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Understanding Multiple Perspectives of African American Males in a Suburban High School

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UNDERSTANDING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN

AMERICAN MALES IN A SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL

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Ravi Hansra Matrenec

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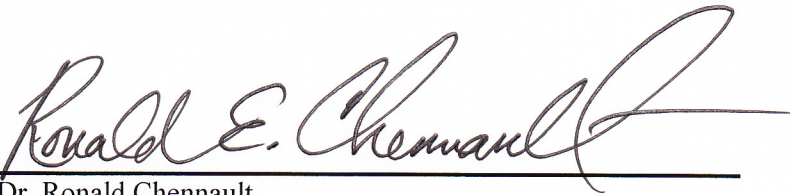
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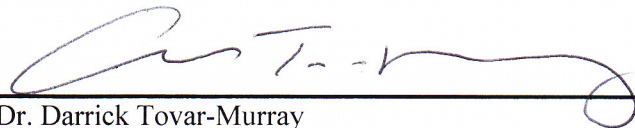
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ABSTRACT

Research on African American males in high school often looks at their experiences from a deficit perspective, and is often conducted in low resourced, high-risk settings, thus perpetuating the image of failure in school. We know less about how African American males experience education in well-resourced schools. In an attempt to fill this research gap, this qualitative inquiry study explores the schooling experiences of African American males at a predominantly White, affluent, and suburban high school of a major metropolitan city. The focus of this study was to understand how the participants made sense of their schooling experiences, paying special attention to the sorts of obstacles and challenges they face, as well as the sorts of supports they encounter. Furthermore, it sought to understand how the participants coped in positive and negative ways with the challenges they faced, as well as how they transcend adversity and demonstrate resilience.

The stories of the 15 participants illustrated how they made sense of high school during the tumultuous time of adolescence. This study included participants who had moved to the Sunnyside community as well as those who had lived in the community their entire lives. The data from three focus groups and five in-depth interviews revealed three main themes: stereotyping and racism, influential people, and the process of identity development, with stereotyping and racism as the most salient

theme. The results from their stories suggest that although they may face similar challenges, and although they are exposed to similar supports as in less well off schools, they navigate and experience school in very different ways, based on the length of time in this particular high school and community. The study concludes by using Spencer's (1997) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) as a lens to influence future practice. In short, PVEST is used to explore the relationships between risks and unproductive coping outcomes, protective factors and productive coping outcomes, and perhaps most importantly, productive coping outcomes in the face of significant risks (resilience). The findings suggest that future practice should include building stronger relationships between African American male students and school staff. Strong, authentic relationships can help to bridge the gap between unfair teacher presumptions that emerged in the findings, and student reality. With a better understanding of one another, more appropriate and authentic support can be given, thus hopefully leading to more positive coping outcomes.

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We must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness. (Delpit, 2006, p. 297).

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Jeremy, a tall, African American male, shaped much like a middle-linebacker, walked confidently into my 5th hour Speech Communications classroom at Sunnyside High. He immediately captured my attention with his outgoing personality and charismatic smile. When the students and I introduced ourselves to the class, I learned that Jeremy came to our school from a nearby, highly diverse, suburban school. Prior to that, he attended elementary and middle school in an urban setting. Immediately, we developed a mentoring relationship where he really knew that I was concerned for his well-being in and outside of school. We talked a lot about what he wanted to do when he left high school, how he was going to get there, and his ability to stay. Although Jeremy was very bright academically, he was often caught in or around a number of scuffles within the school.

One year, I was concerned with one scuffle in particular, leading to my intervention. After speaking with a few students who were present at the scuffle, I learned that a fight broke out in the cafeteria with some of Jeremy's friends. Although Jeremy was not involved in the fight, he stood in the periphery, watching the fight, as did other students. Soon after, a dean arrived, attempting to dismantle the scuffle and discipline the appropriate students. However, as the dean approached, she saw Jeremy standing among the other students. In front of his peers, the dean asked Jeremy what happened and who was involved in the fight. Just as Jeremy refused to tell her, as calling out his friends would have equaled social suicide, the dean proceeded to march Jeremy

down to her office to discipline him. This forthcoming punishment would be his third out-of-school suspension, which typically meant expulsion.

Regarding the dean's disciplinary action, I am still unclear as to how and why she deemed Jeremy's behavior deviant. Even after speaking with her, I am only clear on the fact that she thought she did the right thing and stuck by her punishment. I, however, thought expulsion on these terms was too harsh, and immediately sought out the principal to discuss the matter. Upon consideration from the principal, Jeremy served a suspension for five days, and was then able to return to school. Unfortunately, two weeks after he returned to school, a White student referred to Jeremy in a racially derogatory manner, resulting in a fight. This time, Jeremy was expelled. His fellow combatant was disciplined in school.

Understanding African American Male Perspectives

African American student populations within affluent, predominantly White, suburban high schools is a phenomenon that is on the rise in many metropolitan areas. In this study, I would like to gain a clearer understanding of how African American males perceive their schooling experiences, how their stories reflect their perceptions of success, and how they transcend adversity (potentially demonstrating resilience) within their school. Among these experiences, I seek to understand how they make sense of obstacles and challenges in school, how and what they perceive to be supports and supportive, and ultimately how they cope, both positively and negatively, with these challenges.

Revealing their stories will help our teachers, administration, and students to better understand the perspectives of African American male students, thus enabling them with information necessary to provide more appropriate supports for them in schools. Furthermore, this research seeks to shed light on the voices of African American male students in the school setting in hopes of enlightening and empowering all stakeholders within school communities to advocate for change where needed within the school. I have specifically narrowed my study to focus on African American males because of the overall dismal outlook that has been addressed in research ad nauseam, and often from a deficit perspective. Furthermore, I find it disheartening that in what Hawkins (1999) calls the "land of milk and honey", the outlook is so dismal for African American males (p. 108). Hawkins (1999) acknowledges that "in spite of the wealth and the abundance of resources it brings, African American youngsters struggle in the suburbs. And without question, Black males struggle much harder than do black females" (pp. 108-109). Exposing young African American males' voices seems to fill a gap in research that cannot continue to be ignored.

The following sections will address my positionality within a high school, Sunnyside High School, in an affluent, predominantly White, upper-middle class suburb of a major metropolitan city. It will reveal my entry into the problem described above, addressing from where my practical prior knowledge regarding African American males in affluent, predominantly White, suburban settings has come.

