The academic identity development of African American girls

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The academic identity development of African American girls

by

Aisha T. White

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Human Development and Family Studies

Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University
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DEDICATION

Humbly, I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Sheryl and my grandmother, Ruby.

You were my first teachers:
I learned to be faithful from your spirit
I learned to persevere from your commitment
I learned to seek wisdom from your clarity
I learned to be joyful from your laughter
I learned of my potential from your love

Thank you for these lessons and countless others.

My dissertation is the culmination of many years of support and guidance from family and friends. Thank you to everyone who supported me with prayers and words of encouragement. Your positive energy fed my soul more than you know.

I am very thankful to my sisters in the “PhD Pact”; our academic stories are forever intertwined. Meneka Johnson, thank you for your laughter and dedicated friendship. The words, “We start together, we end together” are priceless! Valerie Holmes, thank you for your unconditional care and consistent support. You are always there for me whenever I need you and I am extremely grateful.

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This research examined the academic identity development of 11 African-American high school girls. Academic identity is considered a lesser known yet important factor in the school achievement of African-American students. However, research exploring the psychosocial process of developing an academic “self” among African-American girls is almost non-existent. Traditional research has focused mainly on the academic deficits of African-American girls in school. Additionally, identity research has traditionally examined African-American girls’ experiences by racial or gender-distinct categories. However, this study explored the processes of the academic identity development of a sample of African-American girls using Positive Youth Development as a strengths-based approach with attention to the intersectional experiences of race, gender, and class that contributed to their academic identity development.

By providing these girls the opportunity to voice their lived experiences, this study produced knowledge that elucidates the positive adolescent developmental processes of African-American girls and their high school education. The results indicated these common themes: (a) Stereotypes in School, (b) The Weight of Stereotypes, (c) The Old Me Phase, (d) Making Transitions, (e) The Real Me, (f) I Am Strong, (g) Representing African-American Girls in School, and (h) Perceptions of Academic Identity. The themes from this research study represented girls who are often deemed invisible and unheard in education. Resoundingly, the girls shared their lived experiences of developing their academic identity in a schooling context that normalized negative stereotypes of African-American girls. The girls in this study developed
academic identities as an interactive process involving meaning making of their school experiences and a conscientious quest to represent their true self. The results of this study suggest that researchers and youth-serving professionals focus greater attention on the role of the school context and social norms as influences on the academic identity development of African-American girls.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The academic identity development of African-American students has proven to be an elusive phenomenon. Further, research exploring the psychosocial process of developing an academic “self” among African-American girls is almost non-existent. This dearth of knowledge may be attributable to the fact that research concerning the school experiences of Black students is often focused on academic deficits and the categorizations of students by race (Rollock, 2007). As youth negotiate the multiple systems of school, family, and community, they acquire a sense of self and identity related to academics. Indeed, they begin to internalize messages from these environments which, in turn, influence their developing academic identities, by impacting their conceptions of their self and their achievement (Pearson, 2008).

Understanding the development of an academic identity may be particularly salient for Black girls as they are often considered the “superstars” compared to Black boys in the school setting. This position may make Black girls seem less vulnerable and render their learning needs as secondary (Frazier-Kouasi, 2002). Such a perception creates a myth of higher achievement than the reality and can prevent the voices of Black girls from being heard in educational research (Rollock, 2007). As educators and researchers grapple with achievement concerns about students of color, understanding the process of forming an academic identity may help link the efforts of youth-serving organizations and school systems in their goal of increasing this population’s academic achievement (Welch & Hodges, 1997). To address this need, this study explored the academic identity development of a number of African-American girls, using a strengths-based perspective framed by tenets of Black feminist theory.
Academic Identity

Academic identity is recognized as a valuable contribution to the school achievement of African-American youth, which represents a dimension of their larger global self-concept (Welch & Hodges, 1997). For African-American students, the term may encompass their internalized notions of racial identity, their perceived experience of becoming a “scholar,” and the meaning they attribute to their educational experiences. (Welch & Hodges, 1997). Academic identity, which is one aspect of academic self-concept, consists of a constellation of the students’ attitudes and beliefs regarding their academic abilities which are shaped by their internal and external comparisons with others (Awad, 2007). Scholars suggest that school failure results from a poorly developed (or nonexistent) academic identity (Welch & Hodges, 1997).

Historically, much of the discourse related to education and students of color has been centered on the phenomenon of the academic achievement gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The term ‘achievement gap’ is used to identify the disparity in student achievement, particularly disproportionately lower levels of academic achievement among minority students in contrast to higher levels of achievement among White students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The research suggests that the problems undergirding Black student under achievement are complex, involving social, institutional and student developmental issues, as well as academic identity. While no single definition of academic identity stands across disciplines, Welch and Hodges (1997) suggested that for African-American students, academic identity may encompass their internalized notions of racial identity, how they perceive becoming a “scholar,” and the meaning they attribute to their educational experiences. With no standard definition of academic
identity among researchers, it can be an elusive phenomenon to measure; yet researchers assert that it may be an important though often lesser known developmental factor for African-American adolescents (Welch & Hodges, 1997).

For African-American girls in particular, the racial identity process occurs in tandem with gender identity development. To address the complexities of this development, scholars note the importance of exploring the adolescent developmental experiences by race and gender as social identities that contribute to an individual’s self-definition (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry). Social identities are attributed to individuals by others and become salient as individuals engage in subjective experiences across socially constructed cultural contexts and associate meanings with those experiences (Côté, 2009). Therefore, as African-American girls establish an academic identity within their cultural contexts and social experiences, the meaning they attribute to their experiences of race and gender may offer important insight into their academic identity development process.

However, it is difficult to draw conclusions about African-American girls’ academic identity because the experiences of these females in school have received relatively little scholarly attention (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). The nature of research regarding Black students may be one contributor to the limited scholarship on African-American girls in school. Even within the predominant discourse on achievement disparity, much of the existing research related to African-American females and education has been “guided by a race comparative paradigm (largely comparisons with Whites) or on a much smaller scale—gender comparative (with African-American males)” (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002, p. 157).
The process of learning, while positioned between these comparative associations of race, gender, and class, places African-American females in a distinct position, marking an intersectional developmental experience. This experience has the capacity to influence a sense of self that incorporates multiple identifications in each dimension (Rollock, 2007). Much of the traditional research utilizing strategies that juxtapose girls and boys in Black racial categories or Whites and Blacks in female categories has contributed to the “invisibility” of African-American girls by race in the research. As African-American girls are forced to choose one sense of identity over another, the scholarship lacks a complete picture of their academic experiences (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007), producing a limited knowledge of their developmental processes.

Gee (2009) described identity as an important analytic tool for researchers to use for understanding schools and society better. Additionally, this author suggested that focusing on the contextually specific ways that individuals reveal their identities provides a greater depth of approach compared to more generalized conceptual categories of race, class, and gender. This is not to negate the importance of exploring the cross sectional impact of various social positions but Gee (2009) proposed that researchers must explore how the notion of identity or being recognized as a certain kind of person, within a given context, may provide an analytic tool for studying important issues of theory and practice in education. Therefore, with consideration of the African-American female experience in education, it is important to understand the process involved in developing one’s academic identity as impacted by the multiple experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and class related to educational contexts. It is also important to explore the
intersubjective or the relationship to the interaction between a person and their context (Stevens, 2002).

More recently, the adolescent development literature has pointed to the need for a positive shift in research toward promoting strengths-based models. Additionally, scholars suggest the need to shift from examining individual and contextual factors that influence development independently to focusing on meaning development ascertained in the negotiation between the person and their context (Stevens, 2002). This direction in the research may significantly contribute a clearly defined approach for exploring the academic identity development of African-American girls as it occurs among their experiences of race, gender and class.

**African-American Girls and Educational Settings**

It has been acknowledged that education and social science research have not always been equally reflective of the diverse experiences of American students. More certainly, the experiences of African-American women in school have received relatively little attention (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). The nature of research regarding Black students may be one contributor to the limited scholarship on African-American girls in school. Even within the predominant discourse on achievement disparity, much of the existing research related to African-American women and education has been guided by a race or gender comparative paradigm (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002).

The process of learning while positioned between these comparative associations of race, gender, and class places African-American women in a distinct position of intersectional developmental experience. This experience has the capacity to influence a sense of self that incorporates multiple identifications within each dimension (Rollock,
Much of the traditional research utilizing strategies that juxtapose girls and boys in Black racial categories or Whites and Blacks in female categories has contributed to the “invisibility” of African-American girls in this kind of research. As African-American girls are forced to choose one sense of identity over the other, the resulting scholarship lacks a complete picture of their experiences (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007), hence limited knowledge of their developmental processes.

**Research Needs**

Gee (2000) stated that “researchers in a variety of areas have come to see identity as an important analytic tool for understanding schools and society” (p. 99). Additionally, this author suggested that focusing on the contextually specific ways that individuals reveal identities “allows a more dynamic approach than the sometimes overly general and static trio of ‘race, class and gender’” (p. 99). This focus is not meant to negate the importance of exploring the cross sectional impact of various social positions, but Gee (2000) proposes exploring how the notion of identity or being recognized as a “certain kind of person, in a given context can be used as an analytic tool for studying important issues of theory and practice in education” (p. 100). Therefore, in considering African-American females’ experiences in school, it is important to understand the process involved in developing their academic identity as impacted by the multiple experiences that occur at the intersection of race, gender, and class as related to educational contexts. It is also important to explore the intersubjective “intervening variable between person and context” processes (Stevens, 2002, p. 216).

More recently, the adolescent development literature has pointed to the need for a positive shift in research toward strengths-based models. Additionally, scholars have also
suggested the need to shift from examining individual and contextual factors that influence development independently to meaning development ascertained from the negotiation between the person and their context (Stevens, 2002). This movement in the research may significantly and clearly contribute a clearly defined space for exploring the academic identity development of African-American girls as it occurs at the intersection of race, gender, and class.

**Statement of the Problem**

In adolescence, identity formation as related to the school context and experiences are developmentally important (Côté, 2009). Scholars suggest that African-American students with an identity based on a positive self-concept are better prepared to meet the challenges they may encounter in learning (Welch & Hodges, 1997). However, studies addressing the perspectives of African-American girls in school are limited and often focused on student deficits (Stevens, 1997). The literature on the widespread achievement gap has provided a base of knowledge on the learning needs of African-American students, yet more information is needed about their identity formation in school, considering their cultural context and meaning formation in their academic experiences (Spencer et al., 2001). As African-American girls develop an academic identity within the frameworks of their gender and race, it is important to move beyond categorical concepts of the process and reveal how the girls themselves perceive school and their identity development experiences.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (a) to explore the academic identity development of African-American high school girls; and (b) to understand how African-
American girls make meaning of the experiences which contribute to their academic identity. The aforementioned literature and the dearth of knowledge related to Black girls’ academic identity informed the need for this research. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What lived experiences contributed to the academic identity development of African-American high school girls?

2. What meaning did these African-American high school girls ascribe to their lived experiences that contributed to their academic identity development?

**Significance of the Study**

The research suggests that examining the culturally specific processes of identity formation and the schooling of African-American youth as normative experiences has been limited (Spencer et al., 2001). “In psychiatry, sociology, criminal justice, and in the media of the past half century, minority schooling and identity are framed in terms of pathology and deviance,” thus contributing to an incomplete analysis of African-American youth development (Spencer et al., 2001). Historically, examining this population by a reduction of one or another of these topics, and presented non-normatively in opposition to White, middle class student experiences, the research has often lacked the clarity of the contextualized meaning derived by individual youth from their lived experiences, further limiting the scholarship on African-American youth (Spencer et al., 2001).

Therefore, this study addressed this gap by exploring the process of the academic identity development of a number of African-American girls by using Positive Youth Development as a strengths-based approach along with their experiences of the
intersection of race, gender, and class. By providing these girls the opportunity to voice their lived experiences, this study elucidated the value of positive adolescent developmental processes related to African-American girls and their academic identity. This study responded to the need for more qualitative studies in Black identity research with many of these adolescents coming of age in the twenty-first century.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Using a Black feminist epistemological framework and the principles of the Positive Youth Development theory, this study has allowed African-American girls’ voices to be heard regarding their schooling experiences and the meaning they attribute to those experiences as contributing to their academic identity development. An in-depth literature review is presented as background for the study. First, identity and self-development in adolescence are discussed. Academic identity development is further explained as a phenomenon within the domains of the self and adolescent development. Second, the theoretical and analytical framing of the study is presented. Third, background on Positive Youth Development is provided. Finally, the research problem is presented.

Academic Identity Development

Adolescence, Self, and Identity

Adolescence occurs approximately between 10 and 20 years of age (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Considered functionally, adolescence reflects a transitional time in life, marked by puberty when youth seek greater autonomy as they move toward adulthood (Elmore, 2009). Scholars suggest that adolescence marks a time when considerations of the self evolve from childhood characteristics to more abstract and psychologically integrated conceptions (Smetana et al., 2009). Essential to that transition are the often intertwined notions of self and identity. By definition, both concepts include psychological and social processes related to exploring the core of our human existence (Côté, 2009). Markus and Wurf (1987) describe the self as a cognitive structure organizing daily experiences and providing a channel for motivation. Self-concept then
can be noted as a cognitive organization encompassing an understanding of one’s identity. In discernment between the terms, the literature refers to identity as related to a consistency and commitment of psychological functioning, interpersonal behavior and roles, values and beliefs (Côté, 2009).

One task essential to adolescence is the integration of childhood identity concepts into a more comprehensive and autonomous identity (McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009). As youth progress across the life span, advanced social and personal identity awareness within self-concept are recognized as markers of development.

**Identity, Meaning and Context**

In the transition from childhood to adolescence, the interdependent nature of biology and the human developmental context becomes particularly salient (Lerner and Steinberg, 2009). Several developmental tasks essential to adolescence, including identity development are influenced by life experiences, the cultural contexts in which they occur, and the meaning attributed to those experiences (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartman, 1997). Adolescents’ identity emerges from the collective exchange of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social systems, that transform how youth make sense of the world (Spencer & Tinsley, 2008). The dynamics of this exchange are mitigated by the role of perception and meaning making within their experiences. The process of meaning making occurs bi-directionally between person-context among social relations (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartman, 1997).

Adolescents advancing through the school system must engage with social systems and institutional task expectations. At the same time, students are maturing developmentally and internalizing meaning from their school experiences (Roeser,
Therefore, it is important that the schooling and identity formation processes of African-American students are examined in relation to context, culture, and the meaning derived within certain developmental experiences of these students (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001).

**Academic Self-Concept, Efficacy, and Identity**

The topic of identity is multidimensional and often embedded in discussions across disciplines. The result has been a vast awareness of identity and differentiated terms related to the self and identity. The terms academic identity, academic self-concept, and academic self-efficacy are often used interchangeably; however, they hold distinctions. First, to distinguish academic self-concept and self-efficacy, it is necessary to locate them within the larger global constructs of the self from which they are derived. Self-concept is influenced and reinforced by contextual exchanges with others. Self-concept is a comprehensive concept, referencing an individual’s thoughts and feelings about their self (Rosenberg, 1979). In comparison, Bandura (1977) elaborated on self-efficacy, describing its role in encapsulating one’s beliefs about their ability to engage in the organization and execution of an action required for a particular endeavor. Similarly, self-concept and self-efficacy are presumed to explain and predict thought, emotion, and behavior. However, self-efficacy is less concerned with what skills and abilities individuals possess, and more with beliefs individuals hold concerning skills and abilities (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). In essence, self-efficacy is concerned with self-expectations, whereas self-concept involves self-evaluation. In total, self-perceptions construct a framework that considers personal attributes, social roles and behaviors, beliefs about
individual capacity, measures of the self in comparison to others, and judgments of how one perceives they are viewed by others (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003).

The term academic self-concept refers to individuals’ knowledge and perceptions about their self within an academic context (Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004). Academic self-concept is a subset of global self-concept, representing the particular notion of self in terms of education. On the other hand, academic self-efficacy refers to individuals’ convictions that they can successfully perform academic tasks at all designated levels (Schunk, 1991). In terms of addressing achievement, it is important that students develop a positive internal “schooled” sense of self that affirms their position and capacity for academic success. Students who have a troubled academic history may “disidentify” with school and create an alternate self that rejects school “norms” and embraces notions of the self-barring or devaluing considerations of achievement in the academic sense (Griffen, 2002). A self-concept developed independently from school may contribute to a cycle of thinking and behaviors that do not support learning, placing the student at greater risk for school failure. For African-American youth, scholars suggest that considerations of racial identity development also be included when assessing academic self-concept (Grantham & Ford, 2003).

**Social Identities**

Socially, African-American students are disproportionately suspended and placed in special education classes, putting them at greater risk for negative school stigma. Social stigma and self-esteem research assert that we engage in cognitive strategies to protect ourselves against psychologically threatening situations (Crocker & Major, 1989). Students who are considered “at-risk” often report feeling disassociation from school. In
this sense, negative school stigma is perceived as a psychological threat and disidentifying as a strategy to refute negative perceptions of their social position. To further delineate conceptions of the self in academics, researchers have identified the role of academic possible selves, which are the future-oriented components of academic self-concept (Oyserman et al., 2004). Youth create academic possible selves by combining self-awareness of their current traits (academic self-concept) and abilities and knowledge of skills needed to transition into models of self in their future (academic self-efficacy) (Oyserman et al., 2002).

Oyserman et al. (1995) described the identity negotiation of African-American youth as involving a dual process of refuting negative stereotypes associated with their race and gender while attempting to develop the positive internal sense of self. These authors proposed that African Americans develop a gendered African-American identity schema as a means of making their sense of self and group membership, in order to provide meaning and context to their experiences of historical racism and to understand the gendered experience of African-American identity.

Few (2007) described the social positioning of Black females as existing within an intersectionality matrix. This matrix shows the experience of an overlapping social position within multiple oppressive systems working together to maintain structures that position a person as an outsider or the ‘other.’ This description is presented as an explanation of the lived experiences of Black females as they negotiate between their racial, gender, and class realities. African-American girls’ social positioning embeds their identity formation in their experiences of race, class, and gender. The processes of developing identity in general and academic identity specifically are socio-culturally
influenced. While African-American students’ school experiences have been a topic of study, scholarship exploring the experiences of African-American girls in school as a differentiated group are lesser known. Race and gender present multiple social identities which may diverge within the school experience, yet research on African-American females and education is only in the beginning stage (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002)

**Theoretical Frameworks**

**Black Feminist Thought**

Black feminist thought, a critical social theory, offers a framework for researchers to examine the experiences of Black women in the United States. In this study, Black feminist themes were used to analyze the lived experiences of the African-American girls and offered insight into their “lived experiences” as a social group. The tenets of black feminist thought (BFT) provided the appropriate theoretical framework to support an in-depth analysis of the experiences of these Black girls, revealing their experiential voice as they near their emerging adulthood and prepare for life as adult African-American women.

**Black Feminist Thought’s Core Themes**

As described by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1991), there are five core themes essential to Black feminist thought:

1. The existence of a Black female’s standpoint: African-American females share the common experience of being Black females in a society that denigrates females of African descent. This experience suggests that certain themes are prominent from a Black female’s standpoint, such as the legacy of struggle.
2. Variation in responses to core themes of Black feminist thought: the existence of core themes does not mean that African-American females respond to these themes in the same way. There is diversity in the Black female experience which produces various reactions to core themes.

3. Interdependence of experience and consciousness: Black females’ work and family experiences and grounding in traditional African-American culture suggest that these females as a group experience a world different from those who are not Black and female, which can stimulate a Black feminist consciousness, but does not guarantee that such a consciousness develops.

