational system and how, even for students who *should* be considered successful, still face significant challenges in gaining equal access to educational opportunities.

I leave with you, reader, how can we ensure that Jerome and his African American peers are viewed in the same light as their classmates, and by broader society? How is it possible that Jerome can come from an urban poor neighborhood, where his own sibling is a drug dealer, be the valedictorian of his high school class, attend an elite university, and still not be treated the same as his peers? Will Jerome have the same life chances as those students with whom he graduated? I hope Jerome and his peers' stories can help us find ways to support all African American students to have the same opportunity structure as their white peers. Let us continue to highlight the stories of African American students who counter the dominant narrative of African American student failure. Let us find ways to ensure that the students I interviewed are not the exception but the rule for African American academic persistence and attainment. Let us ensure African American students' voices are heard.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

## **Information Sheet**

**Purpose of the Study.** I have designed this study to explore how African American students persist through their K-12 school experience, graduate, and attend college.

**What will the study involve?** The study will involve three to six individual student interviews that will range from one to one and a half hours each. Interviews will be voice recorded for later transcription. Students will also be asked to bring in a few personal items that describe themselves and/or their experiences in school. During one of the interviews, the students will complete an identity map, which is a visual representation of their individual identities.

**Why have you been asked to take part?** You have been asked because you have successfully entered a four-year institution of higher education and you self-identify as African American. You must be 18 or older to participate.

**Do you have to take part?** No, participation is voluntary. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**Will I be compensated for my time?** Yes, participants will receive \$10 per hour for their participation and will receive payment within 48 hours of completion of each interview. Participants who complete all required interviews and data collection components will receive an additional \$25 Target gift card.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?** Yes, your participation will be kept confidential.

**What will happen to the information that you give?** Confidentiality will be ensured in all presentations, reports, and publication by changing my name and identifying

characteristics in any reference made to my data unless you sign below to agree to be quoted. Upon completion of the dissertation, information will be kept for six months and then destroyed.

**What will happen to the results?** The results will be presented in my dissertation. My faculty advisor and committee members will read the dissertation. The dissertation will be made available for future reading and may be published in research journals.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?** I don't envision any negative consequences for your participation. It is possible that talking about your personal experiences could cause some discomfort or distress.

**What if there is a problem?** At the end of each interview, I will discuss with you how you felt about the experience. If there are areas you wish not to discuss, we can move onto other topics. Should your discomfort continue, you are able to leave the study at any time.

**Who has reviewed this study?** The Institutional Review Board at Arizona State University must give approval before studies like this can take place. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

**Any further questions?** If you need any further information, you can contact me: Stacey Freeman, 480-203-6150, [staceyvfreeman@gmail.com](mailto:staceyvfreeman@gmail.com) or Gustavo E. Fischman 480-965-5225 [fischman@asu.edu](mailto:fischman@asu.edu).

**By signing below I agree to be quoted with my name in presentations, reports, and publications.**

Signed.....

Date.....

APPENDIX B  
RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Students,

A PHD student is looking for seven African American undergraduate students, both male and female, to participate in her research study on academic persistence. Study participants will be compensated for their time and participation. Below is general information about the study.

**Purpose of the Study.** To learn about African American students' individual stories of how they persisted in school and gained access to college by understanding their individual personal experiences.

**What will the study involve?** The study will involve 3 to 6 individual student interviews that will range from 1 to 1 1/2 hours each. Interviews will be voice recorded for later transcription. Students will also be asked to bring in a few personal items that describe themselves and/or their experiences in school. During one of the interviews, the students will complete an identity map, which is a visual representation of their individual identities.

**Why have you been asked to take part?** You have been asked because you have successfully entered a four-year institution of higher education and you self-identify as African American.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?** Yes, your participation will be kept confidential and your identity will be anonymous.

**What will happen to the information that you give?** The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. Upon completion of the dissertation, information will be kept for six months and then destroyed.

**What will happen to the results?** The results will be presented in my dissertation. My

faculty advisor and committee members will read the dissertation. The dissertation will be made available for future reading and may be published in research journals.

**Compensation. Students will receive \$10 per hour for their participation. Participants who complete all required interviews and data collection components will receive an additional \$25 Target gift card.**

**If you are interested in participating in the study, or if you have further questions,** please contact me: Stacey Freeman, 480-203-6150 or [staceyvfreeman@gmail.com](mailto:staceyvfreeman@gmail.com).

Thank you,

Stacey Freeman  
PHD Candidate  
Arizona State University  
[staceyvfreeman@gmail.com](mailto:staceyvfreeman@gmail.com)  
480-203-6150



APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Interview Guide:* The list of questions below is in no way exhaustive or complete. These headings and questions serve only as a starting point for the initial interviews with study participants. Subsequent interviews and additional questions will be based on the answers and individual stories established in each interview, with a continual focus on the participants' ethnic identity, critical race consciousness, agency, social support system, how they view schooling in light of their personal goals, and the impact of these factors in their development of personal narratives.

## **Interview One**

### **Background/Demographics.**

- Tell me about yourself.
- What is important to know about your childhood and family?
- Talk about particularly memorable incidents or events from your childhood? Why these memories? What do they mean to you?

### **Community.**

- Talk about how you experienced and understood your community.
- Talk about events, places, people, and activities in which you engaged? Expand on this.
- As you grew older, how did your relationships change?
- Tell me about your first job?

## **Interview Two**

### **Recap of previous interview and concept map discussion.**

### **Schooling.**

- How would you summarize your experiences in school?
- I'd like to hear about two or three memories that help show how you experienced school.
- Talk about your teachers, what do you remember about them?
- What role did friends and peers play in your life in school?
- What did you do after school?
- What kinds of things did you do afterschool?

### **Complete Identity Map (see below)**

### **Interview Three**

#### **Recap of previous interviews and conceptual map discussion.**

**Racism.** Questions below adapted from O'Connor, 1999

- What can prevent students from doing well in school?
- Are there any people who have an advantage when it comes to doing well in school? If yes, who are they? Why do they have an advantage?
- What is the best way to get ahead in American society?
- Are there any people who have a better opportunity to get ahead today than in the past? If yes, who? Why do you think that?
- Which people have the worst chance of getting ahead and why?
- Do you think that people of all races have an equal chance of doing well in school? Why or why not?
- Would you say that African American students have an equal chance to do well in school? Why or why not?

**Identity.** Questions adapted from Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity

(Sellers et al., 1998)

- How would you rate the importance of being African American for your self-image?
- How do you feel about attending a school that is predominantly White?  
Predominantly Asian/Pacific Islander?
- What are the biggest social inequalities facing American society today? In education?
- How does American society view African American people?

### **Interview Four**

#### **Recap of previous interviews and conceptual map discussion.**

##### **Artifacts**

- Describe the item(s) you brought with you today.
- Why are these items significant to you
- How does this item make you feel?
- What does this item remind you of?

APPENDIX D  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EXEMPTION GRANTED

Gustavo Fischman  
Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation -  
Tempe 480/965-5225  
fischman@asu.edu

Dear Gustavo Fischman:

On 1/8/2014 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Overcoming Inequalities: Stories of African American Academic Persistence and Attainment
Investigator:	Gustavo Fischman
IRB ID:	STUDY00000463
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Informed Consent - Revised, Category: Consent Form;</li><li>• Social Behavioral Application_Freeman, Category: IRB Protocol;</li><li>• Interview Questions and Guide, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li><li>• Solicitation Email and Letter, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li></ul>

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 1/8/2014.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Stacey Freeman  
Elizabeth Kozleski