Sunnyside High: Past

The summer was once again over, and a new year beginning in the fall of 1993. I was a nervous adolescent, entering into a new life stage of high school, leaving behind what I thought were my immature days of middle school. It was with great curiosity that I entered through the doors of Sunnyside High School as a student. As the school years progressed, I always felt uneasiness in the pit of my stomach that somehow signified that I did not belong. Although I identified with my Indian-American culture at home and outside of school, I had trouble holding on to that identity at Sunnyside High. I often felt disconnected when learning the curriculum, particularly in my English classes which most troubled me as I felt English was the subject matter where inclusion of other races and ethnicities would have been the easiest. I also felt disconnected from the student body as well as the staff because nobody shared my same race or ethnicity, nor did they seem to have any exposure to other races, ethnicities, or cultures. However, despite my feelings of disconnection, I still maintained a core group of friends, was able to earn A's and B's in my coursework, and make a name for myself in athletics, namely volleyball. In retrospect, volleyball was really how I invested in Sunnyside High, though I didn't think about it in that way at the time.

In part, my feelings of disconnection were due to the homogeneous school culture, which, in my opinion, resulted in successful academia for the majority of the White students. This makes some sense: White teachers and administrators were teaching White students who came from similar background, experiences, race, socioeconomic status, and cultural norms as themselves. I, however, did not generally share these commonalities with my teachers or peers, and I was well aware of the

stereotypes that followed my brown skin, particularly that of the "model minority", hence the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Sunnyside High: Present

Five years after attending Sunnyside High School, I found myself passing through those same doors once again, only this time I was more mature, more confident, and a bit older. I now possessed a strong self-concept as well as a strong sense of self and identity, something virtually absent in my student days. This time, as an adult, I was there to interview for a teaching position in the English department.

I remember walking through the hallways elated at the sight of more people of color within the student body. I thought, "What an amazing experience for students of color to have other peers of the same ethnicity to relate to." Moreover, these students could potentially have me as a teacher. I really felt that I could help to advocate for young people and bring their voices out or serve as a soundboard for those who needed it. My Indian American ethnicity contributed to my experiences as a middle class person of color. I was well aware of the identity struggles that people of color may face while living in a community and attending a school that is predominantly White and affluent. Although I was seeking a position to be a teacher, I knew that I wanted to take on much more. While I needed to be sensitive to the needs of *all* of my students, I was particularly conscious of the issues potentially problematic for students of color.

After being accepted into a teaching position, I learned that even though the student body had grown a little more diverse, the racial make-up of the staff had not at all. I was one of two teachers of color in the building, and a year later, the only one. In

retrospect, I acknowledge that in the recent years, I have grown attuned to this issue and have really noticed a shift in our school culture, particularly among our African American students. The disconnect that I felt was becoming visible and seemed to impact my African American students a bit more than other students of color, and was apparent within the school culture as well as with the students. For example, I witnessed African American students venting frustration about targeted racism from teachers in the form of unfair and unwarranted discipline. African American students exhibited acts of lashing out verbally and sometimes physically generally as a result of others' ignorance. They also spoke of unfair disciplinary action like detention and suspension on the part of deans as a result of misunderstanding. Overall, they expressed a feeling that there was a lack of communication and understanding among students, teachers, administrators, deans, and staff.

Trends

My experiences at Sunnyside High as a student and teacher regarding teacher and student demographics relate to larger trends and statistics in suburban neighborhoods of major metropolitan cities. In U.S. schools, there are now growing populations of students who are identified as African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and Hispanic (Howard, 1999). According to Banks (1995), students of color will make up about 48% of the student population nationwide. In schools, Ladson-Billings (2002) contributes, "while the k-12 student population is becoming increasingly diverse, the prospective teaching population is becoming increasingly monocultural, that is, white, middle class, and monolingual English" (p. 4).

At Sunnyside High School in particular, the teachers all shared similar backgrounds with their White students. However, these schools with a predominantly White administration and staff are looking much more diversified these days in terms of their student body (Cooley, Shen, & Wegenke, 2003; Howard, 1999).

Nationally changing populations

Predictions that show the rising percentage of students of color in suburban settings, however, do not mention anything regarding the

Nationally changing populations. Predictions that show the rising percentage of students of color in suburban settings, however, do not mention anything regarding the communities from which they came. It is important to consider gentrification and segregation when thinking about changing student populations in suburban areas. For example, an African American person who has moved voluntarily from an urban or urban-like community to an affluent, suburban community may have very different feelings and experiences regarding acceptance and belonging than one who was forced out of their neighborhood and placed into another, particularly when that community has definite boundaries of race, class, and culture. Furthermore, in many of these suburbs, African American families are simply not welcome (Stuart, 2002) or equipped with the cultural capital to develop networks and connections "that might enable them to transcend their differences in pursuit of common interests" (Noguera, 2003, p. 37). This can serve to be highly problematic when making an urban to suburban transition. The lack of connectedness, often due to segregated communities, is noteworthy.

According to the 2000 Census data, "racial and ethnic segregation persists across the nation. We have not yet overcome the divisions of the color line, but are in the midst of a struggle in which the inequities of the past continue to reproduce themselves" (Stuart, 2002, p. 1). As part of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, Stuart (2002), in his study regarding racial and ethnic segregation found that:

- African American/White…segregation persists across…metropolitan area[s].
- 67% of all African Americans living in an incorporated suburb would have to move to a different suburb to achieve integration with White suburbanites.
- The home buying patterns of African Americans…show that the situation likely only to get worse. [They] are buying homes segregated from Whites.
- The people most likely to suffer the consequences of segregation are children:
  - To create integrated African American/White suburban school districts, 68% of all African American children would have to move to a different school district to be integrated with White suburban children. (p. ii).

Changing populations in the Sunnyside community

Noguera's (2003) notion of the upper-middle class living side by side with a lower class is what has appeared to be happening in the area surrounding Sunnyside High School. It is important, however, to note that most of the research that has been conducted looks at gentrifying urban areas and the race/class conflict. These urban areas are ones which used to be low income communities. However, as they are often nearer to urban redevelopment and new professional job opportunities, they have become more and more desirable in terms of location, resulting in affluent residents taking over these communities (Betancur, 2002). What isn't addressed well in prior research to this point are the effects of this gentrification on the individuals and families displaced or on the communities to which they move.

One of these areas which have received voluntary and involuntary African American residents is the area in which Sunnyside High School is located. Due to the

cost of residences in this area, displaced urban residents in particular are placed in very specific parts of the suburban community. In the areas feeding into Sunnyside High, there are very distinct parts of town where inexpensive, subsidized housing developments exist among the $500,000 to million dollar homes. Not only can race and class single out people living in the apartments as those areas are perceived by the larger White community as being occupied by people of color, those areas are often termed the "bad parts" or the more "troubled" areas of the community by the surrounding residents.