4. Consciousness and self-definition: It is important to create a self-defined consciousness and identity as an alternative to an imposed identity as defined by the majority; and

5. Interdependence of thought and action: Change in thinking may result in change in action and that alerted experience may stimulate a change in consciousness.

Black feminist theory rejects traditional notions of Black women’s lives falling within the binary categories of race and gender. In contrast, a Black feminist perspective highlights the intersectional nature of Black females’ lived experiences across race, gender, and class (Collins, 1990). Collins’ book, Black Feminist Thought (1990), is considered a seminal text, unveiling a collective expression of Black females’ standpoints in response to historical oppressions of their lived experiences. Black feminist thought was directly informed by the experiences of Black females and reflects the content of African-American females’ socio-cultural positioning and subjugated
knowledge and it offers a standpoint from which to reveal the situated knowledge of African-American females.

Black feminist thought has roots in the Black activist periods of the 1960s and 1970s. It began as Black feminists felt their voices were neglected in the scholarship of White, middle-class, liberal feminist discourse (Few, 2007). Shaped by the experiences of Black females in response to a position constructed by society, politics, and consciousness, Black feminist thought encourages self-definition and freedom in contrast to Black girls’ historic experiences related to oppressive conditions and suppression of their intellectual and emotional thought.

**Person-Process-Context Model of Intersubjectivity**

Stevens’ (2002) Person-Process-Context Model of Intersubjectivity was used to guide the data analysis in this study. This model provided an ecological transactional paradigm for exploring identity and meaning creation as a phenomenological process for engaging developmental tasks in adolescence. Therefore, this model was used to analyze the intersubjective process of meaning making in the lived experiences of the African-American girls in this research study. The Person-Process-Context Model (Stevens, 2002) was used to expound contextually relevant meaning from the voiced experiences of the African-American girls related to their schooling and academic identity development as framed by their psychological experiences of Black racial identity development and their socio-cultural experiences from a Black feminist perspective. Components of the Person-Process-Context Model are described as follows: Person is related to the individual and encompasses the attributes of their strengths and weaknesses. Process is related to intersubjectivity, which includes self-relatedness and emphasizes our social being.
Context is defined as social-environmental factors, and experiences within “nested contexts” as well as risk-protections related to the person.

Stevens (2002) built on Margaret Beal Spencer’s (1995) seminal Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST). Her model fuses a phenomenological approach to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Spencer, 1995). The PVEST model employs phenomenology within a developmental model, highlighting the exchange of biological factors, social experiences, and contextual factors, and provides a method for recognizing the role of meaning making across contexts that influence perceptions of the self (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartman, 1997). The Person-Process-Context Model of Intersubjectivity (Stevens, 2002) expands on the PVEST model and introduces meaning-making processes as central in the exchange between individuals and contexts. Stevens (2002) asserts that intersubjectivity is the intervening variable between person and context. Therefore, meaning is co-created between individuals and influenced by the context or ecological domains in which the co-creation occurs. Intersubjectivity for use with this model refers to the consciousness/unconsciousness and perception which lend meaning to experiences occurring between and within contexts and between individuals (Stevens, 2002).

Positive Youth Development

Given that this study explored African-American girls’ experiences from their voices during their adolescent period, the principles of Positive Youth Development (PYD) were also used in this study as a guiding theoretical framework to develop suggestions for youth-serving institutions. The PYD perspective enables researchers to examine the interaction of identity, culture, and context within the developmental
processes of adolescence (Lerner, 2004). Themes relevant to the PYD theory support a shift from deficit-oriented views of youth and offer youth-serving professionals a model to engage to empower youth. Positive Youth Development theory suggests that the collective nature of its principles, which are focused on healthy youth outcomes, supports a strengths-based framework of youth development (Lerner, 2004). First, the 5 C’s of the Positive Youth Development theory are detailed. Then, the construct of thriving is presented, followed by a discussion of risk and protective factors. Finally, how positive youth development can be used in practice or within the development of Black girls’ academic identity within the school setting is discussed.

**The 5 C’s of Positive Youth Development**

Positive Youth Development proposes that exemplary youth development encompasses multiple dimensions of health and indicates psychological, behavioral, and social variables. The recent culminating identification of these aspects is the Five C’s of Positive Youth Development. As defined by Lerner (2004), they are Caring, Character, Competence, Confidence, and Connection. Caring is defined as showing a sense of sympathy and empathy for others. Character is defined as showing respect for societal and cultural norms, a possession of standards for correct behaviors, as a sense of right and wrong, and integrity. Competence is defined as having a positive view of one’s actions in the domains of social, cognitive, vocational, and academic activity. Confidence describes an internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy, and one’s global self-regard as opposed to domain-specific beliefs. Connections are shown through making positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in the bidirectional exchanges between individuals, family, peers, school, and community. Positive Youth
Development, as a strengths-based theory, emphasizes the development of adolescent resources and assets with the goal of helping youth thrive (Damon, 2004).

**Thriving and Academic Identity Development**

The concept of thriving is used by scholars to identify evidence of healthy adolescent development. Young people who possess some of the Five C’s across developmental domains may be considered to be thriving (King et al., 2005). Thriving as a concept describes a change or process. It is not static; it is adaptive and functions to meet the needs of the individual. Thriving is a term devised to represent the active exchange of the individual with their environment, enhancing both. It does not propose perfect behavior nor does it represent an individual who is problem free. Importantly, thriving identifies an individual who has a range of skills and adaptive understanding to maneuver through contexts and adjust appropriately to the context (Theokas et al., 2005).

The aforementioned points are particularly important in reference to the academic identity development of African-American girls. They attribute meaning to their educational experiences which form their identity from the socio-cultural intersection of race, gender, and class. Schools offer one of the most significant sites of identity development for youth (Elmore, 2009). However, Black students are often the victims of stereotypes that depict them as low achieving. Moreover, some of their Black peers perpetuate this negative stereotype. Studies have shown the impact of how low expectations of Black youth can create an internalized sense of self that works only to meet that low outcome. However, Black peer groups are not homogenous, so they also have the ability to provide social and emotional support for the promotion of successful academic outcomes (Kao, 2000). African-American youth develop identity across race
and gender categories and internalize what it means to be a Black American, female or male, which may manifest as an asset or liability, and internalize notions that either contribute to thriving or diminish it in Black youth (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartman, 1997).

**Positive Youth Development and Academic Identity**

The principles of Positive Youth Development offer a natural partnership with applied practices in school settings (Balsano et al., 2009). For instance, Positive Youth Development is often used as a program framework for school learning and social support programs intended to increase youth capacity building and successful learner outcomes (Lerner et al., 2005). In this study, Positive Youth Development theory was used to identify emergent themes about the academic identity development of African-American girls in a strengths-based framework relative to youth-serving professionals. The Positive Youth Development principles offered a vehicle to help transform themes related to the experiences and meaning of academic identity development into practical suggestions for enhancing students’ academic identity development, especially for the African-American girls in this study.

In schools, educators and learning support professionals can build contexts that promote the development of the Five C’s, and thus help African-American girls thrive, with the goal of developing their positive academic identity. In order to strengthen the theoretical knowledge of Positive Youth Development as a practical tool for the academic identity development of these girls, it is important to ensure that scholarship includes their developmental perspectives. The Positive Youth Development approach focuses on identifying youths as resources and partners rather than as burdens on our social system (Lerner, 2005). When addressing challenges that youth face, such as low positive peer
support, negative self-concept, and educational concerns, Positive Youth Development recognizes the impact of the aligned systems of family, community, and school on these youth. PYD promotes the identification of a youth’s positive assets to promote their positive self-concept. Those engaged in PYD view the youth as primary and promote a developmental partnership between the young person’s context and their individual needs (Lerner, 2005).

**The Qualitative Approach for This Research Study**

Qualitative research is a broad term encompassing philosophical theories and methodological practices that emphasize the role of context and voice in the study of social phenomena. Qualitative researchers assert that reality is not fixed; that there are multiple interpretations of the world, and are interested in understanding these interpretations (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Merriam (1998) outlined four characteristics of qualitative research: (a) The key concern is to understand the phenomenon of interest from the participant’s perspective, not the researcher’s; (b) the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; (c) the research usually involves field work, and (d) the research primarily employs an inductive research strategy. These four points are not exclusive of the qualitative research process but they collectively represent its basic tenets.

Prior to beginning a study, researchers engage in a variety of methodological explorations. Naples (2003) cautioned that while researchers are generally encouraged to use research questions to inform and guide their methodological decisions, it is equally important to explore the intent embedded in their chosen methods. All methods whether quantitative or qualitative have underlying epistemological assumptions that have the
potential to influence the nature and results of the research project. Certain research paradigms provide a framework or scientific philosophy that makes assumptions about the nature of reality and truth, and function as a guide for studying a phenomenon (Glesne, 2011). Research practice is informed by the philosophical assumptions associated with strategies employed by researchers. The philosophical assumptions of research are defined as ontology; asserting beliefs about the nature of reality as epistemology; describing how the researcher knows the knowledge described as axiology; expression of research values as rhetoric, referring to the research language; and methodology describes the methods used in the process of the research (Creswell, 2003).

The ontological assumption in qualitative research involves recognizing multiple perspectives and embracing the subjective nature of reality. Researchers question the nature of reality and collect quotes and find themes that represent the different perspectives and multiple realities of the research participants (Creswell, 2003). Epistemological assumptions address the nature of knowledge. In order to gain a deep understanding of their participants’ knowledge, qualitative researchers work in close relationship with the phenomenon they are studying. The researcher uses collaborative methods with her subjects to gain an insider perspective (Creswell et al., 2007).

Researchers and participants bring their values to the research experience, which have the capacity to influence the study. In a qualitative study, it is important for researchers to report their own values and biases in relation to the subjects and the data gathered. As their findings are reported primarily through writing, language plays a key role in the researcher’s conceptualization of their data. They assume that this writing
should be personal and in a literary form, grounded in the perspectives of the research participants, often evoking first person pronouns, and using metaphor descriptions (Creswell, 2012).

The methodology of qualitative research incorporates each of the aforementioned characteristics and assumptions, and frames the research as a cyclical process. The methodology of a study constitutes the partnership of theory and practice, detailing modes of inquiry and the methods used as the investigative tools. Qualitative researchers expect to engage in methods that are adaptive and responsive to the needs of the study (Creswell, 2003). The evolving nature of knowledge acquisition presents a methodological strength as it holds primacy over the needs of the study and reveals a depth of holistic knowledge. In total, qualitative worldviews shed light on the responsibility researchers have for engaging in a concerted analysis of the philosophical drives within their given methodology.

**Epistemology of the Current Study**

The current study was framed using a Black feminist epistemology, which reflects Black women’s access to Afrocentric and feminist standpoints (Collins, 1990). The Afrocentric standpoint developed in Black societies as a result of a consciousness attained from the combination of retained core African values and the common experience of racial oppression. Similarly, the feminist standpoint is based on a history of universal gender oppression which created characteristics and consciousness in the shared experiences of women (Collins, 1990).

Collins (1990) offered four dimensions of an Afrocentric feminist epistemological standpoint. The first dimension is the role of concrete experience as a criterion of
meaning. African-American women make distinctions between knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom is acquired through experiences and considered a key component of knowledge acquisition.

Second, the use of dialogue, or an exchange between two parties, compared to one-way communication, is important for building connections that promote and invoke truth and meaningful knowledge. Third, a caring ethic values the individual as uniquely expressed according to the following: (a) each person is considered a unique expression of life energy, (b) emotions may be appropriately reflected in dialogues, and (c) empathy can be used as a tool for increased understanding. Fourth, an ethic of personal accountability asserts that people will be accountable for their claims. This ethic is underpinned by a combined Afrocentric and feminist belief in the connectedness of knowledge claims, personal beliefs, and values (Collins, 1990).

The literature referring to people of African descent often uses the terms Black and African-American interchangeably. Many research studies do not make distinctions between the terms in reference to their research participants (Larkey, Hecht, & Martin, 1993). Black feminist epistemology deems Black women the experts of their lived experiences. In support of this view, and because I wanted to use the appropriate language in reference to my research participants, I asked them how I should refer to them. They requested that I use both terms African-American and Black. To honor their request and be consistent with Black feminist epistemology, I have used African-American and Black interchangeably in presenting my study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of the academic identity development of African-American high school girls. I explicated this process using their interview data, using an interpretive phenomenological approach. Identity has been defined as lived discourse involving a phenomenological experience of coming to understand oneself (Thomas et al., 2011).

It was essential that all the girls studied represent people who have experienced the lived experience of the phenomenon being explored (Creswell, 2007). Ultimately, I wanted to learn how certain African-American high school girls had developed their academic identity in terms of their education. I used a purposeful sampling procedure to ensure that they were able to speak to the lived experiences of this phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This study focused on African-American girls as a single group, with the intention of exploring their unique experiences; therefore, a within-group design was used (Phinney & Landin, 1998).

Criteria and Sample Recruitment

The following criteria were used for the study recruitment. The participants had to be: (a) African-American girls, (b) in grades 10 to 12, and (c) 15 to 18 years old. In order to learn how they develop an academic identity, I used a purposeful sampling procedure to ensure that the participants could speak to their lived experience as African-American girls in high school. They were recruited using school-based and community-based methods.
School-based Recruitment

Recruitment for the study began after I received Iowa State University Institutional Review Board and school district approval (See Appendix A). The IRB granted permission for school-based recruitment. My IRB description of my procedures requested that the participants take part in three individual interviews and one focus group. The purpose of this format was to ensure that I had IRB permission to conduct enough interviews to allow for saturation of the data, and if I could conduct a focus group with the participants. Ultimately, I reached saturation once all three interviews with each of study participants were completed; therefore, the focus group did not become a necessary study procedure. The Midwestern urban school district I had contacted for the study also approved recruitment at their high school. In order to meet the advanced safety considerations of recruiting minors from a school, however, the high school principal had to provide a study liaison between the school and myself as the researcher. The school social worker agreed to serve in this capacity, filling a vitally important role as gatekeeper for recruitment and communication between myself as the researcher and the high school.

I tried to include African-American girls who were “experts” on the phenomenon of academic identity development by virtue of having experienced education at the intersection of race and gender. The school administration developed an initial list of potential participants from the student body, which I had requested based on their knowledge of the students, the school, and the ability to obtain the students’ informed consent. The school administration and the study liaison were confident in their ability to identify the necessary participants. At this stage in the recruitment, the school liaison
served as the initial contact, informing potential participants of the study prior to my contacting them as the researcher. Therefore, I did not know the number of potential participants contacted, the rate of response, and challenges associated with school-based recruitment that occurred at the school.

Once the school identified potential participants, the study liaison informed these adolescent girls about the opportunity to participate in the study and gave them a study flyer (See Appendix B) and a Survey for Participation Form (See Appendix C). This form gave my contact information and explained that its completion was an indication of their interest and/or a request for further information about the study. Parent contact information was also requested of the potential participants. Interested students returned these forms to the study liaison, which were forwarded to me.

I also invited the volunteers to an informational session to discuss the study. The liaison made the arrangements for us to meet in the high school library during a school day. Ten girls attended and each expressed interest in participating. I explained the study to them and answered any questions. Extra study paperwork (extra flyers and Survey for Participation Forms) were on hand in case anyone needed them. Most of the girls had already returned the Survey to the study liaison before our meeting. However, I received a couple of forms at the informational meeting.

Once I received the Survey of Participation Forms, I called the parents/guardians to discuss the study and their daughters’ expressed interest in participating. If no one answered or I had to leave a voicemail, I called back later. I used a phone script (See Appendix D) and tried to set a friendly and informative tone with the parents/guardians. I shared information about the study, answered any questions or concerns they posed, and
discussed the required consent and assent procedures. Many of the parents/guardians expressed interest in my research study and none objected to their daughter’s desire to become a participant. Once I received verbal authorization from them on the phone, I asked them their preferred method of receiving the informed consent/assent forms (by mail, in person, by email/pdf, or from the study liaison) (See Appendix E). Most of the parents said they were accustomed to receiving forms from the high school brought home by their daughters. All the parents of the 10 high school girls preferred to receive the informed consent/assent forms from the school study liaison. Therefore, I took the informed consent/assent forms in sealed envelopes with the identification of the potential participants to the study liaison at the high school, who delivered the forms to the girls to take home to their parents as requested. The girls returned them to the school with their parents’ signatures. The study liaison contacted me when the informed consent/assent forms were returned with the parents’ signatures. One parent requested the informed consent/assent forms via email/pdf, so I emailed them to the parent who emailed the signed forms back in pdf format.

**Community-based Recruitment**

The IRB was later modified to include community-based recruitment (See Appendix F), which was added to expand the recruitment pool and ensure that I would have enough girls with whom to explore the phenomenon of academic identity development. Community-based recruitment included formal and informal conversations with youth-serving organizations as well as parents and youth in the community. I contacted two youth-serving organizations. The community-based recruitment process followed the same procedure as the school-based recruitment, except that I served as the
initial contact person. All the informed consent/assent forms for all the volunteers were signed by the parents/guardians prior to the girls’ interviews.

The Sample

Eleven African-American high school girls participated in the study. They were in grades 10-12. Five were in the 10th grade, one was in the 11th grade, and five were in the 12th grade. The girls ranged in age from 16 to 18. Ten were recruited through school-based recruitment and one through community-based recruitment. Because they were informants about the phenomenon of academic identity development, I gathered descriptive information about them. To make the voices of the African-American high school girls central to this research study, I asked each for a self-description at the beginning of their interview.

All of the girls participating in this research study described themselves as a “good student.” Recognizing “good” as a constant response yet a subjective descriptor, I asked them to elaborate further in order to ascertain a deeper meaning. The girls responded with details about their success in school as evidence by their grades, involvement in extracurricular activities, and earning leadership responsibilities in classes. They reported pride in their grades ranging from A to C. No objective measurement of their grades or academic work was employed in this study, although their education was reported as a primary value among all the young women. All of the girls reported plans to attend college, and two of the seniors had been formally accepted to college at the time of the interviews. Over half of the girls reported taking college preparatory classes in high school, advanced placement high school courses, and earning college credits dually in high school. Half of the girls reported involvement in school and
community-based extracurricular activities, including basketball, cheerleading, dance, wrestling, volleyball, and swimming. Almost half of the girls were employed at various points in high school or currently, largely in retail, service, and child care positions. All of the girls had siblings, whose ages ranged from elementary school to college and young adults. All of the girls reported having positive support systems for their education, including parents, siblings, boyfriends, extended families, and teachers. A description of all 11 girls is contained in Table 1.

Procedure

Each of the 11 girls participated in three separate, individual interviews for a total of 33 during the course of this research study. The average duration of an interview was 60 minutes. At the first interview, I reviewed the terms of consent/assent with the participant and asked if she had any questions. The girls were each advised of their right to stop the interview at any time and to ask questions at any time. I also advised them of their right to answer only questions of their choosing. I checked in with them frequently during the interviews to make sure they clearly understood my questions. I wanted to ensure an interview environment that would allow the girls to feel comfortable sharing their personal stories. I also attended to their non-verbal cues and gave extra clarification if I sensed any hesitation. For example, if I asked a question and the girl paused extensively before responding and/or displayed confusion, but did not ask for a clarification, I would explain the reason for my question in order to help her gain clarity and respond.

The interviews were guided, semi-structured, and contained open-ended questions based on the research questions (see Appendix G). I asked the girls to describe
themselves. They spoke of their schooling and life experiences reflectively, often in a nonlinear fashion, yet they provided a comprehensive picture of how they developed a sense of identity in terms of school. The girls shared their stories, including elements such as family structure, community structure, and life experiences as they deemed them relevant to their own story. In essence, I allowed the young women’s stories to unfold naturally. The process was structured yet intuitive, contributing to variability in the interview data. This variability helped to increase the role of personal voice and centered the group demographics in a worldview relevant to the young women.