The district

Sunnyside High School is a part of a medium-sized district in a suburb of a major metropolitan city. Between the 2000 and the 2004 report card, the number of African American students has grown in the district from 2.3% to 3.3%. However, the number of African American teachers has declined from 1.5% to .9% (Diversity Plan Quarterly Report, 2006).

Narrowing from the district level to Sunnyside High School in particular, the school cited in their 2005 report card that approximately 3,000 students were enrolled, and spent approximately $9,000 per pupil. The racial make-up of the school consisted of 83% White, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2.9% African American, 1.9% Hispanic, .2% Native American, and 0% Multi-racial/Ethnic students.

Now that an understanding of school demographics has been discussed, the following sections will focus on information I have anecdotally gathered while working at Sunnyside High School. This is important as it inevitably affects how I come to know and understand the school, the students, the staff, and the problem.

Teacher/student disconnect

At Sunnyside High students of color have expressed to me their feelings that teachers do not understand them, therefore having significant trouble finding success within the school culture. A number of students have expressed a feeling of hopelessness; that no matter how hard they try, their teachers just don't understand them or give them a chance. I can remember one African American student in particular express his story of a time when he was sitting with his African American friends in PE class. His friends as well as others in the class were taking their shoes off and getting ready to tumble on the gymnastics mats. In the midst of their preparation, the teacher approached only the African American students and told them to hurry up, commenting that "you guys are always late!" Instead of lashing out at the teacher, as we had discussed conflict resolution during the previous week, the student chose to speak with the teacher about his issues in a non-hostile manner, focusing on problem-solving. According to the student, the teacher proceeded to yell. The student later expressed a feeling that his words were falling on deaf ears. He used words like "what's the use? They don't want to hear us."

Future research focusing on understanding the schooling experiences of African American, adolescent, males in predominantly White, affluent settings is necessary and important work (Noguera, 2008; Russell, 1995). Anecdotally, African American students have been largely categorized by teachers within suburban, affluent schools and districts across the United States as associated with disciplinary issues, low test scores, poor

attendance, low academic achievement, and overrepresentation within special education, particularly behavioral disorder programs.

These categorizations exist in a setting with norms, values, and beliefs consistent with White, middle class America.[1] The ideologies that make up the "school rules" often go unchallenged, resulting in stereotyping, prejudice, and miscommunication. Aronowitz and Giroux (1986) speak about students' reactions to these school rules, indicating that when students are faced with oppressive school settings, they may choose to actively participate in the school by engaging in oppositional tendencies and behaviors. That is to say, students don't always merely comply to school rules; in some cases, they resist (Giroux, 2001). However, this resistance is not necessarily seen by school personnel as a reaction to unfair hegemonic processes embedded within the schooling system. Instead, it is often interpreted as behaviors that do not follow the school rules and are thus deviant. For example, according to Aronowitz and Giroux (1986), "students may violate school rules, but the logic that informs such behavior may be rooted in forms of ideological hegemony such as racism and sexism" (p. 100). When notions of hegemony are not considered, the result can be a silencing of oppressed student voices, particularly African American males. This serves as just one example of why research that aims to expose the voices of the African American males in a school where they have for so long been misunderstood, ignored, and at times silenced is necessary. Secondly, research that aims to bring perspective to all stakeholders can prove invaluable, dispelling

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[1] These categorizations are problematic as they are deficit in nature and can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies if particular groups are characterized in this light. However, these categorizations signal to us important inequities that enable us to do work to increase equity in schools.

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preconceived notions about what they *think* the experiences of African American males are and come to value the realities of these adolescent males.

Teacher and hall monitor perspectives

To better understand the school setting, I found it important to learn about the views of the teachers and hall monitors. Not part of this study, but through informal discussions in school and out of school with both teachers and hall monitors, I have learned that a shared perspective is that largely, our African American population does not make it to class on time nor perform to their abilities in class. The hall monitors, in particular, claimed that the only issue that they have with our African American students is their social nature after the bell has rung, resulting in their tardiness.

Via informal conversations inside and outside of school, I have learned that many teachers have expressed their experiences of hearing vulgar language, vulgar dancing, loudness, and tardiness among our African American students. During those conversations, neither teachers nor hall monitors expressed any issues regarding a cultural disconnect, unfair policies within the school, or racism within the school, nor did they offer up any solutions outside of better policing and stricter rules. My overall impression is that both teachers and hall monitors perceive that African American students frequently misbehave, and therefore frequently get into trouble with deans. I view this as highly problematic as behavior termed deviant can be rooted in age old ideologies perpetuated within the hegemonic processes of the school. Majors (2003) reports that "teachers often label or view a Black child who demonstrates certain culture-specific behaviors as 'having an attitude problem' or even as being 'arrogant' rather than

characterizing the child as one who has pride, confidence, and a positive sense of self-esteem and cultural identity (p. 2). A possible explanation for this may be what Driver (1988) calls "Cultural Dissonance", where White teachers do not understand the cultures of Black children and therefore misinterpret their behavior "and impose sanctions more frequently or more harshly on [B]lack children" (cited in Majors, 2003, p. 28). It seems that sometimes staff within the school are so immersed in their micro level of school, including but not limited to curriculum prescribed by the department or district, that they fail to question or challenge what may affect the macro level.

This relates directly to Lisa Delpit's (2006) notion that "we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness" (p. 297). What a powerful notion when applied to education! However, understanding that human nature does not long for vulnerability, the question then remains: How can we convince the leaders in our school culture to open up to vulnerability so that dialogue regarding culture, race, respect, identity, success, power, the privileged, diversity, etc. can begin?

The vulnerability that Lisa Delpit (2006) speaks of needs to occur within the school, particularly among teachers, to promote meaningful dialogue. If not, will there continuously be a disconnect between the way teachers perceive their African American students and the way they interact with those within the school? Could there be a disconnect between the way teachers perceive students' culture? Are teachers as well as building staff afraid of this vulnerability? These questions need to be boldly and deliberately asked and addressed with building staff. We are sometimes so immersed in

following rules and guidelines that we rarely challenge from where the rules and guidelines came.

African Americans at Sunnyside High

Despite the influx of students of color in affluent, suburban settings, various races and ethnicities of students still make up minority populations in many suburban high schools in major cities. At Sunnyside High, an increase of African American students have come from urban schools into this affluent neighborhood, consisting of few people of color. The faces of the teachers are not changing, nor are the curriculum or the school culture. The more traditional styles of teaching, and the standard curriculum are generally not culturally relevant and are not inclusive of diverse populations (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994). According to Ladson-Billings (2001), teachers "work hard at things that fail to serve the interests of students and families of color or families who live in poverty[,]…often [working] hard at reproducing the same kinds of teachers they have for decades" (p. 6). I subscribe to Ladson-Billings' (2002) proposal of culturally relevant pedagogy which focuses on cultural competence, academic achievement, and sociopolitical consciousness in schooling. This effort may help students of color to feel more connected to the classroom, school, and curriculum while also validating their own cultural identity and self worth.

Student perspectives

Through informal conversations and group discussions with our African American students, they have revealed a number of challenges experienced daily within

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the school. One recurring concern was that they felt other students and teachers did not understand them. They felt as though preconceived notions about African American people and what they stand for are misperceived resulting in a racial profiling of sorts, particularly with the hall monitors. Many expressed a feeling of disengagement in class but did not specify why they felt that way. Further, they also articulated that opportunities among African American students and others relating to belonging to the school were not equitable. When asked if they speak with their teachers about their concerns, they said no because they didn't feel as though they would listen or even understand. There is a clear disconnect for students at this school.

Connection to Jeremy and future action

Looking at the circumstances surrounding Jeremy's expulsion, I was disturbed at the thought of this happening not only to him, but to other students in the school as well. My concern led to action by discussing with our administrative team strategies for meeting the needs of our African American students. In our school, which far exceeds state standards, are we paying attention to this small population of students? Are we aware of their needs? Do they have as much of a voice in the school as our White population exercised? If so, are they being heard by administration and teachers? And most importantly, are we taking steps toward understanding the realities of our African American population in the school?

Although I knew I would be fighting in an uphill battle, I walked into the administrative room armed with a strong grasp of my reality in one hand and courage in the other. As a non-tenured teacher, I was attempting to walk into a room of

administrative elders who at the moment thought that our school is a well oiled machine producing bright young adults each year. Considering the number of National Merit Scholars, high scoring test takers, and a nearly perfect graduation rate, what could they possibly be doing wrong?

The resistance with which I was faced was passive in that I was listened to and considered with little to no feedback from the group. My saving grace was my principal who believed in my thoughts and admired my courage. He was willing to address the needs of the students as that seemed to be a more immediate need. I would have pursued the dean's disciplinary action, but I had to make a personal decision regarding where I felt I could impact the situation the most. In future meetings, my principal and I discussed the ease with which we recognize the problematic issues within our school which takes time and effort to address. I always left with a sense of responsibility to drive toward a course of action.

Thoughts to action: African American Discussion Group

In the spring of 2006, my principal and I started an African American Discussion Group (AADG). Initially, the group would meet about once a week to listen and discuss questions, problems, and concerns that they were facing at school. I found this necessary because "many so called 'effective' schools operate in a 'colorblind' manner which assumes that all students have the same needs and are affected by the same issues" (cited in Majors, 2003, p 31). But the reality is that this isn't true for many of our students. One of the key components to establishing this group was establishing a commitment to

really listening to our students and understanding them from their positionality. It took about a semester for me to begin to really understand where our kids were coming from.

In the following fall semester, I began creating a curriculum that would help address some of the concerns of our students which were communicated in our spring meetings, the previous school year. The curriculum was created to increase pride in their own identity, awareness of their own culture and those around them, awareness of power dynamics which exist in our society, and to provide them with the tools to create a foundation for advocating for change within their school culture and society as a whole. My primary focus was to foster and advocate for a strong self concept and identity within my African American students. I am a firm believer that a strong self concept and identity, when cultivated and validated by the school, may lead to resiliency in any environment with which one may be faced. I also realize that various components such as, staff development, community, family, and mentoring are also important areas that need addressing. Pieces of these areas are presently being tackled by other leaders in our school. For the purposes of the student-led discussion group, I could only tackle once piece at a time, given my limited time with my students.[2]

Although the AADG will not be the focus of my study, it has definitely inspired my research. Each session, I gained perspective and a better understanding of where my students are coming from. They helped me to understand where they feel the problems in

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[2] The AADG existed for a year and a half as a pilot. The principal and I decided to discontinue meetings after a year and a half because I was taking a partial leave from the school. We decided that it would be better to responsibly discontinue meetings until I come back rather than having sporadic meetings, which we felt would cause more harm than good.

the school lay. Further, they help me to understand where they have come from and the struggles they have faced along the way. For example, I was aware prior to the meetings that one student in particular was often late to his first hour class. It was only after meeting in the AADG that I understood that he was always late because he had to drop his sister off at school before getting himself to school, resulting in his tardiness. How many of his teachers were aware of his responsibility? Did they ask? Did he communicate that to the teachers? The AADG has provided me with the communication and perspective, which are keys to allowing us to be emotionally intelligent, empathetic, and responsible adults.

Research Questions

This study was designed to explore the following research questions:

1. How do African American male students make sense of their schooling experiences at Sunnyside High School?

    a. What sorts of obstacles are present in the school setting?

    b. What sorts of supports are in place to help overcome those obstacles and challenges?

    c. How do African American males cope (positively or negatively) with these challenges?

2. How do the stories told by African American male students reflect their perceptions of success?

3. How do African American males transcend adversity in school?

    a. How do they demonstrate resilience?

The next chapter is a review of literature. It acknowledges and evaluates the existing literature around African American males in high school. Then, Chapter 3: Methodology, lays out the research design for this study, and presents the methods used to collect data. Chapter 4: presents the findings of this study. Chapter 5: Discussion, offers an analysis of the findings based on coding thematic categorization of the data. Chapter 6: Implications, uses Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) as a tool for future practice. Lastly, Chapter 7: Conclusion, summarizes the answers to the research questions, and provides some closing comments regarding this research study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In high schools throughout the nation, each student comes to school with their own cultures, backgrounds, and experiences that shape their identities. Students may share the same age, race, class, gender, ethnicity, among other characteristics; but it is their particular experiences as well as their responses to risks and stresses within their environment that help them to interpret these settings in different ways, creating individual identities. Understanding student identification and perception within particular settings are of strong significance in life as well as in research. Attention to individual students' experiences can provide a deeper understanding as to how students develop and navigate their specific settings.

When people with privilege and power in the school setting (i.e. teachers, administrators, deans, campus supervisors, etc.) fail to value the experiences of students, they often unfairly group individuals together, resulting in unfair generalizations, judgments, stereotypes, and opinions that can be largely untrue. Ultimately, those with privilege and power are often unable to effectively communicate with students, and are less likely to empathize, and more likely to build larger and stronger boundaries between one another; thus, the ultimate goal of student empowerment and change can never take place.