All the interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The initial interviews allowed the girls to get to know me as a researcher and to become comfortable talking with me. I also used the initial interview to gather background information on the girls and to focus on their early schooling experiences. The second interview served as a follow-up interview about their secondary education experiences. In the third interview, I addressed gaps missed in the previous interviews and concluded the interview series. All of the school-based interviews were conducted at a public Midwestern high school in a private conference room. The one community-based interview was conducted in a private conference room on the campus of a public Midwestern university.

Assumptions

Several assumptions were presumed in the study to guide this purposeful sampling method:

1. African-American girls would want to talk about their lived experiences related to academic identity development.
2. The girls would accurately recall their personal narratives.

3. I would adequately interpret meaning from the participants’ personal narratives.

4. Establishing trust between the participants, adult “gatekeepers,” parents and the researcher would be essential to the research process.

5. The findings might not be generalizable to all African-American females, but would speak to the experiences of the girls who participated in this study.

**Ethical Considerations**

IRB procedures and requirements governed this study. All interview documents and data were stored in a locked file cabinet in a private office. Electronic interview data were transferred from a digital voice recorder to a secure university server. The interview data were deleted from the digital voice recorder. To protect their anonymity, each participant was assigned a letter code (e.g., a-k) and each participant interview was assigned a number (e.g., 1-3); in sum, each participant interview was assigned an alphanumeric code with one letter and one number, based on the participant and interview number (e.g., a1-k3). The schools the girls referenced attending were referred to according to the region (e.g., Midwest, Southern) and geographic location (urban, suburban). Prior to the initial interview, the girls who were 16 to 17 years of age signed an informed assent and their parent/guardians signed an informed consent (See Appendix E). The girls who were 18 years of age signed an informed consent prior to the start of the first interview (See Appendix E). Participation in this research study was voluntary and the girls could stop the interview at any time. They were compensated with a $10 store gift card per interview for a total of $30 across the research study.
Data Analysis

After collecting the digital audio recordings and brief field notes from the interviews, I began my analytic process by transcribing the 33 recorded interviews. I used these transcriptions and brief field notes to conduct a constant comparison method of data analysis. I transcribed the text, appropriately coded or named areas of interest relevant to this study, and categorized them according to the distinct, observable emergent themes associated with my research questions and theoretical framework (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The data coding process involved my going through each transcript line by line using auditory and visual methods. I listened to the digital audio recordings two and sometimes three times to begin the coding process. I manually entered initial codes on the computer using a colored font while simultaneously keeping a written journal of my thoughts and feelings throughout this process. Journaling was a way to practice reflexivity to increase the trustworthiness and rigor of a study (Glesne, 2011). Then I printed the transcripts and read them line by line, noting additional codes by hand and altered the codes as patterns and emergent themes arose within the data (Litchman, 2010). I placed all of the codes under appropriate themes and categories in a codebook in a Microsoft Word document, from which I was able to conduct further analysis regarding data frequencies and pattern synchronicity. From this data analysis, themes emerged (See Appendix H for example).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

In order to explore identity as a lived experience, I explicated the phenomenological process of identity formation from the interview data using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This kind of analysis is best suited for
research that seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from a detailed examination (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is described as a cyclical process in which the researcher engages the data across four stages of analysis. For the purpose of interpretation, I developed a Word document to chart meaning messages along with direct quotes and interpretive notes from my analysis.

Step 1 of this analysis offers a first encounter with the text, which is intended to allow the researcher to get to know the data as a whole. Smith et al. (2009) explained that the purpose of this initial stage is to ensure that the participant becomes the focus of analysis and to reduce our propensity to engage in quick reduction and synopsis. During this stage, I read the transcripts and listened to each interview in order to understand the girls’ perspectives. I took notes related to big picture concepts and possible meanings which helped me understand their phenomenological experience comprehensively.

Step 2 of this analysis technique involves a second reading of the interview data. Smith et al. (2009) described Step 2 as an initial level of analysis, when semantic content and language are examined on an exploratory level. The purpose of this exploration is to understand how the participant talks about understanding an issue. In order to gain understanding, the researcher must avoid a superficial reading of the data. The researcher is concerned with the process of engaging the data as much as with determining their thematic outcomes. The researcher engages in free textual analysis. There are no rules or requirements about what is commented on. Comments may be descriptive, linguistic, or conceptual. This stage is the most detailed and time consuming. I read through the interview transcripts again and identified possible themes and interpretations of meaning
groups based on how the participants spoke about the phenomenon. I charted themes in a Word document along with relevant quotes.

As described by Smith et al. (2009), the researcher’s task changes in Step 3. The researcher must work between the initial notes and transcripts in order to use exploratory comments to identify themes tied to the original data. This process is important in building interpretation of meaning. I read through the data again and identified emergent themes. I made additional interpretive notes based on additional meanings that emerged from the process. Smith et al. (2009) explained that Step 4 involves making a summary of the themes that were previously charted chronologically in Step 3 from the interview data, and developing how these themes fit together across the participant’s interviews. This level of analysis is not prescriptive. Emergent themes must be incorporated while some may be discarded, based on the interview questions. The researcher may come back to analysis completed on a previous interview and re-examine the data based on what has emerged from this process. Thus, I compared emergent themes across each participant’s three interview series and compiled them in summary form. I discarded themes that were not relevant to the research questions.

Step 5 involves moving to the next participant’s transcripts and repeating the process. As explained by Smith et al. (2009), during this stage the researcher will be influenced by previous interview findings. It is an important step in IPA to allow new themes to emerge with each case (e.g., from each of my series of three interviews per participant). The rigor of the IPA process should ensure a scope that allows for new themes to emerge. This process continues with each participant case. I examined the data
for the emergent themes in each participant interview series. I allowed new themes to emerge from each case.

Step 6 involves looking for patterns across cases. Smith et al. (2009) described the importance of examining the data and asking questions, such as, “Which themes are the most potent? How does a theme in one case help to illuminate a different case? What connections are made across cases?” (p. 101). It often helps the researcher to move to a more theoretical level to highlight the shared qualities of the emergent themes. Additionally, it is important to represent instances of uniqueness among the data in cases that provide higher order concepts. I examined the themes for patterns across cases which highlighted shared meaning. Themes representing at least 50% of participant experiences of the phenomenon were included in these patterns. Direct interview quotes were used to highlight the participant’s own voice and perspective. A summary of the Interpretive Phenomenological Data Analysis process used in this study is found in Table 2.

Validity and Reliability of the Study

The validity and reliability of this study were ensured through my use of reflexivity and theory triangulation (Merriam, 2002). I used reflexive practices to promote transparency in my research process. To do so, I detailed my background and connections to the research topic with each of the girls I interviewed, as presented in the next section.

Next, I took notes during the interviews and listened to the audio recordings between interviews in an effort to assess my role as the researcher and address any issues of bias. I also listened to the audio recordings of my interviews of the 11 girls during the coding process to ensure the congruency of my findings through triangulation (Merriam,
2002). As detailed in the previous chapter, this research employed multiple theories as to increase internal validity. The discussion will reflect in retrospect on how these multiple theories were used to interpret the findings of the study.

In qualitative research, the ability to generalize is grounded in the research situation. Expansive generalizability across broad contexts is not the goal of qualitative research. However, qualitative researchers may seek information that can transfer to similar situations; therefore, for this purpose, rich, thick descriptions are vital for obtaining as much information as possible concerning the research situation or subject (Merriam, 2009). The audit trail is a strategy to ensure reliability, requiring the researcher to keep detailed descriptions of data collection and decisions made throughout the study (Guba, 1981). In this study, I kept detailed records of my decisions, thought processes, and strategies to increase the reliability of my study. Consequently, my notes and thought processes aided in my interpretive data analysis and strengthened the study’s internal validity by providing context and meaning cues in the data.

**The Researcher’s Subjectivity**

As background, I am an African-American woman who is passionate about education and empowerment. I believe that education leads to many positive and important opportunities in life. I was raised in a family that fully supported education both formally and informally. Before I was school age, I remember wanting to learn how to read. I used to watch my grandmother read the newspaper in the morning, and I would mimic her but hold the paper upside down. I knew that adults were knowledgeable because they could read and they knew important information so I wanted that too. I fell in love with school as a child and it’s never gone away. I am affectionately known in my
family as the “professional student” and there is some truth to that now that I am in my thirties and seeking a PhD. Over the course of my life, there have not been many years that I have not been a student either full or part-time. My educational experiences overall have been positive and I realize much of my success in life comes from the way I developed in terms of school.

Occupationally, I am a former school social worker so I have had the opportunity to work with many young people who have had great potential, although they struggled in school. As an African-American woman working in the school system, I have had a unique perspective on the pervasiveness of the academic achievement gap. However, I feel that I represent a positive story that is not always told, a story about the supportive families and successes of African Americans in education. As a school social worker, I found myself working with an increasing number of African-American girls who were challenged in school for many reasons, but with the right supports, prevailed. Therefore, I came to question our tactics as professionals in schools and have asked, “Are we addressing the correct issues?” Additionally, when making decisions that would influence the educational achievement of African-American girls, I wondered, “Where are the voices of the girls? Are the adults taking the time to talk to them?” Unfortunately, too often, the answer was no. I believe this oversight may have been due to many factors, most prominently, our social and cultural norms and assumptions regarding age often place adults in a privileged social role. Essentially, we equate age and life experience with advanced wisdom and knowledge. Therefore, one must reach the age of maturity as a validation of the ability to contribute knowledge to the world. Adults are in charge in families and society. Adults make the rules and social norms and expect adolescents to
obey. While it’s hopeful that adulthood marks maturity along the life cycle across multiple developmental domains required to make complex decisions, adolescents also have knowledge relative to their lived experiences. I believe we are charged with the care of young people, and as we make decisions about their well-being we need to hear their voices.

As an African-American woman I feel an obligation to work to educate and empower young African-American girls. I feel an ethical responsibility to empower youth to be academically successful, and I also feel a responsibility as a Black school social worker to work towards closing the achievement gap. As a researcher, I am required to hear the lived experiences of the girls and record them without placing biases on them. I have had various experiences mentoring African-American girls and helping them make decisions about their schooling and life choices. This research study gave me the opportunity to again engage with youth as a professional advocate and now as a scholar whereby I can make another kind of contribution. I am greatly interested in youth development and applied research as an empowerment tool for individuals and communities. I hope that this kind of work will shed light on the best practices for bridging the gaps between research, policy, and practice. I have had the opportunity to reflect on how my experiences of growing up relate to or contrast with those of young African-American women. My personal academic experiences as an African-American female have provided the means with which to receive and interpret data about African-American girls. It is possible that I have brought to this study the assumptions and biases that most African-American females would have, because of similar experiences, and have shared the same feelings that I have personally had in school and observed
professionally. I have always felt collective support from other African-Americans in my educational experiences.

Fortunately, I have not had a great number of overtly negative racial or gender experiences in school as an African-American woman. I would describe my experiences of racism as more covert micro-aggressions that I learned to maneuver through. My experiences could therefore have biased my perspective if I were to assume that African-American girls have had similar experiences. I did not make that assumption. It is for this reason that I wanted to talk with young African-American women of this generation and allow their voices to be heard beyond the usual stereotypes with the only expectation that they would share their stories. This research process was also a reflective journey for many of the girls who participated in this research study. As the researcher investigating academic identity development, I considered it a privilege to be part of that reflective journey.
CHAPTER 4: THE FINDINGS

This research study served a dual purpose: first, to provide a space for a number of African-American high school girls to give “voice” to their experiences related to developing and defining academic identity; second, to understand how these African-American girls made meaning from the experiences that contribute to their academic identity development. In this chapter I discuss the findings from the study based on the research questions: (a) What lived experiences contributed to the academic identity development of the sample of African-American high school girls? (b) What meaning did these African-American high school girls ascribe to their lived experiences that contributed to their academic identity development?

In my interviews with them, the 11 African-American high school girls told their personal stories of their lived experiences related to their academic identity development. From my analysis of the interviews I isolated common themes from their school experiences of what they believed had contributed to their academic identity development. The tenets of Black feminist thought helped me to discern the meaning of the girls’ experiences as revealed by their interview data. Black feminist thought expresses the commonality of Black women’s socialized experiences as expressed by Black women (Collins, 1990). Additionally, Black feminists have called for researchers to contextualize data on the lived experiences of Black women (Collins, 2000). (See Table 1 for a summary of the description of the participants in this study.) Therefore, in this chapter, I further contextualize the data and my findings, presenting them in a fashion that mirrors the manner in which they were revealed to me. The findings are presented in two parts: (a) narrative descriptions from their school stories to help the reader
understand who the girls were as informants regarding the phenomenon of academic identity, and (b) that reflected similarities among the girls’ lived experiences as indicated by the data. The narrative descriptions are not presented uniformly; rather the young women’s unique stories offer depth to the data. Second, to address both research questions, I present the common themes that emerged from the interview data concerning academic identity development and what the girls believed attributed to it. These common themes are supported by quotations and segments from the interview data along with my interpretations. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the research participants.

**Part I: Narrative Descriptions**

**Assata’s School Story (17 years, 12th grade)**

Assata was very open and friendly. She walked into the room ready to talk about her experiences in a manner that was reflective and friendly. She didn’t need much prompting about my questions, as if she had already been thinking about her journey in school. Assata’s reflections on her school experiences were insightful and comprehensive. She described herself as “an African American young lady.” She also identified herself as a person who stands up for what she believes. She enjoys being a student and has always been successful in school. Assata shared her favorite classes, stating, “I like English. I like history …. I’m starting to like math this year… and I love gym and then I like my nursing class too.” She also described herself as a good problem solver. She likes to be a supportive person to her loved ones.

**Family.** Assata lives with her mother and younger sister. Her mother is her role model and she said she has a positive support system both within her immediate and
extended family. Her sister was 14 years old and a freshman at the same high school. She said they have a close relationship even with their age difference. Assata said that she was not sure what her sister was going to do without her when she leaves for college next year, because she takes care of her as her big sister and drives her to school. She says they are close even though Assata is 17 and she is 14. Assata also has a 22-year-old sister who has a baby girl and is expecting another baby soon. Assata is excited about the baby and since there are so many girls in the family, hopes it will be a boy. She describes her role in the family as the middle child, stating, “Sometimes if my older sister is not there then I’m in charge, but if she’s there, we both are in charge I guess… So like, I don’t know, we switch off roles but I’m just here to help.”

**Elementary School.** Assata went to two different elementary schools. She attended kindergarten to 3rd grade at a public school in the school district in which she currently resides; then during her 4 and 5th grades, after her family moved to another state in the Midwest, she attended a private school in a larger city. She described this school as racially mixed and the private school as predominantly African American. Assata said, “…at each school, they taught things in different ways…,” which was a benefit to her educationally. However, of the two schools, Assata preferred the private one. She stated, “It was way different. I feel like it was way different from the elementary like public school. When I asked her to explain, she shared the different ways that the private school engaged students in more active learning than the public school. With two months left of her 5th grade year, her family moved back to her home state, just in time for Assata to reconnect with her former peers and prepare for middle school.
**Middle School.** Assata started middle school with many of the friends she knew before the family moved, which helped her with the transition socially. Middle school was a time of self-discovery for Assata, and she became involved with the many sports that she has grown to love. She described herself as a “good student,” earning A’s, B’s, and C’s. She felt her grades sometimes varied depending on the classroom teaching styles and her own ability to ask questions. Assata shared that it was the norm for many of her peers to sit in class and not ask questions of the teacher, even when they needed clarity. Assata rejected this assumption. She recalled learning to use her voice in class to ask questions: “… sixth grade and stuff more people was just like, no, I just figured it out myself or whatever and I’ll just be like, no, I need help!” She also remembered how transitioning to the new public middle school from the private elementary school impacted her academically: “… teaching wise, math wise, it was different cause it was like I was ahead but I wasn’t, like I’d already learned it.” In reflection, Assata recognized the value of having learned from both school settings, stating, “… some things I didn’t learn at the public school I learned from the private school as well.”

**High School.** Assata lives in the school neighborhood but usually drives to school because it’s quite a distance to walk. She has been a member of the varsity cheerleading squad for three years. She had been on a local drill team since the 8th grade. She has tried playing several sports: “I’ve done track, volleyball, basketball and everything except for competitive swimming,” but noted that she likes swimming for fun! She also expressed interest in playing soccer and softball this year. Assata made the point that she takes advantage of any opportunity she has to travel with the various groups she’s been involved with. One year, she was on the drill team that performed for President Obama.
She has also participated in college visits with an organization that takes students on tours of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which helps them become college ready. Assata was motivated to do well in school because she knows how hard her mother works. “She had me just when she was entering high school so she was like fifteen and then, um, she graduated early and then my dad, he wasn’t there at all ....” Assata’s mother encourages her: “She’s just like (advises) don’t get pregnant you know and go to school first and then get a job. And I’m like I won’t.” As a reflection of that promise, Assata has worked hard in school and was planning to take a test that would allow her to start CNA courses while completing high school. She is taking courses for college credit and looks forward to making decisions about college soon.

**Brooke’s School Story (18 years, 12th grade)**

Brooke was funny and self-reflective in the interview. She was very focused on continuing to do well in high school and graduating this year. Brooke described herself as hard-working and said she was a good student, meaning “… getting A’s and B’s, make sure work’s getting done, not getting into fights, listening to the teacher’s directions and instructions, and behaving yourself and being cooperative and all that kind of stuff.” She described herself as different and intuitive, stating, “I can feel thoughts, emotions and stuff like that.”

**Family.** Brooke’s immediate family consists of her mother and her 12-year-old brother. She described her family as close and has a special relationship with her little brother, even though they are six years apart. Brooke takes pride in being a role model for him. She stated, “Oh, oh, I love my brother to death. I have so much fun with him.”
Brooke was not born in the city in which she resides. She said she is used to diversity because her mother is White and her Dad is Black.

**Elementary School.** Brooke went to elementary school in a large urban school on the East Coast. She described her early schooling experience as “terrible.” The school was overpopulated and resources were scarce. She recalled, “I mean ... teachers didn’t care about students.” Brooke stated, “It was really rough ... a lot of fighting, gang related stuff. People would make fun of you, tease you and just be rude, and teachers would threaten kids, saying that if you don’t act right I’m going to put you in a room full of bees, and it was just horrible.” She recalled living in an impoverished neighborhood and hearing gunshots outside her window frequently.

**Middle School.** After Brooke’s grandmother passed, her mother decided to move the family to the Midwest so that they would be near extended family members who all lived in the same city. Brooke was about 11 or 12 years old. She laughed reflecting on how her accent stood out then, and recalled learning how people in different regions refer to carbonated drinks as “soda”, “soda pop” and “pop.” The family moved to an urban neighborhood, where they still currently reside. Brooke grew to like her new neighborhood because it was clean and friendly, stating, “Oh yeah, yeah, people are more friendly. There’s neighbors always willing to help you. I mean I have a nice next door neighbor ... it’s safe.” Brooke attended the neighborhood middle school but faced challenges fitting in. Brooke shared, “I just kept going to the principal’s office all the time and I wouldn’t follow directions. I left school without nobody knowing, I actually left school when I was supposed to be in school so they said that’s it.”
**High School.** As a result of several behavior incidents, she had to attend alternative school during 9th and 10th grades. She credits the alternative school staff, support from her family, neighbors, and boyfriend for helping her to become the successful student she is today. In order to transfer back to her home high school, she had to meet academic and behavior goals set by the middle school staff. During her junior year, Brooke transferred from the alternative school to her neighborhood high school. She shared, “I earned the right to come back to my home high school when the teachers thought I couldn’t make it here. I proved them wrong.” Brooke works at a retail store and is proud of being independent and responsible as an employee.