Often facing those generalizations, judgments, stereotypes, and false opinions are African American[3] males. It is not uncommon for research studies focusing on African American males to begin by setting the stage for their dismal state in society and schools today. In fact, this research study does the same. This information is important to acknowledge as it reflects the macro-level issues as perceived by the larger society and reported by researchers. However, it is equally important to consider these dismal statistics with a critical lens as they are often reported from a deficit view.

Previous research and statistics suggest that African American males generally have an inordinate amount of risks and challenges in their lives. Noguera (2008) would support this claim, adding that the important quality-of-life indicators demonstrate that African American males are in trouble.

> They lead the nation in homicides, as both victims and perpetrators (Earls, 1994; Skolnick & Currie, 1994), and in what observers regard as an alarming trend, they now have the fastest-growing rate for suicide (National Research Council, 1989; Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). For the past several years, Black males have been contracting HIV and AIDS at a faster rate than any other segment of the population (Auerbach, Krimgold, & Lefkowitz, 2000; Centers for Disease Control, 1988; Kaplan, Johnson, Bailey, & Simon, 1987), and their incarceration, conviction, and arrest rates have been at the top of the charts in most states for some time (Roper, 1991; Skolnick & Currie, 1994). Even as babies, Black males have the highest probability of dying in the first year of life (Auerbach, et al., 2000; National Research Council, 1989), and as they grow older, they face the unfortunate reality of being the only group in the United States experiencing a decline in life expectancy (Spivak, Prothrow-Stith, & Hausman, 1988). In the labor market, they are the least likely to be hired and, in many cities, the most likely to be unemployed (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Hacker, 1992; Massey & Denton, 1993; Moss & Tilly, 1993; Wilson, 1987).
>
> (Noguera, 2008, p. 17).

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[3] The racial identity categories of African American and Black are used interchangeably to refer to individuals of African ancestry. Black may also be used to include individuals who are perceived to be Black or African American (e.g. African, Jamaican, multi-racial) and who currently live in the United States) (Middleton, Coleman, & Lewis, 2006, p. 162).

Furthermore, research regarding African Americans in U.S. schools reports a dismal state as well. For example, taking a look at Table 1 from the U.S. Department of Education (Schott Foundation, 2008b), one can see that Black students experience suspension rates at 179% higher than White students, expulsion rates 171% higher than White students, and are 70-74% less likely to enroll in an AP Mathematics or AP Science class.[4]

Table 1. U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights: Projected Values for the Nation, 2004

	Black (non-Hispanic)		White (non-Hispanic)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Membership	4,128,695	8.58	14,502,371	30.13
Suspension-Out of School	784,917	23.93	988,669	30.14
Total Expulsion	25,940	24.42	33,668	31.70
Mental Retardation	127,513	19.68	197,775	30.53
Gifted and Talented	124,573	3.89	1,103,694	34.46
AP Mathematics	11,311	2.66	153,601	36.16
AP Science	11,927	2.82	141,429	33.47

Source: Schott Foundation (2008). "The Schott 50 State Report Black Male Data Portal: National Summary." 2008, from http://blackboysreport.org/node/15.

The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males (Schott Foundation, 2008a), reports similar findings for African American males and graduation rates:

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[4] Statistics such as these can be used to perpetuate a deficit perspective as they measure one group against another group in a way that assumes the referent group is the norm without taking into account the structural reasons for inequity. I am using these statistics here, however, to give the reader a glimpse of how African Americans are characterized in some of the research.

- More than half of Black males did not receive diplomas with their cohort in 2005/2006

- The state of New York has 3 of the 10 districts with the lowest graduation rates for Black males.

- The one million Black male students enrolled in New York, Florida, and Georgia public schools are twice as likely not to graduate with their class as to do so.

- Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, South Carolina, and Wisconsin graduated fewer Black males with their peer group than the national average.

- Nevada and Florida graduated less than a third of their Black male students on schedule.

- Illinois and Wisconsin have nearly 40-point gaps between how effectively they educate their Black and White non-Hispanic male students.

(Schott Foundation, 2008a, p. 2)

Prior research on African Americans generally and males in particular, is vast and predominantly negative in terms of academic achievement and discipline in predominantly urban settings (Monroe, 2006; Roderick, 2003). Much of this research was and continues to be collected in urban settings where poverty, crime, gangs, drugs, and violence are the norm (Noguera, 2008). Furthermore, African American males are often studied through a deficit lens, resulting in a shortsighted view on the individuals' lives as resiliencies are not considered (Spencer, 2001). These research studies are largely used to understand a particular group of individuals (i.e. African American males) in a particular setting (i.e. urban). However, dangerous misconceptions can result if they are then used to identify and explain the experiences of all African American males. Understanding the setting, exposure to as well as perception of risks and protective factors, engagement with stresses in a particular setting, and an understanding of

students' perceptions of their own identity are imperative if the ultimate goal of the research is to unveil accurate, authentic experiences, empower students, and advocate for change where necessary within particular settings.

This review of literature focuses on two specific concepts researchers, teachers, and all stakeholders must consider prior to attempting to understand African American, male adolescents in predominantly affluent, White schools: setting, and identity development. I argue that African American male voices must be accurately exposed and understood not just for validation, but to provide counter narratives to the existing institutional norms and ideologies within schools today. I remain hopeful that the counter-narratives will recursively lead to a positive change in the schooling experiences of African American, adolescent males.

I begin with a focus on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory to set the foundation and framework for understanding African American males within the microsystem of schooling. Bronfenbrenner equips the reader with a common language by which to understand the information that follows. Second, school as a setting is unpacked. The decision to focus on setting is grounded in the assumption that one must understand the setting in which the student operates in order to make sense of their schooling experiences. The third part focuses on identity development in the life-stage of adolescence. This section values the assumption that a student's experiences in school are interconnected with their identity development. A significant portion of the identity section focuses on race, as race is inevitably interconnected with African American male identity development. Lastly, I offer Spencer's (1997) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) as a tool for future practice in schools..

Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

In hopes of understanding the schooling experiences of African American males, I find it important to view individuals, "in Sartre's (1946/1965) words, as 'first of all beings in a situation' such that if one wants to understand them, one 'must inquire first into the situation surrounding [them]' (p.60)" (as cited in Steele, 1997, p. 613). As a result, I will use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) to ground the language which I will be using. EST is an approach to the study of human development, which focuses on the interconnectedness of various systems present in an individual's environment. Figure 1 graphically depicts Bronfenbrenner's EST model. At the center of the model is the individual. The second ring, depicting the *microsystem* is a "pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.22). It focuses on the interaction between the individual and their social and physical environment (Spencer et al., 2006). Further, the microsystem includes settings with which the individual has direct, first hand contact (e.g., family, neighborhood, and school, and people in those settings).