Brooke plans to pursue phlebotomy as a career. She first learned about the field when phlebotomists came to the high school for blood donation drives. “I was like, wow, that seems interesting. I was like so what is this called? They says ‘phlebotomy’ and I’m like I want to take blood and stuff so I started ... was like job shadowing and I really liked what they was doing, so I was like this is the type of career I would like to do.”

**Ciere’s School Story (15 years, 10th grade)**

Ciere was very open and seemed eager to share her story. In our first meeting, she shared excitement about her upcoming 16th birthday party. She prides herself on being an honest person and stating her true opinions, stating, “When they’re right (fine) but if they’re wrong I’m going to tell (them they’re) wrong.” She described herself as a good student. She recalled having two opportunities to skip a grade but chose not to, in part, because she has been in a pre-college preparatory program, so an early graduation could impact her eligibility, and she did not want to rush into college before she is really ready for it.
*Family.* Ciere lives with her mother and stepfather; both of her parents are remarried and her father lives in another state. She has a large family with six sisters and three brothers, and is eighth among her siblings. Currently, Ciere lives with her parents, little sister, and little brother. “*We have a big family so we’re all pretty much in the same school.*” Some of her older siblings are parents, so she helps out with their children and her younger brother. Ciere shared her perspectives about her role in the family: “*I’m the auntie, the god mom and the everything else, whatever.*” Ciere’s older siblings also serve as role models for her in terms of education. One brother is an engineer, another is in the graphic design field, and an older sister is in the navy.

Ciere’s family moved to the Midwest from the South after a destructive storm. She said it was a very challenging experience for her entire family. She recalls how they had to leave everything behind and that some of their family members and neighbors had died in the storm. Ciere recalled the challenges her parents faced with finding employment in their new home state. It was a challenging transition, she explained, but the family got through some tough times but Ciere noted the bright side of their challenges: “*… if I, we hadn’t moved, I know I wouldn’t have the same education and the same opportunities, so it’s like I’m really grateful that we moved.*”

*Elementary School.* When Ciere was two years old she had an asthma attack which, because of the loss of oxygen to her brain, caused her to have and continue to have migraines, which she feels has had impact on how she processes information in school. So she learned to seek extra help as needed. Ciere started school in the South at a predominantly African-American school in an urban neighborhood. She recalled it as a “*normal school,*” having the appropriate items like books and computers for students.
When she was seven and in the 2\(^{nd}\) grade, her family moved to the Midwest. Her new elementary school was located in an area of the city considered affluent. She described this elementary school as “predominantly White ... rich ... and a really good school.”

Ciere’s early school experiences were riddled with challenges related to her family’s move across the country. She often felt ostracized and misunderstood by her White teachers and peers. When she transferred to the new school she was one of only a few African-American students. Ciere described herself as quiet and shy. She has done well in terms of her academics, and in her early school, saying, “I got straight A’s or I got A’s and B’s” but she began to have some behavior trouble in school.

**Middle School.** Ciere described her middle school as more diverse in terms of the student body than her elementary school. Some of her early troubles in elementary carried over to middle school. She described herself saying, “I didn’t like to really get to know people .... I didn’t really talk.” Middle school was a time characterized by Ciere as when she started to speak up more for herself. As a result she went through a challenging period when she got into arguments and fights. As her behavior troubles started to negatively impact school, her mother intervened: “My Mom got me on track.” Ciere also got help from teachers and learned how to address her issues differently. Ciere joined a college prep program in the 8\(^{th}\) grade, which also helped her focus on her academics because it requires students to maintain grades that indicate college readiness and to participate in summer enrichment activities.

**High School.** Ciere recalled her transition to high school, stating, “It was easy since I was prepared.” Ciere is proud of maintaining her grades and participating in many extracurricular activities in high school. She is on the dance team, involved in drama, and
takes vocal music lessons and enjoys “guitar plucking” as she called it. Ciere shared her strengths, stating, “I’m a tinkerer. I like to figure stuff out. My talents help me associate with a lot of people ... I sing. I play the guitar, so that opened up a lot of musical stuff in just getting to know people, and my education.” Ciere is planning to attend college; she has many interests and will decide on a major in the future.

**Dondria’s School Story (15 years, 10th grade)**

Dondria took great care with her answers in our interviews and was interested in her own reflections. She described herself, saying, “I feel back then when I was younger it was a roller coaster. I went from good to bad. No, I went from good, good to bad, and good again so I don’t know. But this year I feel like I’m a mature person, nice, but not too nice. I still have attitude, I just feel like I became a better person.”

**Family.** Dondria was raised by her mother and has four siblings, two adult sisters, an older brother who is 18, and a younger brother, 10. One of her older sisters is completing her undergraduate degree and planning for graduate school; the other works as a CNA, like Dondria’s mother, and her older brother is preparing for college. Dondria is also very close with her grandmother, who helps watch the children when her mother is at work, so Dondria often looks to her grandmother for advice and support. The family stayed with Dondria’s grandmother when she was younger; she said, “I lived in the really big house with my grandma and stuff like we lived on the nicer side, kind of like we never heard any shooting at night time, nothing. It was really peaceful. I’d go outside and play with my friends in my neighborhood and go over to my neighbor’s house and play with her kids.”
Elementary School. When we began talking about schools, she said her experiences were “jumbled” and that she struggled to make friends in positive ways. At that time her family lived with her grandmother. Dondria attended three different elementary schools within the school district that she resides currently in. She stayed in the first school for two years, then transferred to the second for two years, which she was eventually kicked out of for fighting in the 3rd grade, and finally transferred to the last elementary school, where her grandmother worked, in hopes of keeping out of trouble. Dondria recalled, “Starting from kindergarten I was always good, I had like, we didn’t really have grades, but I would always do good.”

Middle School. Dondria attended two different middle schools: the first for 6th and 7th grades, and the second for 8th grade. She compared the two, describing her peers at the first school: “There were some Black kids, not a lot but there’s a lot of like Mexicans and like Whites and Asians.” She described the second middle school as predominantly African-American. The students at the first school wore uniforms, but the students noticed socioeconomic differences in slight ways, for example, the brand of khaki pants that the students purchased. Dondria described the second middle school, stating, “... we all understood what everyone was going through about living in the hood I guess and like everyone understood each other.” Dondria described herself at that time saying, “I guess going into middle school and stuff I was always still good but stepping into eighth grade was my bad year with grades going down. I went from A’s and B’s to F’s, all F’s.”

High School. Dondria’s transition to high school was challenging and her grades continued to decline. Motivated to turn things around, she attended summer school after
her 9th grade year. She attributed many of her challenges in school to hanging out with the wrong crowd and trying to make friends in negative ways. She commented, “Um, so last year I tried to get away from a lot of my friends but we were still kind of bad.” Now, in her sophomore year, Dondria describes herself as a girl making a transformation: she said with pride, “So this year I straightened up; my grades are a lot better. I’m almost on the honor roll.” Dondria works in retail at the mall and has to balance her work hours with her classes. She described herself as creative; she likes to visualize things to design. She was currently designing a wedding dress for a class. She plans to attend college.

**Eliza’s School Story (18 years, 12th grade)**

Eliza was friendly and openly shared her experiences in depth. She shared how her school experiences have contributed to who she is today, saying, “I am now a lot more versatile. I can fit in with just about anyone I hang out with if I want to, and I don’t know, it just helped me really develop how I learn, taught me how I learn and what works best for me, yeah.”

**Family.** Eliza described her family, saying, “I’m adopted so that’s kind of complicated ... in my adopted family I am the oldest and I have a 10-year-old little sister who’s also adopted and we have a child that’s living with us for foster care and he’s 17 months. We call him our nephew. He is the most amazing thing ever. I love him ... he’s wonderful, and then there’s my mom and then my biological family on my mother’s side. I am the youngest of five. My father ... I know I am in the middle somewhere, not quite sure how many he has. Eliza described herself at home: “I’m more just... do what I’m asked. My mom asks me to clean up something, I clean it up, go back to my room. I’m kind of a hermit at home actually, but yeah, I, my responsibilities at home are mainly just
to make sure my nephew is taken care of and help my sister out when she needs it, so yeah.”

**Elementary School.** Eliza recalled her early school experiences very fondly and said her school was very nurturing and “good to develop in.” She was placed in gifted and talented classes in elementary school and felt that the school worked hard to develop student leaders and provide education through experiences. Her school was located in a neighborhood considered affluent, recalling often being one of few or the only African-American in her classes but she also felt supported in her education, and diversity was respected. Eliza described herself stating, “I was chatty... I had so many good experiences.”

**Middle School.** Middle school presented some challenges for Eliza. When she was 11, she found out she was adopted. She shared, “... it was really hard for me, um, I don’t want to say a crisis, but it caused me to really question who I was as a person.” Also, her school environment changed and she transitioned into a more diverse school. At that time Eliza, trying to fit in and find herself, started to hang out with African-American peers and often felt the pressure of fitting into negative stereotypes of African-Americans in school. She recalled that time, saying, “I just lost a lot of who I was through middle school.”

**High School.** When Eliza went to high school, she found her way back to herself and rejected people’s stereotypes. She is very involved in a number of extracurricular activities, including the dance team at school and a community-based group, a gospel choir. She is also involved in church activities and has participated in various scholarship cotillions and groups supporting young African-American girls. She is particularly proud
of her work with the NAACP Youth Council. She is the vice president and as a member has been involved in influencing policy decisions of the local school district. Eliza described her feelings about where she is now in school: “For the effort I put forth, yeah, because I’m not a very hard worker in school. I’m not, I’m not a school setting person. I don’t like sitting in a class with everyone, so I didn’t, I haven’t tried in high school, just did the bare minimum to get by. So I mean my grade point average is a 3.08. It could be better because I mean I know I have the ability to do better but I’m, I’m glad it is where it is.” Eliza will be attending college next year and plans to major in marketing. She stated, “I hope to either work in a marketing firm or be the marketing department of a major corporation and then possible transition into like public relations or like a personal manager.”

Fatima’s School Story (17 years, 10th grade)

Fatima was very friendly and light-hearted in our interviews. When I asked her to describe herself, she said, “I’m intelligent, I have different ways I can be funny to hang around, and sometimes I can have my way where I just don’t want to be bothered. And smart when it comes to school. I get my work done.” She also added, “I am a good student. I respect my elders.” Sharing further, she said, “I used to be so shy to talk to people, but now I just, I like to talk to people. I just like to have, like to have a conversation, so I like was so quiet like ok, why are we over here talking with these people and I don’t know them but now I just have a random conversation with people, so most people think I’m weird. I’m like well it’s better to be weird than shy I guess.”

Family. Fatima described her family, saying, “…on my dad’s side I have a brother, well it’s me, my 12-year-old brother, well, 13-year-old brother, then my 12-year-
old sister. And then on my mom’s side, she had me and my brother and he’s 11.” Fatima described her family as busy, due to her parents’ variable work shifts, so everyone helps out at home, she stated, “... so we all have our, we try to have our schedule to where my brother won’t be home by his self.” Fatima feels well supported by her immediate family and extended family members. She said that her biggest supporters are her mom, dad, grandma, and grandpa. Fatima stated, “My grandpa, he helps me out a lot when I, so yeah, I think that’s important, and, well, my mom too. It’s a lot like my family is important to me when I need help.”

**Elementary School.** Fatima started elementary school at a school in the South. She explained that her stepdad is from the Midwestern state where they now live. Fatima felt her early education was not adequate. Referencing her first elementary school, she said, “I did horrible my 3rd grade year.” She added, “I wouldn’t say I was a bad kid but I was horrible so... as in I did not get my work done at all. It’s like they didn’t teach it good enough. It’s like they do one thing one day and like the next day it’s a different subject about what we learn.”

The family moved when Fatima was in elementary school, she explained: “So yeah, we’ve been here for six years, February 14th. Valentine’s Day will be ... I was in fourth grade when we left on Valentine’s Day, February 14th so this next year it will be seven years ... I started school late. I didn’t start kindergarten until I was six and a lot of people started at five.” Therefore, she is older than some of her peers in the 10th grade. After the family settled in to their new home, Fatima attended two different elementary schools in 4th and 5th grades. The first was located on the opposite side of the city, so her mother drove her to school, but the second was close enough to home for her to walk.
**Middle School.** During Fatima’s 6th and 7th grade years she went to her local middle school. When she was in 8th grade, her family moved to a suburb and she went to a different middle school, which was located in the city. Fatima described both schools as diverse, with a mixed student body. She was very conscious of differences in school policies and education outcomes for students. Fatima recalled her first middle school, “...we had the lowest math scores in like, as in ITBS taking all that,” so in the summer of her 8th grade year she took classes at the local community college and she entered high school with extra credits.

**High School.** Fatima’s transition to high school was a bit rocky. In the 9th grade she was sent to the office for off-task behaviors. Fatima said her biggest challenge was sitting in class and reading: “Silent sustained reading where you have to read for like 15 minutes just to yourself and I did not like that. I just can’t sit and just read while everybody’s quiet ...” Fatima’s parents, family, and teachers helped her to refocus and get back on track in school. She is proud of making a positive change in school. Fatima’s favorite class in school is psychology, she enjoys math and science, and is interested in pediatrics. She is taking two college credit courses and is looking at colleges and searching for scholarships with her mother’s help. Outside of class, Fatima runs track and has a part-time job in retail.

**Gelisa’s School Story (18 years, 12th grade)**

Gelisa was talkative and friendly. In our first interview she let me know that she had a lot to share. She laughed and said, “You should have a video!” As she described herself, “My personality is I can be lovable and like this sweet kind-hearted person. I’m very sensitive. I’m like a very sensitive person, really sensitive and, um, I don’t know. I
just, I am a person who gives a lot.” She is a senior and ready to move on to college. Smiling, she said, “I found out that senioritis is like such a real disease.” Describing herself, she said, “My parents are both pastors ... yeah, it was like no room for error.” Gelisa shared one of her motivations: “I was just mostly like I wanted my parents to be proud cause like when you’re in a house with four other boys, like the attention gets set on them because they’re like in wrestling and everything, so I’ve always wanted my parents to like talk about me too, like, oh, she’s such a good student.”

**Family.** Gelisa lives with her mother and dad, and she shared with pride that “….they’ve been married for like 22, 20... 24 years.” She also said, “I’m the youngest of all boys and I’m the only girl.” Her brothers are 20, 21, 23, and 30. Gelisa described herself as a “Daddy’s girl” and said her family is very close knit, and that they support one another. Wrestling is an important sport to her family, because all of Gelisa’s brothers are wrestlers, and she is a wrestling manager. Even though she’s the youngest, Gelisa said she does not play the “baby” role. She described herself as the “second mom” in the family because she helps to make sure her brothers take good care of themselves, particularly as athletes. Gelisa said her brothers serve as an inspiration for her, as each is currently enrolled in or attended college and one also served in the navy.

**Elementary School.** Gelisa went to an elementary school near her home. Recalling that time, she said, “It was just like I always had White friends. I was a really good student. All I did was like read all the time. I was a reader, June B Jones. When I got home I’d do my homework, what was that, I didn’t watch much TV. My mom was like really strict …. She was like homework needs to be done, everybody come downstairs at the dinner table and do your homework then we eat.” She also shared, “I was very
studious like I would always be in class like on time. I was hardly ever late like the only
time I wasn’t at school was when I was sick and like I was, I was always sick.” I asked if
this affected her grades and Gelisa said, “Uh-uh, I was always the type of kid who got
everything in early and asked for the next assignment so, and then like my teacher would
give my mom like homework and like my mom would work with me so I didn’t miss much.
It just made me work harder.”

Middle School. Gelisa referred to middle school as “… the hardest time.”
Academically she described herself as naturally smart, saying, “I was in, like, seventh
grade doing my brother’s chemistry homework.” However, it was a difficult transition for
her because she moved to a middle school that was outside of her neighborhood.
Attending school with more African-American students, she often felt as if she did not fit
in with them, and in some ways she was socially more aligned with her White peers,
which made her feel different. Desiring to fit in, she shared, “Um, middle school, it was,
like, I was exposed to different things, like, different people and I, like I, was a bit of a
follower... kids were having sex, I did not. I’m a good girl. Kids were having sex and,
like, they were drinking and they were, like, wanting to party, and they were, like, no, I
don’t want to do my homework, and they were sassy. And I, like, kind of turned into, like,
some of them, like, trying to be sassy with them.” Eventually Gelisa said her new social
habits started to affect her focus so her grades dropped.

After a bout with serious illness, Gelisa worked to change things in school,
saying, “I just wanted to work hard, and I could just see where, like, my life got off track.
After I got really sick I got back in gear. I tried my hardest to get everything up and that
was like 8th grade. I got really, really sick and went to the hospital. I lost, like, 15 pounds
in a week ... and then I went back to school and I worked really hard to try to get things up to get prepared for high school.”

**High School.** Reflecting on her transition to high school, Gelisa said, “… then I got to high school, I got a 3.8 GPA.” She is also involved in a variety of extracurricular activities, noting, “I’m in varsity cheerleading, I did JV cheerleading last year. I’m a varsity wrestling manager because all my brothers are wrestlers. I’ve done it since eighth grade. Yeah, that’s all I’m involved in at school, but at church I am a greeter. I’m captain of the step team, dance team, choir, oh, I did choir here too…” She’s particularly proud of working as a wrestling manager; in a predominantly white sport she’s also proud of the diversity of her wrestling team. Gelisa plans to attend college next year and looks forward to living off campus in an apartment with her brothers.

**Heather’s School Story (15 years, 10th grade)**

Heather was friendly and soft spoken at times but often smiling. At our first meeting she described herself, saying, “Well, most people would say I’m outgoing. I like to talk to, like, people. If somebody new here comes to school, I’ll talk to them, and I like to babysit.” When I asked her what she likes best about school, she replied, “I just like being with my friends. Yeah, sometimes I like being in class. I have great attendance and I have no tardies, so the point is I just like being with my friends and, I like going to class sometimes.”

**Family.** Heather lives with her mother and father, and noted proudly, “My mom and dad, they support me really cool.” She has two brothers and a sister. Heather described her siblings, saying, “Well my brother’s 16. My sister’s about 12 and my other brother, he’s like in his 40s or something ...” Both of Heather’s parents come from large
families, so she feels well supported by her extended family as well. She laughed about some challenges of big families, stating, “It’s ok cause it’s, it’s fun being in a big family, but sometimes it’s annoying because family can get on your nerves a lot, so I just go with it.” Heather described her neighborhood: “It’s mostly quiet. It’s not like the ghetto, ghetto neighborhood ... Well, like, we don’t have, like, say, like, shootings, like, around our neighborhood. It’s just quiet, like, we have nice neighbors and stuff.”

**Elementary School.** Heather shared her experiences in elementary school, recalling the different ones she attended. She said, “I went to a lot of elementary schools... I changed, like, I would argue and, like, get an attitude with teachers.” Some of her earliest school memories included a comparison between the two schools’ grading styles. One used S’s and N’s and the other used grades. Heather said she did better in the school that assigned traditional grades. In elementary school she characterized herself, saying, “I was kind of bad a little bit.”

**Middle School.** Heather attended her neighborhood middle school. She remembered that “… there were a lot of different kinds of people, it was pretty mixed ... just like here.” In middle school she recalls enjoying playing basketball and being involved with after school clubs. Because she continued to have some behavior challenges in school, she was required to carry a point sheet to classes, with which teachers monitored her behavior. Heather said her earliest school memories go back to the 8th grade and she felt as if she had related well to her peers.