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory
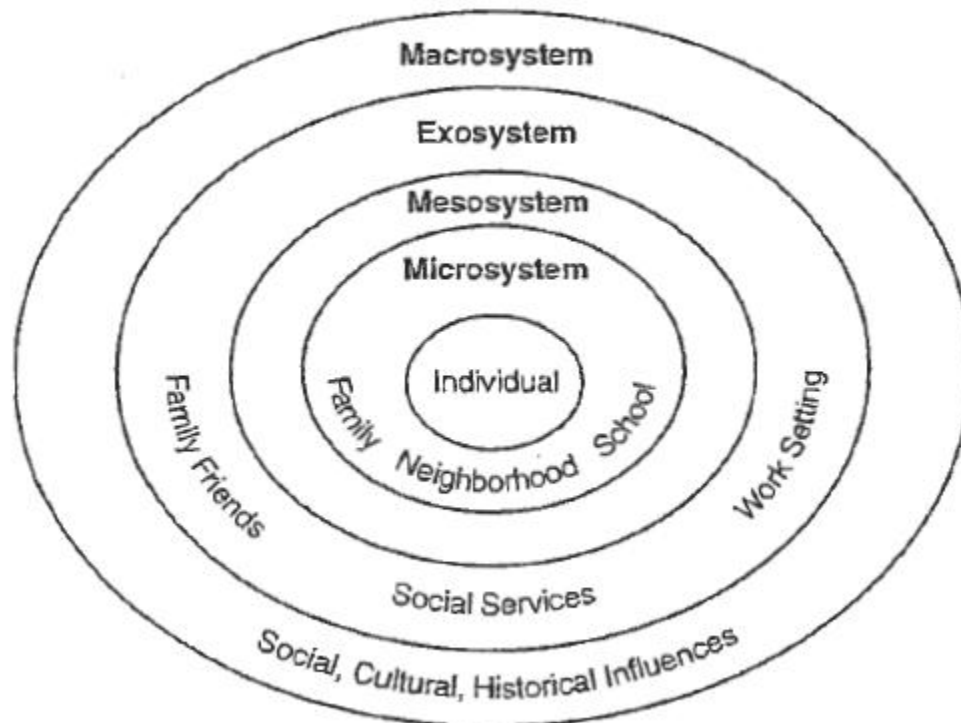
Source: Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

The *mesosystem* depicts the interconnectedness between two or more microsystems with which the individual actively participates (e.g., the interrelations between a child's home, school, and social life). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), a mesosystem is merely "a system of microsystems" (p. 25).

The *exosystem* represents the settings that an individual may never enter. These are settings where events may occur that impact the happenings in the individual's immediate environment (e.g., a mother's work setting because the child will not necessarily ever enter this setting; however, it impacts the development of that child).

Lastly, the *macrosystem* represents the generalized patterns of ideology and organization of social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture. For

example, this includes larger societal institutions such as the government, the media, and the economy, which influence the social, cultural, and historical aspects of an individual.

It is also necessary to mention *ecological transition*, as it "occurs whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of change in role, setting, or both" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). This definition is important as EST is a model applicable to one's lifespan, which will inevitably include transitions. Transitions are worthy of acknowledgement as they inevitably impact the individual. For example, a child experiencing a newly born sibling for the first time, parents divorcing, parent remarrying, death, illness, job changes, buying a car—all of these examples serve as "a consequence and an instigator of developmental processes" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 27).

The entire EST model represents an individual's environment. Within their environment, they interact directly and indirectly with a number of different settings. In this literature review, I will use the term *environment* to describe the complexity and interconnectedness of an individual's systems. The term setting will refer specifically to certain domains present in the individual's microsystem. The *setting* to which I most often refer is school. However, I recognize the complexity and importance involved in understanding the interconnectedness of all system's influence on the development of an individual.

School Setting

The structural norms students face everyday within school settings are also important to consider when exploring the experiences of African American males. Spencer, Fegley,

Harpalani, and Seaton (2004) refer to the concept of context in the same way that

Bronfenbrenner (1979) refers to the concept of setting. In this literature review, I will

refer to the terms setting as depicting "both immediate and situational influences across

various contexts of development, such as school, family, and neighborhood, and the

larger societal influences including political decisions and media messages that are

filtered through the more proximal venues" (Spencer, et al., 2004, p. 230). Students'

everyday experiences are influenced in part by how they exist within this setting. For

example, in suburban, affluent schools in the suburbs of Chicago, it is not uncommon to

see predominantly White students being taught by predominantly White teachers. These

circumstances are a part of the school setting that form the realities of all students.

In many high schools located in suburbs of metropolitan areas, teachers not only

share a common race with their students, but often have had similar experiences in

similar settings (i.e. they have grown up in the same or similar neighborhoods, been

afforded similar privileges, and have come from similar socio-economic backgrounds).

However, these often predominantly White schools are looking much more diversified

these days in terms of their student body (Shen, Wegenke, & Cooley, 2003; Howard,

1999). There are now growing populations of students of color: African American,

Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and Hispanic students (Howard, 1999).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2004), and shown in Figure 2,

people of color will make up about 35-38% of the nation's population by 2020.

Figure 2. Minority population as percentage of total population. Selected years, 1980-2005, and projections 2010 and 2020
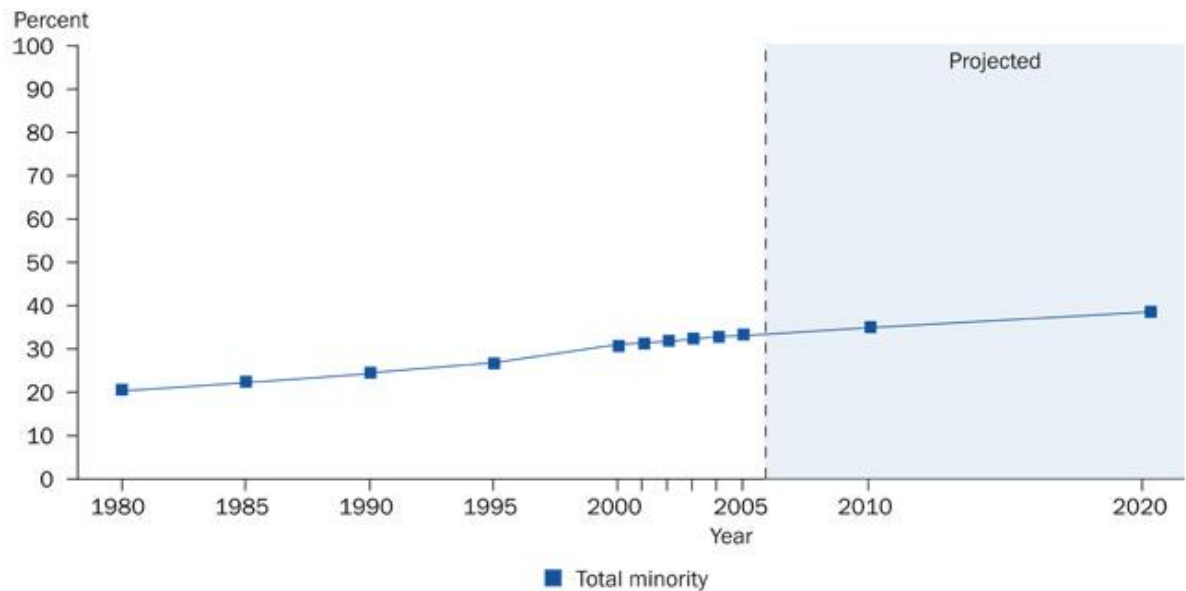
More specifically, Table 2 illustrates the growing population of students of color and the declining population of White students when considering the distribution of public elementary and secondary school enrollment. The students of color (minority) population, between the years of 1986-2005 have steadily grown 13.3%, and the White population has steadily declined 13.3%.