**High School.** High school presented other challenges for Heather. She described her 9th grade year: “Yes, it was really bad. I was, like, I was in level one before, like, before I came to this school I was in level one. I did bad in level one and then I got all the
way, I skipped level two and got all the way to level three. Like level one is where you have all out classes and level two is like we have some out classes. Level three is where you only have one out class and you stay in one class all day. Yeah, I kept on getting kicked out and then they had a meeting with my parents and told me ‘you will be going to level three starting Monday’.” When I asked Heather why she felt transitioning to high school was hard, she replied, “Because I was, like, I didn’t know what to do ‘cause I was, I would, this was my first year here. The school is too big so you couldn’t find your way around and then, like, some of the kids, like, I wouldn’t know them or nothing so it would be hard to make friends when you first come.”

Although she has had some challenges in school, Heather seems to be trying to be self-reflective and working towards making a positive transition, as she explained, “Um, some people think I have a bad attitude ‘cause I get mad sometimes and then like, like, some people talk to me that I have, like, a bad attitude. Yeah, I need to change my attitude.” I asked Heather what she feels proud of, and she said, “Well my accomplishment was to get an out class from level three, and I did that. They told me if I have a week without getting in trouble or getting sent to do an essay, then I could get an out class, and I accomplished that.” Heather said she would like to get a job soon and she is trying out for a dance team. She said, “My mom talks to me about my future after graduation.” Heather is interested in pursuing cosmetology as a career.

Ishawna’s School Story (16 years, 11th grade)

Ishawna shared her story very openly and was introspective. Ishawna described herself saying, “…well I think, um, I’ve been through a lot which makes me stronger.” She added, “I think that I’m strong and independent because I work hard for the stuff that
I have and, um, I would rather get it by myself than to be helped with it and then have it taken away or something.” Ishawna enjoys being a leader: “I like to speak my mind. I think I have, I think I’m a leader. I think, um, a lot of people watch me, so I have to do good ’cause I know people are watching me.”

**Family.** Ishawna lives with her mother and 3-year-old brother. When I asked her what it’s like to have a sibling much younger, she said, “I was used to being an only child. I was happy when she had him.” Ishawna often helps her mother take care of her little brother. Most of Ishawna’s extended family do not live in the same state, so she appreciates her extended support system, which includes her godparents, people from church, and other adults in her life.

**Elementary School.** Ishawna started school at a magnet school in another Midwestern state. Thinking back to those early days she stated, “It was pretty good, um, I had a lot of friends. I still talk to the friends that I had.” She described the school as racially mixed: “Oh, it was mixed, had a lot of Black and, um, Latino. It was mixed.” She also recalled, “I lived in an apartment complex, so the bus would meet at the clubhouse, and I would walk across the street from the apartment complex and take the bus to school, and then they’d drop me back off across the street, then I’d just walk across the street. My mom would stay over there with me until I got on the bus.” Her family moved to the state where she currently resides when she was in the 4th grade. When they moved, she attended her neighborhood school, which was the first time she walked to school. Describing herself as a student, she said, “I was an honor roll, on the honor roll. I played basketball pretty good. I loved school back then.” She also said she had “lots of friends. I
hung out with them or I went to their house ‘cause we all lived in the same neighborhood.”

**Middle School.** Ishawna went on to attend her neighborhood middle school. She recalls, “… that, that’s kind of when I was going through this phase. I was fighting a lot in middle school, 6th and 7th grade, and the people there like they really helped me change.” She described the middle school: “You know that wasn’t where people wanted their children to go because of all the fights, there was fights on the news.” She further stated, “I don’t even know what happened. I started fighting. My grades were still up, but, like, um, I started, just I got into a couple fights and I got in trouble like serious trouble, like, with the police, and I had to go to anger management class… ” This incident served as a wakeup call for Ishawna.

**High School.** Ishawna’s mother wanted her to go to her current high school because she heard it was a good one. So they moved into the high school district. Ishawna recalled, “Freshman year I made good grades, was on the honor roll, but I was still, like, acting up a little bit, not really fighting but just, like, disrupting class, talking. So like that then I straightened up, sophomore year went by good, no more fights. I haven’t been in a fight since the last fight in 8th grade. Yeah, um, and now I’m a junior, everything’s pretty good.” Ishawna is focused on success in school. Looking back she said, “Yes, I was young. Now I pray like the grace of God is how I got through it.” Ishawna had a part-time job, but she decided to quit when she joined the girls ’ basketball team. She has also been involved in a college preparatory program since 9th grade. It requires her to take summer program courses, she said, so “I chose to take chemistry.” Math was her favorite subject
in elementary and middle school, although now she does not have a favorite but is committed to having a successful education.

Ishawna shared her future interests: “I used to want to be a lawyer and I used to want to be a judge. But I don’t now. It’s changed because now, like I’m into, like, nursing. I thought about being a pediatrician.” She’s looking forward to college when she can have more freedom of choice in her education. She also shared, “I want to get my PhD but I don’t know how that’s going to work. I don’t know if I can go to school for that many years.”

**Joslene’s School Story (16 years, 10th grade)**

Joslene described her school experiences poignantly and with humor. She described herself as a “silly person.” I don’t know... I’m weird like I like crazy things, like crazy legal things. She shared an example of silly things she likes to do ... play hide and seek after school …”

**Family.** Joslene lives with her parents and has four siblings: “...my brother’s 20, my sister is 19, my other sister is 18, I’m 15, and my little brother is three.” Jokingly, she described how it feels to grow up in a larger family, saying, “... when you don’t do something you just blame it on them. Like when I don’t clean the kitchen. I did clean the kitchen but your little spawns ran around here eating and they’ll get in trouble. They’ll be like she didn’t even clean the kitchen.” Joslene’s family moved from another Midwestern state to the state the family currently lives in when she was in elementary school. The family moved so that they would have better opportunities, as Joslene pointed out: “… my mom said like this isn’t where you’re supposed raise kids, so we moved here.”
Elementary School. Joslene recalled moving between school districts in elementary school. The first school she enrolled in was an urban school that was eventually closed by the district, so the students transferred to another building. The second school was also an urban school and she described the student body as having “a lot of students of color.” Joslene went to that school for a week and then transferred to the suburban school district in the 4th grade. This was a big cultural switch for Joslene because the suburban school district had a majority White student body population. As she said, “There was like maybe six Black people.” She recalled initially feeling different the first day on joining her new class: “I walked in and there’s nothing but White people and they just looked at me like...” Joslene’s new school identified her as one of “the troubled ones,” but she recalled getting into trouble only after defending herself from bullying. Joslene said, “…she (another student) kept calling me, uh, she’s like the Black monkeys. They’re always causing trouble, and I was, like, ‘I’ll break your glasses and shove them down your throat.’ That was the first time I got in trouble...”

Middle School. Joslene stayed at the suburban district through middle school. She said, “I got bullied in fourth grade; fifth grade I was like not this year. Then after that, after that threat...nobody was really mean to me anymore. Well, they were still mean but they weren’t mean directly to me.” In the 7th grade things started to shift for her, as she made some friends and started to feel more comfortable. Joslene became more comfortable and enjoyed opportunities for outdoor activities that she had in the suburb that weren’t in the city. She explained, “We used to have like the barn like ends right across the street from the townhouse so you have the library. Everybody would go out to
the barn, hang out, throw rocks, go fishing cause there was a pond.” She described the school as, “... more formal, it’s just different like it’s smaller.”

**High School.** Joslene’s family moved to back to the city, and she enrolled at her current high school in her urban district. This transition from 9th grade was also challenging. She was more accustomed to school in the suburbs. At her new school she often felt she had to defend herself, and that fighting took her focus away from school. She said, “I failed a class last year due to my trouble, but yeah, I’m pretty good now. I don’t talk to people often. I talk to my friends but now I don’t talk so she in class.” The summer of her 9th grade year Joslene’s parents made her attend summer school. She said, “My parents kicked my butt over summer. I didn’t tell them like my grades were bad until, like, summer school was over, and they were, like, you’re going to summer school. I’m, like, no, I’m not. It’s already over.”

Joslene is proud of her transition to high school. She showed me her grade report on her smartphone app and said, “I have perfect attendance. I’m a B student. Yeah I’m like a straight B student except psychology, I’ve got a C in that.” She also had an A in a directed studies course. Describing her classes, Joslene said, “I like, I love math and I don’t like English and I don’t like, um, I don’t like science because I want to be a lawyer and I don’t understand how it’s going to help me. I feel like I shouldn’t take classes that aren’t going to help me in the future, like I don’t want to be a scientist.” Joslene works in food service at a retirement community and she is a member of the varsity cheerleading team. She is looking forward to college; she and her friends are making plans to go together.
Kaleena’s School Story (18 years, 12th grade)

Kaleena was insightful and thoughtful in our interviews. She described herself, saying, “I’m hard working and responsible. I love to read and write and be creative… I love to play with kids. I would say that I’m just an average student. I get average grades and I work really hard and school is important to me.”

**Family.** Kaleena described her family, saying, “I have a mom and a dad, but they got divorced when I was either 12 or 13, but they handled it a lot better than most parents. They can still talk to each other and go to sporting events and support me and my siblings, which is good. I’m really close to both of them and I have a twin brother and a little sister who I’m really close to.” Kaleena described what it is like being twins in the family: “It’s awesome, we stick together, um, we’re just, I think growing up we spent so much time together that we knew each other really well and we have a lot of the same interests and we’re very similar but also different. We kind of support each other. He’s really good at math so he helps me with math. I’m really good at English so I help him with English. I am really hard working and caring, and he has common sense and we just kind of work better together and do stuff really.”

Kaleena’s family is diverse; her mother is White and her Dad is Black. She described a recent self-examination of her racial identity, sharing, “Most of my life I identified myself as Black or African American, but recently I’ve started identifying myself as also White ’cause I don’t want to not be proud of either side of my family. My mom is White and my dad is Black, so I want to be proud of both of them and I didn’t want to just label myself as one. I want to be seen as both, especially because I am Black, but I also was raised by mom who has European influence on us, so I don’t want people
to just see me as one race, and I do want to associate myself with Black people. I’m proud to be Black. I like a lot of what comes of part of the Black culture, but I’m also proud of being White and what comes with the White culture. Kaleena showed a careful consideration of her racial identity both from a personal perspective and a wider societal perspective. She added, “I just think from experience being able to kind of relate to both sides will help me better than just relating to one.”

**Elementary School.** Kaleena had fond memories of elementary school, as she said, “They had a lot of opportunities for kids. They had a lot of clubs and fairs and, um, a good playground and lot of good teachers, so, um, I mean of course there was a few teachers I had issues with and some drama I was in, but overall I think it was a pretty good elementary school.” She described herself as a shy student, saying, “I used to be super, super shy, and I’ve gotten better at kind of speaking up and not being, not putting so much pressure on myself to talk to people, just kind of letting it go naturally and it’s been a lot better.”

**Middle School.** Kaleena remembered having a lot of diverse experiences with her peers in middle school. She said, “I did have a lot of African-American friends, but I also had a lot of friends who were mixed. I had a friend who was Black, White, Indian, all mixed into one, and I had a friend who was Hispanic, and I had a friend who was Indian and White, and I had White friends and Black friends and friends from all over.” She added, “...the schools I went to we always had people who had a lot of money and people who didn’t, and it was always a wide range, and I think that helps growing up with diversity in wealth and race ‘cause then you don’t see it cause that’s just how it is.”
High School. Kaleena’s family moved from the city she grew up in to a smaller town when she was in the 9th grade. Diverse experiences and people were generally a norm in her family. Her new high school was less diverse, and the school district area was more affluent. It was a challenging transition for her, and she struggled to feel comfortable. Kaleena stated, “… a lot of the people come from wealthier families and a lot of the people are either professors or doctors or, um, they’re from different countries and different—we do have people from different backgrounds, but it’s more people kind of, it’s not clicky, but people that have grown up together hang out with their own group, and they don’t really let new people inside the group.” So she focused her energy on working hard in classes and eventually found social groups aligned with her own interests. Kaleena is a member of her high school’s sustainable agriculture group. Additionally, “I am the co-manager of the student organic farm which is also Grind Club, we just, we named it this year Organic Farm and I’m in the Fiber Club, which is knitting, sewing, crocheting, and needlepoint, and I’m also a student mentor and a student ambassador.” Kaleena has been accepted to college and will begin next year.

Part II: Common Themes

In this section I describe the common themes that emerged from my analysis of the interview data. My goal was to locate the voices of African-American high school girls interviewed within their experiences of academic identity development and to highlight the meaning they expressed relative to these experiences. This study was guided by Black feminist epistemology, which values the experiences of Black women, as a criterion for their meaning. As a racial and gender minority group, the research suggests that Black women’s voices and experiences constitute subjugated or suppressed
knowledge. Black feminist epistemology asserts that scholars investigating the subjugated knowledge of African-American women must be attuned to expressions of their lived experience reflected as two types of knowing: knowledge and wisdom.

As Collins (2009) stated, “Living life as Black women requires wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions has been essential to U.S Black women’s survival” (p. 275). Essentially, Black feminist epistemology reflects Black women’s value of knowing, both as a cognitive process expressing experience and as an internal “understanding” of a lived experience. With this in mind, I paid particular attention to the meaning of the experiences expressed by the 11 girls directly by their words in the interviews as well as by their “energy” or expression in the interviews that articulated a point. The girls in this study shared school and personal experiences that were complicated, yet simple, distinct yet shared. The young women’s stories of their academic identity development expressed an intersectional identity process, meaning that they regarded their experiences of this development to be influenced by the cross-section of race, class, and gender, rather than by the distinctions of these socialized experiences. See Figure 1 for an illustration of the common themes that emerged from the lived experiences of academic identity development.

**Theme 1: Stereotypes in School**

All of the girls shared stories about the pervasiveness of stereotypes in their lived experiences, ranging from in kindergarten to high school. An underlying concern related by the girls was the manner in which such stereotypes caused others to make judgments against them in school. Kaleena (18 years, 12th grade) described feeling judged by her teachers in school. She said:
Well I think just by the color of my skin people automatically start kind of making judgments about me whether that’s good or bad and I think the teachers do too, whether or not they notice and um, so that’s definitely part of I feel like what people see me as.

Ciére (15 years, 10th grade) recalled an early experience with stereotypes and her transition as a new student in elementary school. Her former school was predominantly Black and her new school was predominantly White. She described herself as a shy and quiet student who worked hard “earning straight A’s or A’s and B’s in classes,” but she recalls a difficult transition culturally. Reflecting on her previous school demographic, she stated, “I just fit in better.” She shared two significant experiences that influenced her academic identity development. Ciére vividly recalled a troubling introduction to her new 2nd grade teacher. Prior to her arrival, the teacher received her name as a new transfer student. Ciére shared,

I was seven and when I got here they thought I was a guy and when I transferred schools they thought I was a guy because of my name and ... so I was going to second grade and then I showed up and (the teacher) was like, oh, you’re, you’re a girl.

From Ciére’s perspective, the teacher’s assumption that she was a boy revealed a lack of cultural understanding in terms of African-American cultural and regional naming customs. Ciére seemed hurt by the teacher’s assumption that she was a boy based on her name. She added, “I was like, yes, and I’m Black, let’s just get that out of the way.” Ciére shared a second incident in elementary school, stating,
I remember my fifth grade teacher saying, ‘Do you know that you’re not supposed to rub your skin off when you take a bath?’ I’m like, um, ok, what do you mean? He was, like, ‘You’re supposed to dampen your skin when you take a bath.’ I was, like, ok, what are you saying? ‘Cause like did you mess your skin up?’ I’m, like, no, I’m Black. Did you not go to science? I have a lot of marrow in my bones. I was like this is my pigment color. I was, like, what do you mean? And he just didn’t understand and then eventually he understood, and I’m, like, what are you talking about? And so he was, like, ‘Oh, ok’ and I remember this little girl saying my mom said that Black people are Black because they don’t take baths. I was, like, ‘Well, your mom lied to you, um, ok’, so I remember that. I will always remember that.

When asked how this experience impacted her in terms of her peers, she said:

I had some other friends but I just associated with them in, like, class so it’s, like, I didn’t hang out with them. Because I didn’t know them, I didn’t like to really get to know people. So I didn’t talk.

I also asked her how the experience impacted her as a student to which she replied:

It definitely made me not care about my grades ... I still got good grades because I was good at it, but it made me not want to try. Because it’s like why am I here? I want to go back home. I want to go back to where people like me, where they understand each other so that pulled me down a lot.

Eliza (18 years, 12th grade) recalled an early incident with a classmate, saying:

I think it was the summer I was going into second grade. I did a ... I went to daycare for the school breaks and so there was a White girl who already didn’t
like me and so she picked on me and everything. I didn’t really... it didn’t really faze me much. She didn’t really bother me. Her mom was one of the teachers there, so every time she would do something I would just go tell her mom and she would get in trouble, but one time she spit on me and called me ‘a little nigger.’

Dondria (15 years, 10th grade) shared her perception of stereotypes of Black girls in high school: “That all they do, they don’t pay attention in class, like teen pregnancy, that’s one. They don’t pay attention; they’re always worried about boys and stuff like that. And that’s really not true.”

Eliza (18 years, 12th grade) shared her perspective of stereotypes about African-American girls, saying:

… that we don’t take our education seriously, and I feel like people assume we don’t have life plans like the general scope of African-American women, and I mean I think that people need to see that there are high-achieving African-American women, like one of my best friends graduated a year early last year. Now she’s at Howard on a full scholarship, so I mean, on a full-ride scholarship; so I think that’s what needs to be pointed out and illuminated as opposed to, like, the pregnancy rate and the dropout rate.”

Kaleena (18 years, 12th grade) further explained experiencing stereotypes in the high school classroom:

Um, I do sometimes feel like it’s a stereotype. I had a teacher today tell what, um, an epiphany was, like I didn’t understand what that kind of thing was, and I mean again I don’t know if it’s because of the color of my skin, but you kind of get that question of ‘Are they really treating me differently because the
color of my skin?’ ‘cause they didn’t tell, he didn’t tell people sitting next to me who were White what it meant. He just looked at me and asked me if I knew what it meant and then told me.

She further explained her response to the teacher, saying,

Um, I tried to tell him I was a little throw off by the question, because I wasn’t really prepared to answer something like that and at first I kind of thought he was just teasing with me or something and then I tried to explain it, and he just kind of interrupted me and told me, so it just kind of took me off guard. It always takes you off guard when someone kind of seems to treat you differently ‘cause even though it’s happened before, you don’t really expect it. Um, I kind of struggled with describing it properly. I would, um, cause I know what it means, but just to kind of was on the spot have to describe it and I wasn’t really sure. I was hesitant and feel like it might have made me look bad in his eyes.”

Theme 2: The Weight of Stereotypes

The African-American girls often detailed highly emotional experiences of being negatively stereotyped in school, yet they used a reserved and matter-of-fact tone when speaking about it. I sensed an unspoken weight related to their stories, so I inquired if my presumption was correct. The constant response was ‘yes.’ Gelisa (18 years, 12th grade) said, “definitely”, based on the strength of her assertion. I further inquired if that puts responsibility on the person being stereotyped to always have to disprove it. She stated:

Yeah, it does cause then, I feel like I kind of need to act a certain way or do something to, like, prove that I’m smart or that I’m not one of those stereotypes,
and then really when it just puts more pressure on me, then I just kind of hesitate more and stumble more, and I feel like I don’t really; I maybe make myself look like the stereotype they think I am.

Kaleena (18 years, 12th grade) also recognized the impact of stereotypes on her academic self-expectations, explaining,

*Um, I think I put a lot of pressure on myself to try to do well in school, and, um, make myself look good, and I think that was one of the reasons I struggled with putting so much pressure on myself to get good grades and not really being ok with just basic A’s and B’s and C’s ‘cause I kind of felt like I had to do a certain, do well so that I could get kind of, break past that stereotype people have of me and prove that I’m not just a stereotype.*

The girls were keenly aware of the psychological impact that stereotypes could have on their self-development in school, and they were grateful for opportunities to be treated fairly. Fatima (17 years, 10th grade) expressed a constant sentiment of wanting to “just be myself."

Some girls felt that being one of a few African-American girls in a school helped to lessen the weight of stereotypes. Eliza (18 years, 12th grade) was one of only two African-American girls in her grade. She stated:

*I loved my elementary school experience. I had a lot of fun, made friends, and I feel like I grew more because I wasn’t surrounded by a lot of African-American students because I, when I was younger I was a person that was really influenced by the people that I hung out with. I feel like I wouldn’t have let my own personality develop as much if I would have been*
surrounded by, like, say a group of Black girls because we all would have been doing the same thing in an effort to like keep ourselves together, whereas ... when I grew up with a whole bunch of White girls like I could hang out with any of them really because it didn’t really matter. I could fit in with all of them.

Eliza further elaborated,

Yeah, it helped me to be more versatile as well, like it taught me how I could, like, I could get along with more people and learn how to work with other people, and, like, it also taught me that I can be myself, instead of, like, trying to conform to the stereotype ‘cause I was a gifted and talented student. So, in being that there wasn’t that much diversity at school, I couldn’t see that I was one of a few African Americans in the gifted and talented program.

Ultimately, Eliza felt that her sense of self in school at that time was not greatly influenced by negative stereotypes because the low numbers of African-American students in her school, in her perception, served as an equalizer of opportunities. Additionally, the school was considered affluent, and the general culture of the school was to provide educational opportunities to all students. While school success was generally normalized for students in her elementary school, her reflection offered insight into her awareness that this experience sits in contrast to the norms of greater society, where upon being African American may preclude one’s belief in and ability to be a successful gifted and talented student.
The girls in this study felt misunderstood because their lived experiences in school were in a challenging context embedded in stereotypical norms, yet invisible to many of their white peers and teachers. Assata (17 years, 12th grade) shared her sentiments about being misunderstood in school, stating, “I’m just, like, if you don’t know my life, like not being rude or anything, but, like, you guys make it seem like my life is supposed to be like peaches and cream.” Many of the girls recalled feeling guarded in response to being misunderstood. Ciere (15 years, 10th grade) expressed having “a protective coat.” She shared her insight about being misunderstood in school, when she had moved from what she described as “a normal Black school ... they had nice classes and things we needed” to what she called a “rich”, predominately White elementary school. Ciere stated:

That was hard because they were all different and they were, like, oh my gosh ... I don’t know what to say ... they just thought I was mean and then like they, like, edged away from me. They’re like, ok, who is this person and, like, I was doing the same thing.... I was just shy and they didn’t understand that.

Kaleena (18 years, 12th grade) shared a similar experience:

A lot of people think I look mad a lot of the times ... Yeah, um, I can get mad, but I don’t. That’s not always the state I’m in. I guess I just have that face that since I’m not naturally smiley I guess I kind of look mad, but you could just say I’m just lost in thought. Yeah, and sometimes I think it just became a defense mechanism because I put myself out there to kind of talk to people, and they would shut me down, so then I just started looking mean so that I wouldn’t get hurt. So I’ve been
trying to work on that and not do that anymore and like I said, I think it’s gotten better.

Theme 3: The Old Me Phase

Every participant shared stories with me, as the researcher, explaining how they developed into the students that they are today compared to the student they once were. Brooke (18 years, 12th grade) used the words “... how I was back then” in reference to an old self as compared to a new self in one of her schools. Alluding to the “old me phase”, more than half of the African-American girls described a time in their early and mid-adolescence when they reported involvement in fights and bullying. All of the girls who went through this phase felt that their past bullying behavior stood in contrast to their true self. As Eliza (18 years, 12th grade) indicated, “I just acted different.” Bullying often resulted from their acclimation efforts at trying to fit in at school. The girls spoke of their challenges as they transitioned in school across multiple contexts as revealed by descriptions of their lived experiences.

The following illustrates their common experience with bullying. Brooke (18 years, 12th grade) recalled, “I was just different so I got picked on.” She shared her experience of both sides of bullying:

I was bullied in elementary, but in middle school I kind of thought to myself, “Well, since I got bullied now, I’m going to act like the bad one. You know saying ... people will always make fun of me, now it’s time for me to fight back.” So, through my middle school years I was horrible; I didn’t want to listen, and always got into fights, arguments.

When asked if it was a conscious decision to become a bully, she responded,
Yeah, because that’s what happens when someone bullies you all the time. You just get fed up with it and you just, like, no more. I’m not going to let nobody take advantage of me and think that I’m weak, you know, because that’s not the issue, that’s not the case, you know. So that’s when I started being tough, having my guard up and not letting nobody walk over me, take advantage of me.

The challenge of acclimating to a new environment was also voiced by the girls who moved from predominantly White schools to schools that were more racially mixed. As African-American girls they wanted to have African-American friends, but some realized that their social norms were, at times, more aligned with their White peers. Eliza (18 years, 12th grade) named that time in her school journey as “the trying to fit in phase.” She stated,

*Middle school ... hmmm, that was tough because I went to an elementary school that was predominately White. I spoke proper and I did my best in school and that was just not cool. And so, and that’s when I started hanging out with more African-American students, so they’re like ‘Why do you talk like a White person, and why do you care so much? Why do you do your homework on time?’ Yeah, so it, so I don’t know. I did a lot to fit in and I slacked off in school, didn’t pay attention in class, was talking, sat in the back talking to my friends. I changed my dialect.*

When asked how that shift affected her as a student, Eliza said,

*I was still in advanced classes and stuff, so I mean I stayed up where I was, but when I was around my friends, I acted like I wasn’t as smart, or I didn’t*
know how to speak proper English and ... I was in orchestra all the way through middle school, but when I was with my friends, there was no mention of orchestra because orchestra was not cool, and so, yeah, I just lost a lot of who I was through middle school.

Gelisa (18 years, 12th grade) shared a similar experience. She said, “My Black friends called me an Oreo. I was a White girl trapped in a Black girl’s body, that’s what they called me.” When asked to explain what that meant, she replied, “I don’t know. I listened to country music... I talked proper...” However; she recalled, “… all that went out the window.” She reported, “I started to act sassy in school” in order to fit in with a crowd of Black girls that she wanted to be friends with at the high school.

The feeling of losing oneself to become another self to fit in as a Black girl was commonly expressed. Kaleena (18 years, 12th grade) explained, “I just lost a little bit of who I was...” The girls who reported feeling a loss of self while trying to fit in were also reflective about their motivations and recalled feeling like a follower at that time. Brooke, (17 years, 12th grade) shared, “I think I always had a following-the-leader problem, like if I see one of my friends go to ISS (In School Suspension), it made me want to do something bad so I can go in there with them so we can talk in ISS. I was just, I was a, I don’t want to say a bad kid, but hard headed...”

Theme 4: Making Transitions

All of the girls recalled making a shift in their school journey. When asked to explain motivations for the change, individual circumstances varied, but all of the girls reported a connection with their academics. Their experiences of making a positive transition were self-reflective about negative past behaviors. Ishawna (16 years, 11th
grade) said, “I guess I fell into the gutter because everybody else was doing it, you know?” While listening to these stories I often felt an unstated sense of regret for their loss of self on the part of the girls. In order to better understand, I inquired about their feelings related to those challenging times. All of the girls who felt a loss of self also expressed having regretful sentiments as an internal motivator for change. Dondria (15 years, 10th grade) clearly stated, “I wasn’t the girl I should have been.”

In some cases, the reality of school failure offered a motivation. Dondria shared her transitional insight:

_All of a sudden thought I want to go to college. I don’t want to be that anymore so I cut a lot of my friends off. I don’t want to be a girl that is not good, like my other friends. They don’t have a plan for their self in life. I do. I just keep thinking, you know, if I have children I don’t want them to be in my situation, how I was younger, always having to have my mom fend for me and stuff like. I want to be able to give my children whatever they want but still have them learn._

The girls were also motivated to change by having positive adults in their support system. Eliza (18 years, 12th grade) said,

_My mom is the biggest school advocate in the world. I will always remember this: I had a project due and I had procrastinated and put it off. I’d done a little bit of work here and there, but it wasn’t done and it was due the next day and she stayed up with me until three o’clock in the morning to finish my project so I could have it done on time and … she, she stays on top of my school work. She makes sure I’m doing what I’m supposed to and when I’m_
not she will get on it. She makes sure I have all the help I need, and if she herself can’t help me she, she can find somebody that can. She’s the biggest support I have in school.

The girls also recalled being motivated to change by the reality of facing potential consequences for negative behavior at school. The following explains:

*I was just more kind of like disruptive in class and just kind of bad. I guess the eye opening for school was when they told me I was going to be held back if I didn’t get my grades up. That’s when that kind of woke me up to do better during the school year* (Dondria, 15 years, 10th grade).

Oftentimes, the combination of the reality of not meeting one’s educational goals and increased maturity helped the girls make a positive transition in school. Brooke (18 years, 12th grade) stated,

*As I got older, to me being 18 years old and being a senior now, I kind of grew out of that and you know I’m mature and you know, I just want to be a nurse and just stay out of trouble and just do what I have to do to be successful in life.*

**Theme 5: The Real Me**

All of the girls felt positive about being African-American and identified as a good student. Eliza (18 years, 12th grade) said, “I’m a good student. I respect my elders.”

When I asked her to explain how she sees that connection with school, she stated,

*Some people drop out and all that, so I try my best to finish high school... Sometimes I can have my days where I just don’t want to do work, period, and some days I’ll just do the work the whole class period.*

Fatima (17 years, 10th grade) depicted herself as a student:
I’m respectful. Well, most people think I’m a good student. They come to me for help, ask me for my notes and stuff for class, and I try to help them out in class and out of class, so I try to be a good student in class and out of school. So, yeah, I’m trying to get all my C’s to B’s, like I have two C’s and all, then, like A’s and B’s. I’m doing just really good. I’m trying to become a good person. I want to go to college.”

Regarding her demeanor, Kaleena, (18 years, 12th grade) stated:

I’ve been trying to be aware, like make myself smile, not like a big smile but just kind of make it look, yeah, make it look more like I’m not mad and be aware of how my face looks when I’m at school and stuff, and I think I’ve definitely gotten better at it. But it takes a lot of energy to be aware of that, and it’s like I make myself smile, and I’m not used to it. It’s kind of weird, but also I think it’s been good too. They do say that the more you smile the happier you are. Yeah cause… I don’t want them to think I’m upset.”

The girls were very focused on being successful in school and often referred to the importance of working hard in school. I inquired about motivations for that value.

Dondria (15 years, 10th grade) explained why school was a motivation:

I’m just now getting fully into education and focusing more than ever like education-wise, like I am more focused than ever right now so I can hit my goal ‘cause my, either my junior year or my senior year, I need to graduate. I feel like school has done that for me … that’s helped me become who I am right now because if it wasn’t for like school and stuff that, like, is motivating me to do better, I think I’d still be doing the same thing like there’s people that motivate me
too, to do like do better. But like I feel like school, it’s like a challenge and I kind of want to take it upon myself like to do better for myself.

Ishawna (16 years, 11th grade) claimed, “I do try my best every time but I just want to make it. I just want to get through high school and go to college and just not have to struggle because I’ve seen my mom go through it. And I just don’t want to have to go through any of that.”

The girls were also motivated to do well in school once they realized their strengths. The ability to persevere and learn through tough content in school was a point of pride. Even through tough times at school, Ishawna (16 years, 11th grade) reflected, “I’ve never really hated school, I might hate a subject in school, but I never really hated school even when things were rough.”

She further explained,

*Um, I don’t, I don’t really know. There’s this, I have this thing where, um, if a teacher’s teaching something like I don’t get it, like it just doesn’t come, like I get frustrated ... and I just want to stop, but when I asked you like ... like when I actually want to learn something like I’m going to learn it like I’m going to, no if’s, and’s, or butt’s about it. I’m going to get help. It just don’t work, but I don’t get it. I want to get it. I’m not going to stop until I get it and that’s that’s. That works with life, not just a problem, a math problem but with everything.*

**Theme 6: I Am Strong**

In reflecting about the African-American girls’ experience in school, “strong” was an experiential theme that was constantly present throughout their interviews. These
young women’s expressions of strength were revealed in a variety of ways. Especially, they developed strength in response to a need for self-protection.

Brooke (18 years, 12th grade) stated, “When I think about like Black girls, I think of us just being strong.” She reflected on her middle school experience in this way:

*You know I have to be strong. I have to stand up for myself. I have to prove to people that, hey, I’m not the one, so that’s how. I was nicer before all that stuff started to happen to me. I was more calm or more, you know, cool and stuff, but since that stuff started happening, I’m, like, oh no, like that’s it. I’ve just been through a lot of stuff with a lot of issues, like people would just put me down constantly, and sometimes your brain can only take so much.*

She added,

*It’s all about staying strong. I believe that strength is the most powerful thing ever. That’s what I believe, just strength like you know because it takes strength to climb, you know, a mountain. It takes strength to swim. It takes strength to do everything what you do, you know, but if you are just like weak, then you going to get nothing accomplished, you know, so I always thought that strength, being strong-minded, like not giving up what’s the most important things to be.*

A sense of strong-mindedness was important to all of the young women. Dondria (15 years, 10th grade) explained how using her mind and voice as a weapon is strong:

*I feel like each and every Black girl has their own strengths. Like we don’t all have the same strengths, but we have strengths in different ways, like, each and everybody, like one girl might have strengths in this or that, or my strength is with my voice, like I’m powerful with my voice like if you come, like, at me and think*
I’m not going to come at you with something when someone gets smart with me, I’m not coming at them with something that’s stupid, I’m going to come at you with something that’s intelligent that will make you think about it for a while and be, like, oh, this is what she’s saying. I’m not going to just yell out a whole bunch of cuss words and all that stuff and make myself sound like unintelligent.

Dondria further explained how Black girls should use their strength and why they may not be using it:

When you look at a Black girl and you think, no, she’s dumb, no, she’s really stronger than what she thinks. She’s just not using it, and if she is using it, then you see how strong she is, and I feel like you don’t use Black girls to their advantage. They are way smarter, beautiful inside and out, than what you really think, and if you don’t think that they will dominate someday, you’re wrong because we will.

Dondria also said,

I just think that we should come together. We’re so strong and I don’t think the Black girls here know how strong they are, but I don’t think they know it in their minds how strong they are. I think they’ve always been put down by someone that they’re not strong, they’re stupid. They don’t need to have that type of image.

**Theme 7: Representing African-American Girls in School**

All of the girls interviewed discussed the importance of personally representing successful African Americans in a positive light in school. This sentiment was expressed by Brooke (18 years, 12th grade) when she said, “I think it’s very important to me because I think I stand out more, that the race stands out more. It’s important to me because
that’s how I am as a person, so people would see me how I am. They don’t understand my culture and stuff, so I think it’s really important ...” Dondria (15 years, 10th grade) said, “I love being Black and I love our culture. I love all of it. I just find sometimes that I feel like the Black kids here are so smart and they can be better than what these teachers think they are.” Ishawna (16 years, 11th grade) stated,

Well, it makes me want to go harder every day to be successful because people think that Black people can’t be successful. It just makes me want to push harder and just keep going and never give up ... Um, let’s see ... well, there’s like little things and there’s big... it may be something like when I’m in class and I have this thing where if I don’t think I’m going to be right ... I won’t say the answer, like if my teacher asks a question and I think it might be a chance I’m wrong, I just won’t say the answer because I don’t want to be wrong. When he asks me, asks me a question, and I get it right, it makes me feel good. Makes me feel good especially when I’m in class with a whole bunch of, you know, different people ... Because I got the answer right, and they probably thinking like ‘she can’t get the answer right.’ When they choose me to write up on the board, it just makes me feel good.

The participants also felt that part of their ability to positively represent African-American girls in class stems from their ability to stay focused on their academic goals, regardless of how others treat them. Ishawna (16 years, 12th grade) stated,

When I came to high school, like I still see race like it’s still a part, like, when I’m in class sometimes and I ask for help and another White student asks for help, he’ll go to them first before me. Things like that .... Yeah, like I’ll never for, I, I
don’t know ... I won’t forget like the stuff that happened to me in middle school; it just stays there. And I always think back on it, but it doesn’t really take over my mind, you know?

Gelisa (18 years, 12th grade) shared:

When I meet people I want them to be like, oh, wow she’s really sweet, you know like kind, and she seems very, very respectful and nice and you want people to have a good look on you instead of like, oh, I don’t like her. She has her attitude like you know you want to make sure that you know you stand out in a positive way, like you don’t want people to think that you’re a horrible person. You don’t want them to think that ... oh, wow, Black people are horrible, like you know what I’m saying? Like they like to get to drama, you want to, like, prove, like, to be the leader.

Theme 8: Perceptions of Academic Identity

The girls’ lived experiences that contributed to their academic identity development provided insight into their perceptions of its role in their schooling experiences. The girls indicated a complex understanding of academic identity, essentially expressing its role in relation to how they understand who they are as students and the impact of that understanding on their roles in school.

Gelisa (18 years, 12th grade) expressed the complexities of academic identity, saying,

I think who you are as a student kind of decides what classes you take, what colleges you go to, the kind of the friends you have, so that’s kind of how it’s affected me ... it’s kind of just like being at a level where you feel comfortable in
your grades. I guess it changes when I hear African-American students. I don’t know, it’s just what I see like if there’s a Caucasian and then there’s an African American ... if it comes to a job, you cannot slack in that department ‘cause I feel like they would get it over me ... and that’s just how I see that. I could win ... It’s like I would have to try a lot harder ... and I think it goes back to like how your teachers feel about you and like all this in one and how you carry yourself. I feel like when I’m close to finding out every time I think I know who I am, something surprises me.

Struggling with the notion of self-identity, Ciere (15 years, 10th grade) explained her challenge:

I hate the question ‘Who are you?’ I hate that question so much. I would say how am I and then I explain how I am. I don’t know who I am yet. I didn’t have so much, I have a long life or it’s like, um, if I die young then I, then ok, I guess I’ll know who I was ... I mean you can find out who you are through other people, but it’s still how you are. It’s like, oh, she’s nice but that’s not who you are. It’s like you can be nice, but you can be a completely different person at home, and you can be mean or whatever and then, ugh ... I hate it.

I don’t know because I think you’re going to keep learning who you are and then when something drastic happens, you’re going to act completely different or whatever, and you’re going to have to try to solve it, and you’re going to find out who you really are in true colors, whatever in that situation, but just in that situation and then you will go back or something, I don’t know, or you’ll be changed, so I say I don’t know who I am. I just know how I am.
The girls shared their insight as to what constitutes knowledge, which impacted how they view academic identity. Their reflections often showed a value for learning, gained from various experiences inside and outside of school. Dondria (15 years, 10th grade) shared how she conceptualized differentiating education she derived in school from what she learned outside of school:

*If this makes sense, I guess I have street smarts and education smarts too. Not all education smart yet; I haven’t learned a lot yet. But I know I have a lot of street smarts now because of where I’ve been. I could tell you more about my street, like street years in doing bad than more about education. My street smarts ... I feel like out in the streets, like I know there’s different sides I guess in the hood or where I live... I know which streets to go on. I know which streets not to go on. Sometimes after school I know like during the beginning of the school day like it, it might always happen, there’ll be an argument in the hallway at the beginning of the school day, and I use my street smarts. I’ll guarantee you there’ll be a fight after school from that, and I know exactly where it’s at, so I avoid that spot.*

Dondrias’s acknowledgment of this academically alternative knowledge source felt very thoughtful and introspective. But she further explained her plans to develop school smarts. She expressed a desire to continue growing in terms of school, stating,

*I’m still trying to build up my academical smarts, like school smarts, and, um, each and every day I learn something new in school. There is not a day without being in school I don’t learn something new, and I feel like that’s really good for me, like learning something new every day in school helps*
me build up, like, academically and helps me, like math may not be my favorite subject, but I still go to learn.