While Table 2 illustrates public school, student enrollment, Table 3 disaggregates the data based on locale (central city, urban fringe, town, rural) and race/ethnicity. These findings from the U.S. Department of Education (2003), generally show a growing population of African American (Black) students in most locales from the years 1993-2003.

Table 2. Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary school enrollment, by race/ethnicity: Selected years, 1986-87 to 2005-06

Fall of school year	White	Total minority[1]	Black	Hispanic	Asian/ Pacific Islander	American Indian/ Alaska Native
1986	70.4	29.6	16.1	9.9	2.8	0.9
1991	67.4	32.6	16.4	11.8	3.4	1.0
1993	66.1	34.0	16.6	12.7	3.6	1.1
1994	65.6	34.4	16.7	13.0	3.6	1.1
1995	64.8	35.1	16.8	13.5	3.7	1.1
1996	64.2	35.8	16.9	14.0	3.8	1.1
1997	63.5	36.5	17.0	14.4	3.9	1.2
1998	62.9	37.1	17.1	15.0	3.9	1.1
1999	62.1	37.9	17.2	15.6	4.0	1.2
2000	61.2	38.8	17.2	16.3	4.1	1.2
2001	60.3	39.7	17.2	17.1	4.2	1.2
2002	59.2	40.9	17.1	18.1	4.4	1.2
2003	58.7	41.3	17.2	18.5	4.4	1.2
2004	57.9	42.1	17.3	19.2	4.5	1.2
2005	57.1	42.9	17.2	19.8	4.6	1.2

[1] Total minority includes Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native students.

NOTE: Excludes students enrolled in Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 1986 State Summaries of Elementary and Secondary School Civil Rights Survey; and National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," selected years, 1991–92 through 2005–06.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, (2006). "Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary school enrollment." 2008, from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/nativetrends/tables/table_2_1a.asp.

Sociological phenomena, such as race trends, which exist in society unquestionably, find their way into our schools. Students walk through the doors of educational settings every day armed with their individual experiences based on their previous settings, which include cultural norms, experiences, and histories. It is in those previous settings that they have developed an understanding of the world around them. When that understanding is not recognized or understood in new school settings, it can result in an inevitable risk factor for that student. The next section will focus on the role

that institutional norms play in defining the experiences of African American males in

schools.

Table 3. Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary school enrollment, by locale and race/ethnicity: 1993, 2000, and 2003

Year and race/ethnicity	Total	Central city	Urban fringe	Town	Rural
1993					
White	66.0	44.3	68.8	78.4	83.5
Total minority	34.0	55.7	31.2	21.6	16.5
Black	16.6	28.7	13.6	10.4	8.7
Hispanic	12.7	21.4	11.8	8.3	4.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.6	5.0	5.4	1.3	1.1
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.1	0.7	0.5	1.5	2.3
2000					
White	61.0	37.0	64.8	73.5	81.5
Total minority	39.0	63.0	35.2	26.5	18.5
Black	17.0	29.6	12.9	13.8	8.6
Hispanic	16.6	26.8	16.4	9.5	6.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.2	5.7	5.2	1.0	1.6
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.2	0.8	0.7	2.2	2.2
2003					
White	58.7	35.2	63.5	70.5	79.1
Total minority	41.3	64.8	36.5	29.5	20.9
Black	17.2	27.7	13.3	13.6	9.9
Hispanic	18.5	29.8	17.5	11.5	7.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.4	6.6	4.9	1.7	1.3
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.2	0.8	0.7	2.7	2.3

NOTE: 1993 data exclude race/ethnicity information for Maine. 2000 and 2003 data exclude race/ethnicity information for Tennessee. For more information on locale codes, see the NCES Common Core of Data, Public Elementary/Secondary School Locale Code File: School Year 2003-04. For locale definitions, see Appendix C: Guide to Sources. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic origin. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The NCES Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 1993-94, 2000-01, and 2003-04.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, (2003). "Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary school enrollment by locale and race/ethnicity." 2008, from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/minoritytrends/tables/table_7_1.asp.

The first section of this review of literature focuses on understanding the

setting of schooling when listening to the experiences of African American males. More

specifically, it will discuss the role that institutional norms play in contributing to the

experiences of African American males. When these norms are enforced upon students

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who don't fit these norms, deviance (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997), or what

Aronowitz and Giroux (1986) refer to as resistance, is inevitable. Perpetuating these

norms, and included as a part of the setting of schooling are teachers. The second portion

of this section focuses on the role teachers play in the setting of schooling, and the power

they posses in influencing the experiences of all students, particularly, African American

males.

Role of Institutional Norms in School

Within the school setting, it is also important to consider the role that institutional

norms may play in the schooling experiences of African American males. Schools

represent a microcosm of society. Students, teachers, and other staff bring their norms,

beliefs, and values present in their *macrosystem* into school with them. It is no surprise

that students live in a society still laced with racist traditions and values, and then enter

into the educational arena with little to no acknowledgement or validation. Often

dominant, middle class ideologies are unconsciously brought into schools and

classrooms, placing students of color at an unfair disadvantage (Lewis, 2006). In her

book, *Race in the Schoolyard*, Lewis (2006) examines how race and racism/racial

inequality is reproduced in schools. Lewis (2006) observed, "At the center was an issue

of membership: Who were "real" members of the school or class community? Who

belonged?" (p. 79). When one's race unfairly determines whether or not a student feels

as though they belong in a school community, it leaves the student vulnerable to be

misunderstood, particularly when the school community is unaware of these injustices.