When asked to reflect on their academic identity development process, all of the girls shared experiences by using a metaphorical “journey.” That journey included experiences of highs and lows in school, as Dondria stated, “My school experience has been a roller coaster, up and down!” As the young women told their stories, it became clear that the “ups and downs” were caused by a number of factors, but in total, the journey involved change and self-discovery in education.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences and meanings associated with the academic identity development of 11 African-American girls. The girls’ individual stories revealed a depth of experience relative to academic identity development. In total, the young women’s experiences collectively gave voice to the lived experiences of African-American girls in schools engaged in the phenomenon of academic identity development. The results of my data analysis indicated eight common themes: (a) Stereotypes in School, (b) The Weight of Stereotypes, (c) The Old Me Phase, (d) Making Transitions, (e) The Real Me, (f) I Am Strong, (g) Representing African-American Girls in School; and (h) Perceptions of Academic Identity. Table 3 summarizes these themes and interprets the role of each on academic identity development.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences and meanings associated with the academic identity development of 11 African-American girls. Research exploring the school experiences of this population to examine their educational development process is scarce. Much of the focus in education tends to examine racial disparities in academic achievement although, more recently, there has been a greater focus on the gender gap, that is, documenting the within-group trend in higher academic achievement of girls to boys among African-American students. While this is an issue of concern, lesser attention has been paid to the educational experiences of Black girls or the socialized processes inherent in their lived experiences. The comprehensive examination of African-American girls in education may provide implications for understanding their school achievement outcomes (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). This study was intended to address that need by examining the academic identity development of 11 African-American girls from their lived experiences in school and their meaning formation from these experiences. This discussion summarizes the implications for the literature, the strengths and limitations of the study, and the implications for practitioners.

Implications for the Literature

The African-American girls in this study experienced stereotypes in school as a regular occurrence in their lived experiences. As described by Collins (1990), there is a vulnerability that arises as an outgrowth of Black women’s lived experiences that are formed in a society that denigrates them. As such, the standpoint of Black women is often characterized by a “legacy of struggle” against social norms established by racism and
sexism. The hostile environments that assert stereotypes that disparage Black women characterize the oppressive contexts in which they live and learn. Unfortunately, age offers little protection against the legacy of this struggle. The lived experiences of the African-American girls in this research study serve as evidence. Scott, Jones and Clark (1986) explained that the school environment mirrors the values and norms of the greater society that privilege males over females and Whites over non-Whites. In addition to academics, school achievement for non-White students requires them to become competent in navigating stereotypes still held by peers and teachers. Systematic and institutionalized racism in society may manifest in practices that devalue minority groups (Spencer et al., 2001). The findings in this research support the literature examining the school experiences of Black girls. In addition, Black feminist thought helps to expand the literature by positioning Black girls’ school experiences within a greater societal discussion and expanding conceptions of oppression to include the manner in which their school contexts frame their experiences, thus contributing to their academic identity development.

In this research study, the African-American girls’ school experiences were riddled with stories about managing the weight of stereotypes in their school experiences. Black female adolescent maturation often occurs within a context that is hostile and a society that devalues race and gender (Stevens, 2002). Stereotypes are socially constructed and serve to reflect the devalued status and oppression of social groups (Collins, 1990). Therefore, membership in an oppressed group places a value of “lesser than” on that social group. The girls in this study experienced a psychological weight
manifested as an emotional burden developed in response to judgments and biases. Expressions of the emotional burden felt by the girls revealed the outcomes of stereotypes and the devalued status positioning of African-American girls in schools. The findings from this study expand the literature on African-American women’s experience by providing insight into the social-emotional impact of stereotypes on the school experiences of Black girls.

While stereotypes are still prevalent among and perpetrated by certain social groups, including schools, the findings from this study support the notion that Black girls develop a particular sense of self and identity from their experiences of race, gender, and class. Scholars have noted the role of social identity as a construct that positions this intersectional process. Due to the interrelated experiences of multiple social identities, the girls expressed the weight of stereotypes as an internal process that did not diverge from distinct identity categories. The findings from this study revealed that a crucial factor in the African-American girls’ academic identity formation was related to their internalization of stereotypes and feelings of social responsibility. Quite often, the girls in this study felt a social responsibility to disprove the stereotypes they encountered in school, for both their personal and the collective good of African-American girls. On a conscious level, the girls expressed an understanding of injustice in their school experiences as African-American girls. The collective experience of managing the social responsibility of being a Black girl in school contributed to a greater social group consciousness or a knowing about the experiences of Black girls in school. However, these girls were engaged in a constant battle of external and internal will as they also
expressed experiences in school that manifested from a subconscious internalization of racial stereotypes. This finding supports the literature suggesting that African-American youth may enter schools with foundations of positive racial identities that are supported by families, and yet the predominantly White school context that reinforces societal stereotypes can place students at risk for losing that sense of self (Tatum, 2004.)

The internalization of stereotypes reflected an important interaction between the African-American girls’ tangible experiences in school and their innate sense of being. Collins (1990) expressed the interdependence of experience and consciousness as a theme detailing the standpoint of Black women, within which a group consciousness may develop in response to shared lived experiences. Consciousness may play an important role in one’s world view and subsequent behaviors, and, thus, is an important factor in understanding the self comprehensively. In the current study, a group consciousness developed that influenced the girls’ academic identity development. The task of constantly refuting negative messages about African-American girls in school had conscious and subconscious implications for the girls’ own academic identity development.

Judgments and stereotypes expressed by teachers greatly affected the world view of the girls in school and, as such, influenced their academic identity development. The teachers in the schools played a significant role in establishing classroom norms, and as adults hold power over the school context. Adolescents seek mutual recognition, agency, and self-recognition as they engage in identity negation (Stevens, 2002). As noted by the young women’s stories in this research, negative and racial judgments by teachers can
cause students’ disconnection from school in an attempt to protect themselves from negative experiences. The girls in this study noted that they simply wanted to be treated fairly in school and provided the opportunity to be their own authentic selves. Thereby, the girls’ referenced a connection between the challenging realities of their lived group experiences and the relation between their ability to safely engage in full, authentic self-expression as African-American girls. However, self-recognition is challenging for social groups who have been oppressed in society (Collins, 1990). As the lived experiences of African-American women as a group combine to offer a collective consciousness, the struggle for self-definition becomes valued within-group. The girls’ aforementioned desire to be their own authentic selves gave voice to their need to disconnect from negative expectations placed on them by society and to perform self-empowerment by redefining who they are as both individuals and as a social group.

As described by Collins (1990), consciousness and the struggle for a self-defined standpoint is a common theme in the lived experiences of Black women expressing their need to suppress negative assertions about them, and create social constructions of them with an emphasis on a worldview that values their distinct experiences across race and gender. For the girls in this study, self-definition was also interrelated with their actions and behaviors. The girls identified as “good students” and shared stories of peers who dispelled the myth of the underachieving Black student. Several values related to identity and education were shared by the girls as a conceptualization of the meaning encompassed in identification as a “good” student, including showing respect to adults and working hard in school. The girls reported several motivations for a focus on their
success in school, including recognition of education as a tool for personal empowerment. All of the girls expressed a desire to attend college and/or receive advanced professional training post high school. Many of the girls were cross-enrolled in high school and college classes at the local community college or taking college preparatory classes. The girls in this research study saw value in “showing and proving” negative stereotypes about Black girls in school as wrong.

The girls identified significant experiences that contributed to self-conceptions associated with group membership and internal identity, during their formative years. In the early school experiences shared by the participants, many of them reported taking on negative social identities and negative social roles associated with stereotypes of African-American girls, often in an effort to meet perceived social norms of Blackness in school. However, once the girls realized that the meaning of being a Black student resulted from a social process that normalized stereotypes, they reported shifts in their behavior. The interdependence of thought and action is an important theme for expressing the standpoint experiences of Black women (Collins, 1990). The lived experiences contributing to the girls’ academic identity development as revealed in this study point to an interdependence of thought and action along the continuum of cognitive and behavioral developmental domains in adolescence. The participants in this research study began to think more critically about the stereotypes they encountered in school and, as such, changed their behaviors to counteract the normalization of negative stereotypes of Black girls in school. Collins (1990) explained that the positions of oppressed groups are often suppressed because they can provide impetus for resistance. In the current research
study, the girls showed increased resistance to accepting negative stereotypes about African-American girls in school. Thus, the self-reflecting shift in cognitive awareness influenced the perceptual domain related to norms of African-American girls and school, thereby empowering the girls to change their outward behavior. Therefore, the academic identity development of these girls was full of transformative experiences.

The data from this study support research that indicates that the academic identity development process is greatly influenced by the schooling contexts, experiences, and the meaning established within said experiences (Welch & Hodges, 1997). In reflecting on their school experiences, the girls shared stories of learning, transformation, and self-discovery. In all cases, the girls described their academic identity development as a process. This process involved engagement with peers and adults within social systems, developing meaning in those exchanges, and establishing an identity related to the resultant cognitive schemas. Stevens (2002) described the importance of meaning-making actions in the development of the self as captured in negotiation and norms. Negotiation in meaning making indicates that individuals find themselves navigating a social situation, engaging in dialog and thus establishing socially constructed meanings within that space. Social norms then become the representation of socially constructed meanings. Embedded within the girls’ stories in this study were norms that contributed to the development of their academic identity. Experiencing academic identity development as a transformative journey was a normative experience for the girls in this research study. During their individual interviews, the girls reflected on their experiences of academic self-discovery as a collectivity, not as distinct occurrences in their K-12
experiences. This research suggests that literature examining African-American girls’
school experiences collectively offers a more comprehensive picture of their academic
identity development experience.

The girls often referred to the strength of African-American girls in school as a
constant factor in their socialized development. The girls were thoughtful about the
concept of strength, referencing the need for African-American girls to show strength in
the face of developing an academic identity in hostile school contexts. The girls reported
using their minds as a weapon to defend the self against negative social norms and pre-
formed expectations of African-American students. Using the mind as a weapon for these
girls involved working hard in class and dispelling myths about African-American girls.
Strength was also reported in the girls’ sharing of examples of the importance of standing
up for oneself, and essentially in finding one’s voice. In this research, the stories shared
indicate that acting out strength as a social norm within school experiences represented a
resistance strategy established to counter social devaluation across race and gender
“willful, outspoken, independent, spirited behavioral style” as a resistance strategy
serving to offset powerlessness in the face of race/gender stereotypes and contributing to
the development of their self-efficacy. The girls in this research study discussed strength
as an outgrowth of multiple themes. They were able to conceptualize strength as a
cognitive state of being, as a behavior reflected in the classroom, and as a motivator for
future school success. Retrospectively, the girls identified developing strength from
experiences as contributing to a legacy of struggle, developing a consciousness from
struggle, transitioning their thinking about the contexts, meaning, and experiences contributing to struggle, and making a self-determined decisions to align their behavior in school with their true self.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

**Limitations**

The first limitation to this research study was the recruitment criteria for participating in the study. The participants had to be African-American girls in grades 10 to 12; ages 15 to 18. These criteria were established in hopes of securing a pool of participants who were mentally and emotionally mature and able to articulate their academic identity development experiences. However, expanding the criteria to include 9th graders may have contributed to the richness of the data. Secondly, the study was limited by the small sample of African-American girls, 10th to 12th grade (N=11). All of the participants except one were recruited from an urban high school in the Midwest. Therefore, the majority of the participants may have shared lived experiences in the high school, thereby making the data more context dependent. The limited number of participants in this research study does not support generalization of the phenomenon. Thirdly, the recruitment process may be considered a limitation. The researcher was not the initial point of contact for recruitment. The school study liaison served as the initial contact for the research study. Additionally, the use of a purposeful sample may have biased the study. Lastly, only one researcher conducted this study. Coding of the data may have been strengthened with multiple researchers examining them for themes and
developing interpretations. The validity of the findings may have been enhanced as common themes emerged across researchers’ analyses.

**Strengths**

The first strength of this study was the representation of within-group diversity. The participants in the study represented a range of familial and class structures. The diversity among the participants’ backgrounds assisted with asserting their lived experience of academic identity development across considerations of race, class, and gender. Secondly, this research centered on the voices of African-American girls in education. The data represented the lived experiences of the participants as expressed by them. Rather than speak “about” the participants, the data provided a voice “of” the participants. Lastly, this research study established meaning within the context of the school experiences of African-American girls. The meaning of the girls’ experiences contributes to a greater understanding of their academic identity development as a process.

**Implications for Practitioners**

Positive Youth Development offers a framework for researchers to incorporate identity, culture, and context in developmental processes in efforts to increase positive youth outcomes. The identity formation process for African Americans involves making meaning of socially constructed meanings of one’s status as a member of a minority group.

“As part of the life course of African Americans, identity involves appraising or assessing one’s social status as a minority group member and making meaning of this
social information” (Swanson et al., 2002, p.75). The Five C’s of Positive Youth Development reflect a combination of psychological, behavioral, and environmental factors attributed to contexts supportive of positive developmental outcomes in youth. The five C’s are (a) Caring: a sense of empathy for others, (b) Character: a sense of right or wrong, (c) Competence: a positive view of one’s actions in specific areas, (d) Confidence: internal self-worth and efficacy, and (e) Connection: positive bonds with people and institutions (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009).

The findings from this study indicate the girls’ awareness of an interrelationship between the norms and expectations within the school context and their lived experiences which contribute to their academic identity development. The African-American girls shared stories reflecting challenges they faced in school while battling stereotypes and judgments. The experiences of academic identity development shared by the African-American girls in this study indicated a greater need for the 5 C’s of Positive Youth Development as a means to protect the girls from challenges they faced in school. Caring relationships with adults in the schools would serve to support the positive development of African-American girls and help to facilitate their positive connections. The girls were conscious about the need for support from the teachers and adults in their schools. Dondria (15 years, 10th grade) stated, “I told (Mom and Grandma) it’s not just a Black/White thing. We just need teachers who care. We need teachers to connect with all students.” Schools and youth serving institutions must take conscious steps to encourage caring relationships between adults and youth. As adults attempt to make connections with African-American girls, they must also be attuned to the pervasiveness of
stereotypes in the learning context and the possible impact that may have on their relationships with these young women. As stated by the girls in this study, the most important factor for building relationships across divides, including age cohorts, race, class, and gender, is a sense of caring and the effort put forth to build positive connections.

Additionally, the school offers an essential site for developing confidence in school by increasing competence and the mastery of academic skills as a student. The girls in this study identified an interrelationship between their own potential for success as students and access to competent teachers who can create opportunities for all students to access education. Joslene (16 years, 10th grade) stated, “How I’m taught influences me more than who teaches me.” The girls desired opportunities to build a mastery of academic skills and thus feel better prepared for the future. Eliza (18 years, 12th grade) shared lessons she’s learned about her own learning style, “I am a mixture between a visual and auditory learner, so, like, I can hear you saying it, I can hear you giving a lecture. I can interpret everything you tell me, but then I need something to connect it with visually in order to keep the knowledge.” This response indicated Eliza’s reflective self-knowledge regarding her own learning needs in school and the impact of that reflection on her actions as a student. The interdependence of thought and action is an important dimension of Black feminist thought, suggesting that changes in thinking may occur with changes in action and impact consciousness (Collins, 1990).

Student perceptions of the school climate are positively associated with student achievement (Barile et al., 2012). The African-American girls in this study expressed the
need to feel safe as an indication of a positive school climate. Assata (18 years, 12th grade) shared this need:

*I know, um, in middle school we always had this person called a safe person, so it could be any teacher, like you’d be in 6th grade talking to an 8th grade teacher or vice versa, like that’s just whenever you got like angry or sad, if you wanted to go talk to your safe person that your teacher would call and let them know that you’d come down and then you’d go down and talk to your safe person, but at my time like I just felt like nobody really understood but only one teacher... He’s still here. I still go to him today if I need anything.*

Establishing safe spaces and relationships for the African-American girls in this study contributed to their positive perceptions of safety and the character of the school. The girls perceived their teachers’ efforts as reflecting good character and serving as protection against hostility in school. Educational practitioners seeking to further develop youth contexts in the promotion of positive academic identity development of youth in general and African-American girls more certainly may benefit from seeking more direct insight into their learning needs by building opportunities to engage with youth and further seeking their perspectives. The findings from this study may be used to further understand how practitioners can develop healthy contexts supportive of the positive academic identity development of African-American girls.

The Five C’s of Positive Youth Development may offer a framework for supporting the academic identity development of African-American girls in schools. The five C’s may be used to provide defining characteristics that may be used to evaluate the
goals and outcomes of youth programs as well as a standardized language (Lerner, 2004). The Positive Youth Development theory suggests that the collective nature of its empowering principles supports a strengths-based framework of youth development (Lerner, 2004). The Five C’s may be used with the findings of this study in support of establishing characteristics for the school environment at the teacher and peer levels of student interaction. The lived experiences of African-American girls in schools, as shown in this study, indicate a greater need for caring teachers and peer relationships that would establish kindness as a normal experience in school. The girls in this study shared the experience of character within the school context as indicated by safety established by adults. Peers may also promote safety in school by taking a stand against harmful behaviors and refusing to engage in bullying. Teachers may show professional interest in increased competence by attending cultural diversity training. Students may also increase their cultural awareness by making intentional efforts to engage in genuine conversations with diverse peers. Teachers may build confidence in African-American girls as students by establishing high expectations for all students and creating learning environments to meet diverse learner needs. Peers may help to develop confidence by supporting one another’s personal efforts for educational success with encouragement. Teachers may increase their connections with African-American girls in school by developing relationships with students and their families to increase positive support systems. Peers may expand their connections by building friendships with diverse peers and identifying common bonds across cultures. See Table 4 for Positive Youth Development Teacher Practice Suggestions.
Conclusion

As the researcher in this study, it is my hope that the voices of the participants in it are heard. The findings indicated a need for more research to explore the educational realities of our schooling contexts for African-American girls. The girls in this study experienced many challenges in school for coming to terms with their academic identity as African-American girls.

The findings indicated a need to establish safe, non-hostile school contexts in support of positive experiences that would contribute to the academic identity development of African-American girls. The girls in this study showed great strength and resiliency in the face of adversity, but my analysis of the interview data also indicated that they experienced a social-emotional weight, particularly addressing ongoing racial stereotypes, with potential consequences for their academic identity.

While conducting this research study, I sensed that my interviews were the first time that the participants had an opportunity to engage in discussion about their lived experiences in the school setting as related to their cultural identity. I asked several of the girls about their resources and positive outlets at school for examining issues related to their academic identity development. Fatima (17 years, 10th grade) said that she has some supportive adults at school that she talks to and added, “We need more things like this,” referencing the discussion in our interviews. The girls in this study were aware of their needs in school, but educators must face the challenge of better addressing the needs of African-American girls in order to promote their positive academic identity development.
REFERENCES


Figure 1. Themes of Academic Identity Development Derived from the Study
Table 1: Descriptive Information on the 11 Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Age in years</th>
<th>Parents/# of Siblings</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Activities/Job</th>
<th>College/Career Prep</th>
<th>Future Plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assata</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Mom/2</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Cheerleading</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Volleyball, Basketball, Swimming, Drill team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooke</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mom/1</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Retail job</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Phlebotomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciere</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Mom &amp; Stepdad/9</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Dance, Singing, Music, Drama</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dondria</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Mom/4</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Drill team, School dance team, NAACP, Church, Sorority, cotillion, Sorority girls group, Choir group, Track, Job in retail</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mom/1</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Drill team, School dance team, NAACP, Church, Sorority, cotillion, Sorority girls group, Choir group, Track, Job in retail</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Mom &amp; Stepdad/4</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Track, Job in retail</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gelisa</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mom &amp; Dad/4</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Wrestling manager, Cheerleader, Waitress</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>College-accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Mom &amp; Dad/3</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Trying out for drill team</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Cosmetology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishawna</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Mom/1</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Basketball, Cheerleading, Job at retirement facility</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joslene</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Mom/2</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2: Interpretive Phenomenological Data Analysis Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis Step</th>
<th>Associated Action</th>
<th>Meaning Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Immersion in data</td>
<td>Reading transcripts of original data&lt;br&gt;Becoming embedded in the life story of the participant</td>
<td>Record what strikes me as most significant, including thoughts and feelings associated with interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Initial noting</td>
<td>Re-reading data&lt;br&gt;Identifying preliminary themes&lt;br&gt;Ensuring familiarity with the data</td>
<td>Recording meaning based on how the phenomenon is explained, with special attention to how the data relays processes, relationships, values or other items noted of importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Developing emergent themes</td>
<td>Examining provisional notes across data for emergent themes&lt;br&gt;Emergent themes are developed in a cyclical process engaging notes with data&lt;br&gt;Developing understanding of what is important across interview data of each participant</td>
<td>Emergent themes are reflective of the participant’s original thoughts and words as well as the researcher’s interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes</td>
<td>Looking for connections&lt;br&gt;Examining themes in chronological list form&lt;br&gt;Noting relationships between themes</td>
<td>Themes represent patterns in data across participant interviews addressing research questions, meaning and interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5: Moving to the next case</td>
<td>Moving on to the next participant case (series of 3 interviews)&lt;br&gt;Allowing for emergent themes to develop within new cases&lt;br&gt;Continuing this process with each</td>
<td>Identifying the essence of meaning and key factors of the phenomenon in detail as an individual case of a participant (across the 3 interview series)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases</td>
<td>Making connections across participant interviews as cases&lt;br&gt;Identifying the emergence of new themes</td>
<td>New themes emerge and represent a greater collectivity of meaning and interpretation across cases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Summary of the Themes on Academic Identity Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Experiences</th>
<th>Meanings</th>
<th>Role in Academic Identity Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypes in School</td>
<td>Stereotypes were experienced in various forms; teachers made culturally insensitive remarks about skin and names; White peers used racial pejoratives. Negative stereotypes of African-American students led to lower expectations from teachers. Experiences with stereotypes were common among K-12 school experiences.</td>
<td>Conflicted feelings develop about school. Girls valued grades and school, yet experiencing stereotypes in school left them feeling disconnected from teachers and lessened internal drive to connect in associated classes. In response, the girls desired supportive school environments. Early elementary school experiences with stereotypes remained significant memories from high school.</td>
<td>Stereotypes were established, a constant factor in the school experiences of the African-American girls. Negative stereotypes of African-American girls became a normal part of the academic identity development experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Weight of Stereotypes</td>
<td>Girls experienced internal weight or pressure to disprove stereotypes. This weight was often unspoken, but revealed as a motivating factor for working hard in school.</td>
<td>Disproving stereotypes often meant balancing a responsibility to educate others while engaging in personal self-development. Opportunities for fair treatment, feeling understood and fitting in were valued. The weight was associated more in the school environments with greater populations of African American girls.</td>
<td>The weight of stereotypes was associated with the experiences of the African-American girls in school. The girls’ individual academic identity development became infused with a socially greater responsibility to refute stereotypes. The responsibility of representing an entire social group became infused in their academic identity development.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 3 continued**

| **The Old Me Phase** | The girls reflected on a time in school when they were not the student that they are today. As students in the minority at school, fighting and bullying were experienced because they were different. The girls also engaged in bullying behavior in response to past experiences of being bullied. Negative stereotypes about African-American students perpetuated the experience of difference among both African-American and White peers. Fitting in with those groups of African-American peers meant conforming behavior to match negative stereotypes of African-Americans. | Negative feelings about experiences in school contributed to negative behaviors. It was important to the girls that these experiences were acknowledged as representations of a former self in school. The experience of difference was perpetuated by White peers’ acceptance and African-American peers’ internalization of negative stereotypes about African-American students. Girls who changed their behavior to fit in also felt a loss of self. | This phase in life held emotional significance in reflection about current academic identity. The girls reflected on past experiences with fights and bullying as a time that did not reveal their true self. Their experiences were reflective of a time when the girls were measuring a desire for social connections with the internal cost of self-awareness and academic success. The dual process of rejecting negative stereotypes of African-American girls in school among White and Black peer groups becomes central to their academic identity development. |
| **Making Transitions** | The girls made positive transformations in school. Experiences constituting motivations for change included: reflection on personal role within education, potential to attend college, and accessing greater life resources. Experiencing parental support and developing personal maturity were also important factors. | Positive transformations were a source of pride. The girls felt regretful about engaging in previous behaviors that they did not think reflected their true self. Each experience motivating external behavioral change was promoted by an internal shift in thinking and awareness. | Internalization of meaning behind motivations for change was essential. The act and/or decision to make positive changes in school noted a shift in awareness of personal self in contrast to and/or connection with previously learned norms. Academic identity development involved a process of critical reflection of self within social groups. |
| **The Real Me** | The girls felt positive about being African-American students and identified as good students. They showed they were good students by working hard, showing respect to adults, showing positive attitudes toward peers, and persevering through challenges in class. | Positive feelings about the self in school played an important role in positive engagement with school. Behaviors were reflective of the girls’ opportunities in school to show their true selves. Behaviors stood in contrast to negative stereotypes and helped the girls to bring transformative shifts in thinking to reality in school. | The girls established their own personal norms of African-American girls in school and challenged negative social norms. Academic identity development involved an independent revealing of the self in school as “good” and as such, consciously or not, challenged social norms assumptions of the “bad” African-American student. |
| **I Am Strong** | The girls experienced ‘strong’ as a response to a need for protection in their school experiences. The girls learned the value of mental strong-mindedness in response to experiences with bullying. Strong-mindedness was revealed as an internal tool for defeating negative stereotypes about African-American girls’ lack of intelligence. | The girls’ sense of strength reflected pride in their ability to persevere through schooling challenges. Additionally, the need for protection in school reflected feelings about the hostility African-American girls faced in their school environments. Mental strong-mindedness was used as a tool to deflect negative messages. ‘Strong’ was internalized as a state of being capable and successful. | ‘Strong’ represented African-American girls’ school experiences that were associated with a collective struggle to beat the odds and a personal struggle to internalize. Mental strength became important to academic identity development to overcome challenges associated with intelligence as a reflection of one’s educational capacity. Mental strong-mindedness was a representation of intelligence and, therefore, stood in opposition to stereotypes. |
Table 3 continued

| Representing African American Girls in School | The girls are aware of their differences and believe others may not understand them culturally. Showing African American girls in a positive light were important to the girls. In class, the girls were certain about the answers to questions before answering. They did not want people to associate African-American girls in school with drama or bad attitudes, so they worked to show leadership and respect even when faced with occasions of bias in classes. | Being different makes experiences in school standout more. Answering questions correctly and representing oneself as a respectful student in class even when faced with bias made the girls feel good about their behaviors in school. The girls worked to build positive representations, which meant ignoring bias and any tendency to internalize negative stereotypes. The girls felt a sense of pride when they showed themselves as capable students in class because it stood in opposition to stereotypes and aligned with positive cultural norms of school. | Representing African-American girls in class was an academic and social experience. The girls learned that a great deal of successful representation in school was measured by their ability to present a positive attitude, show respect to teachers, and to be likeable. Academic identity became a systematic process. The girls made conscientious decisions about engagement in school. They worked to build representations of self in class positively related to academic intelligence. |

| | | | |
Table 3 continued

| Perceptions of Academic Identity | The girls shared their perceptions of academic identity as complex and related to a number of important experiences in school, including classes students enroll in, colleges students attend, friends students choose, and how comfortable students feel with their grades. Beyond the classroom, academic identity is noted as particularly importance for the African-American girls in terms of employment prospects. Academic identity involves developing a collective sense of self including academic knowledge and life experience knowledge. The girls experience academic transition as they grow and develop a greater sense of self; they want the opportunity to continue to learn. | The girls perceived a complex relationship between academic identity, school experiences, school outcomes and how one feels about their grades. Having a strong academic identity is important in terms of seeking employment because African-Americans may face additional challenges when seeking jobs due to institutional bias. It is important to gain knowledge from classes in school and from life experiences so that they may be used in total for successful life outcomes. The girls are self-aware and value opportunities to continue to fully develop a sense of self. | Academic identity development should be understood as multifaceted and transactional in the schooling and life experiences of African-American girls. Academic identity development involves processing the meaning of experiences, often expressed as feelings and emotions occurring in social exchanges within significant contexts. The African-American girls recognize that their academic identity development in adolescence has the potential to impact their adult outcomes. The academic identity development of African-American girls includes their desire to continue comprehensive learning, in school and life before they fully assert a sense of self. |
Table 4: Positive Youth Development Teacher Practice Suggestions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5C’s of PYD</th>
<th>Suggestions for Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Caring** | • Teachers talk with African-American girls and learn about their experiences  
              • Peers make kindness a social norm and provide supportive networks |
| **Character** | • Teachers ensure the classroom is a physically and emotionally safe space  
                 • Peers refuse to engage in harmful behaviors and take a stand if others do |
| **Competence** | • Teachers attend cultural diversity training and show interest in learning about cultures  
                   • Peers engage in genuine conversations with peers from different cultures with the intention of learning |
| **Confidence** | • Teachers set the same successful outcomes in class for all students  
                     • Peers encourage and support classmates to seek success in school |
| **Connection** | • Teachers build positive relationships with families to increase adult support system  
                   • Peers develop diversity among friends to increase cross-cultural bonds |
APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Date: 8/27/2013
To: Aisha White
51B LeBaron Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

IRB ID: 13-220

To: Dr. Brenda Lohman
2330 Palmer, Suite 6230

Title: The Academic Identity Development of African-American Girls

IRB Approval Date: 8/26/2013
Date for Continuing Review: 8/19/2016

Approval Date: 8/26/2013
Date for Continuing Review: 8/19/2016
Submission Type: New
Review Type: Full Committee

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holder of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.
APPENDIX B: FLYER ADVERTISING STUDY

Research Flyer: Academic Identity Development of African-American girls

Research Participants Needed

Purpose: To study the experiences of African-American girls in school and explore how girls develop identity

Eligibility: African-American female
Grades 10-12
Willing to participate in interviews and a focus group (4 total sessions)

Compensation: $10 Walmart gift card per interview/focus group discussion

Participation: If you are interested in participating in this study and/or have questions please see (insert administrator’s name) in the (insert office).
APPENDIX C: SURVEY OF PARTICIPATION FORM

Participation Form: Academic Identity Development of African-American Girls

If you would like to participate in this research study and/or have further questions please complete this form. You will be contacted about participation in this study soon.

(Please print)

Today's Date: ____________

Student Information:

Name: ________________________

Phone number _________________ (please circle one) This is a cell/home number.

Email: ________________________

Parent/Guardian Information:

Name: ________________________

Phone Number: _______________ (please circle one) This is a cell/home number.

Email: ________________________

Thank you for your interest,

Aisha White (Researcher)

Researcher Info:

Aisha White
Doctoral Candidate
Iowa State University
Department of Human Development & Family Studies
51 B Lebaron
Email: atwhite@iastate.edu
APPENDIX D: PHONE SCRIPT

Phone Script

Once potential participants return the Participation Form (which contains the parent/student contact information) I will contact their parents via phone.

Good morning/afternoon/evening, May I speak with (parent name)__________?

If the potential responded answers:

This is Aisha White. I am a doctoral student at Iowa State University working on a study about African American girls and academic identity. I have spoken with administrators at your daughter’s school about my study and placed flyers around the school inviting students to participate in the study. If students are interested in participating they fill out a Participation Form with their contact information so that I may explain the study further to students and parents. Your daughter returned the Participation Form indicating her interest. I would like to explain the study to you and answer any questions you may have.

After explaining the study purpose and process I will ask:

Would you like to give permission for your daughter to participate in this study?

If the person says yes:

You must provide your signed consent for participation. Once I receive it I will begin to schedule our first meeting in the fall semester according to your schedule. I can provide the Informed Consent form to you. Can we schedule a time to meet based on your availability? At that time you can sign the document.

If the person says no, I will thank them for their time and hang up.

If someone other than the parent answers, I will ask for the parent. I won’t say anything about the study or personal information to protect the confidentiality of the potential participant/parent.

If the person is not home:

Do you know when he/she will return home? Ok, thanks I’ll call her later.
APPENDIX E: CONSENT/ASSENT FORMS

INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Study: The Academic Identity Development of African-American Girls

Investigators: Aisha White and Brenda Lohman

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to learn about the many factors impacting how African-American girls develop a sense of identity in terms of education. This study will provide young girls the opportunity to share their experiences related to education and give youth the chance to have their voice heard concerning their perspectives about learning and development.

This study will be conducted by Aisha White, Ph.D. candidate and researcher. Ms. White is a graduate student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State University. She is also a former school social worker and has had 10 years of experience working with youth and families.

Inclusion Criteria
(1) Participants must self-identify as African-American female;
(2) Participants must be in grades 10-12;
(3) Participants must be willing and available to participate in audio recorded interviews and a focus group; and
(4) Participants must be willing to articulate experiences related to their schooling and identity development.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

Participants will be asked to take part in 3 individual interviews and 1 focus group. Each participant will be interviewed by the researcher about their perceptions of school and educational experiences. During the first interview, the researcher will get to know who the participants are and gather background information about their schooling experiences. The second interview is intended to be a follow-up interview, to further discuss the details of the participant’s experiences and to address any gaps missed in the initial interview. The third interview is to discuss what the experiences shared in the first two interviews mean to the participant. Each interview will allow the participant to share information about different phases of their academic experiences and to follow-up on any missed information from the previous interview. The interviews are estimated to last an hour and a half each.

After the interviews are done, participants will be invited to take part in a focus group. During the focus group participants will be asked about their perspectives as a group. They will be able to share their similarities and differences in school. Along with answering questions, participants will be offered art supplies (paper, markers, etc...) in case they would like to use art as a creative expression when addressing questions related to the topic of discussion.
INFORMED CONSENT & ASSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: The Academic Identity Development of African-American Girls

Investigators: Aisha White and Brenda Lohman

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to learn about the many factors impacting how African-American girls develop a sense of identity in terms of education. This study will provide young girls the opportunity to share their experiences related to education and give youth the chance to have their voice heard concerning their perspectives about learning and development.

This study will be conducted by Aisha White, Ph.D. candidate and researcher. Ms. White is a graduate student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State University. She is also a former school social worker and has had 10 years of experience working with youth and families.

Inclusion Criteria
(1) Participants must self-identify as African-American female;
(2) Participants must be in grades 10-12;
(3) Participants must be willing and available to participate in audio recorded interviews and a focus group; and
(4) Participants must be willing to articulate experiences related to their schooling and identity development.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

Participants will be asked to take part in 3 individual interviews and 1 focus group. Each participant will be interviewed by the researcher about their perceptions of school and educational experiences. During the first interview, the researcher will get to know who the participants are and gather background information about their schooling experiences. The second interview is intended to be a follow-up interview, to further discuss the details of the participant's experiences and to address any gaps missed in the initial interview. The third interview is to discuss what the experiences shared in the first two interviews mean to the participant. Each interview will allow the participant to share information about different phases of their academic experiences and to follow-up on any missed information from the previous interview. The interviews are estimated to last an hour and a half each.

After the interviews are done, participants will be invited to take part in a focus group. During the focus group participants will be asked about their perspectives as a group. They will be able to share their similarities and differences in school. Along with answering questions, participants will be offered art supplies (paper, markers, etc...) in case they would like to use art as a creative expression when addressing questions related to the topic of discussion.
APPENDIX F: IRB MODIFICATIONS

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Date: 11/15/2013
To: Aisha White
51B LeBaron Hall

CC: Dr. Brenda Lohman
2330 Palmer, Suite 6230

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: The Academic Identity Development of African-American Girls

IRB ID: 13-220

Approval Date: 11/15/2013
Date for Continuing Review: 8/19/2015
Submission Type: Modification
Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.
APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview 1: Focused Life History

Demographic Information
1. How would you describe yourself?
2. What grade are you in?
3. Where are you originally from?
4. How old are you?
5. How do you identify racially?
6. Tell me about your family. How would you describe them?
7. Do you have siblings?
8. How would you describe the role you play in your family?
9. Tell me about your neighborhood.

Research Context
1. How long have you been attending this school?
2. How would you describe this school?
3. Tell me about your experiences in school from kindergarten to now.
4. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities?
5. Do you work outside of school?

Research Questions
1. How would you define academic identity?
2. How do you see yourself as a student?
3. Do you think about your identity in school?
4. How does your identity impact you in school?
5. What/who has most influenced how you see yourself as a student?
6. What is your perception of yourself as a student?
7. Do you feel very well connected to high school?
8. What sort of relationship with school would you say that you have?
9. How do you see yourself as a student in comparison to your peers?
10. What do you feel your strengths are?

Additional questions will be determined on the basis of responses

Interview 2: The Details of Experience
1. Explain the details of your average school day.
2. What is your earliest memory in school?
3. What is one of your most memorable experiences in school?
4. What experiences have you had that influenced how you see yourself as a student?
5. How have your experiences in school changed across elementary, middle and high school?
6. Do you feel race and gender influence your experiences in school?
7. What is your best class in school? Tell me about it.
8. What class challenges you the most in school? Tell me about it.
9. Tell me about the opportunities you have had to show your strengths in school.
10. In our previous interview you mentioned______________, tell me more about that. What made __________important?

Additional questions will be determined on the basis of responses

**Interview 3: Reflection on Meaning**

1. How do you feel about being a high school student? What does it mean to you?
2. What most impacts your feelings about being a high school student?
3. How does the memory of your school experiences impact how you see yourself as a student?
4. What does it mean to be a high school student?
5. What does the concept of scholarship mean to you?
6. How have your previous experiences influenced how you understand scholarship?
7. When you look back on your school experiences, what have you learned?
8. What lessons will you take with you into your future?
9. What are your future plans after high school?
10. In our previous interview you mentioned______________, tell me more about that. What made __________important?

Additional questions will be determined on the basis of responses
## APPENDIX H: EXAMPLE OF DATA ANALYSIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
<th>Selected Exploratory Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiences</strong></td>
<td>Past experiences in school were troubling. She often was the outcast and now is proud to have found her voice. She may come across as guarded but it’s clear that any external anger is a shield for possible hurts. Her reflection got emotional at times but she is proud to notice her own personal progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disconnected feeling from teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of understanding of my reality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was bullied</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was a nerd</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was small</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your brain can only take so much</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve always been different</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>I was bullied</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your brain can only take so much</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve always been different</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had to start speaking up for myself so I wouldn’t get bullied</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was a follower</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learned to ask questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m a good student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was quiet, shy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help other students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help my siblings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming a good person in school means attending class, following the rules</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizes negative examples of students in school when discusses situation with friend being kicked out of school stating, “I don’t want to be that.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>