These disadvantages often manifest themselves in various forms of unfair discipline, particularly for African American males (Lewis, 2006).

> *Black boys are Angels and Devils in British (and American) schools. They are heroes of a street fashion culture that dominates most of our inner cities. On the other hand they experience a disproportionate amount of punishment in our schools compared to all other ethnic groupings. (Sewell, 1997, p. ix).*

Behavior: deviance and discipline

Educational institutions uphold certain norms and expectations for behavior. Conforming to school rules is seen as an act of socialization, which enables learning to take place in the classroom (Ferguson, 2001). What happens when the rules which are assumed neutral and fair for all, are not? This notion of behavior and how one defines and responds to deviance deserving of discipline is highly problematic as it varies from setting to setting, system to system, and person to person. Too often are African American male students suspended and expelled for "deviant" behavior, while their White counterparts in the same acts of deviance are "slapped on the wrist" and sent back to class. Irvine (1991) argues that "discrimination in disciplinary practices occurs because there are no absolute definitions of disorderly behavior" (p. 18).   One's ideologies include varied norms as well as varied definitions of normative versus disorderly behavior. This discrepancy needs attention.

Studies by LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) on "deviance theory" and dropping out demonstrate that those who do not conform to the traditional rules, norms, and values (racist or not) of the schooling system run the risk of being labeled as deviant. Dei (1997), in extensive research on student dropouts, takes this theory even further to claim

that students who are labeled as deviant run the risk of "redefining themselves in terms of their deviant behavior," leading to behavior which eventually pushes them out of school (p. 19).

Consequently, for some students, particularly African American males, schooling can become a dangerous game of assimilation and conformity. As in society, those who do not conform or assimilate to institutional norms are considered deviant. Furthermore, Dei (1997) adds, "Society expects the school to legitimize certain hegemonic and ideological practices, while delegitimizing others" (p. 21). These hegemonic practices are also laden with cultural differences. Often these cultural clashes between Eurocentric ideology and those of Othered populations situate non-majority students at a disadvantage. These cultural values may manifest themselves through differences in language, communication style, dress, and interpersonal communication. Teachers often perceive these actions not as cultural values, but as deviance (Lewis, 2006).

This information has the potential to transform the context of schooling as well as the thinking of those within it; it has the ability to redefine and possibly transform notions of deviance and discipline in school settings. Often the notions of deviance and discipline stem from the ideologies of teachers who interact with students on a daily basis. The next section delves deeper into the role that teachers play specifically in the development of African American males' microsystems.

Diversity is not a choice, but our responses to it certainly are.
(Howard, 1999, p. 81)

White teachers and African American Male Students

It is important to consider teachers when exploring the schooling experiences of African American males. Within the setting of high school, students and teachers spend approximately six to seven hours of their school day with one another. Consequently, given the hegemonic and power dynamics as well as the socialization purposes of school at present, their experiences with one another are of great importance.

Key to understanding the interconnectedness between teachers and students in the school setting is recognizing the positionality of the teachers. This includes an understanding of teachers' and students' current and prior microsystems that converge in school every day. For example, it is important for teachers to understand that an increasing number of families of color are moving for various reasons to affluent, predominantly White communities (Banks, 1995; Johnson, 2000, 2002). In some cases, African American families are involuntarily moving out of their previous neighborhoods and into new neighborhoods as a result of gentrification (Aardema & Knoy, 2004; Betancur, 2002; Betancur, Domeyko, & Wright, 2001).

However, as suburban communities and schools have grown more diverse, the teachers and staff in the schools have not (Howard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2002). As a result, we often have White teachers who previously shared the same ethnicity, race, class, and experiences with their White students, now struggling to understand their students of color who are racially, ethnically, and culturally different from them (Howard, 1999).

Among her vast research experience with pre-service and practicing teachers, Ladson-Billings (2002) concludes that "most teachers have little or no genuine

experience with the cultures different from their own," nor do they have the experience of

looking closely at the assumptions, worldviews, and perspectives that they bring to the

table (p. 81). Differences between student and teacher, particularly regarding race, often

create uneasiness among the White teachers[5]. One possible explanation for low academic

achievement among students of color can be found in Schofield (1982) and Fine's (1988)

research, which illustrates how educators either do not acknowledge or avoid references

to the racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural differences among their students. One

example is a testimony from a White elementary school teacher from Texas:

> I don't understand all of this talk about differences. Each of my little
> kindergarten students comes to me with the same stuff. It doesn't matter
> whether they're Black, Hispanic, or White, they each have a brain, a body,
> and a family. They each get the same curriculum. I treat them all alike.
> And yet, by the end of the year, and as I watch them move up through the
> grades, the Blacks and Hispanics fall behind and the White kids do better.
> They all start with the same equipment. What happens? (Howard, 1999, p.
> 25).

In Schofield's (1982) research, she documents a principal's experience:

> I really don't address myself to group differences when I'm dealing with
> youngsters…I try to treat youngsters as youngsters and not as black,
> white, green, or yellow…Children are children. (p. 30).

Pollock (2008b), in her book, *Everyday Anti Racism*, argues that there are times

when it is appropriate and beneficial to acknowledge differences, particularly racial

differences, and times when it is detrimental to the student. The educator must take care

in acknowledging these instances and strive to act and promote anti-racist practices every

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[5] I am not suggesting that all White teachers struggle to connect with their students of color, nor that all students of color are struggling. However, research is clear that there are a vast number of White teachers who are unclear, unaware, or completely oblivious to the cultural needs of their students and how to connect with their students of color. See for example, Delpit (2006), Howard (1999), Ladson-Billings (1994, 2002), Noguera (2001).

day. What is missing from these two scenarios is a raised awareness of racial differences and the role that race plays in society, the individual's life, and their process of identity development.

These types of testimonies are not uncommon in the educational arena, where the teacher is unaware or unwilling to address or notice the differences among their students. It is what Irvine (1991) would call "cultural aversion," where there is a "reluctance of teachers or administrators to discuss race or race-related issues like ethnicity, culture, prejudice, equality, and social justice" (p. 26). What often results from cultural aversion is a color-blind philosophy, where teachers claim to see all students as beings without race, culture, ethnicity, and heritage (Irvine, 1991). When teachers don't take the time to acknowledge the cultures, backgrounds, race, and ethnicities of their students, they are undoubtedly dismissing the identities of their students. Given that identities shape how students come to know, academic achievement may be in jeopardy as well, and can create dissonance between the teacher and student.

Irvine (1991) relates the concepts of cultural dissonance and misunderstanding specifically to African American students and school failure. She argues that when cultural misunderstandings occur between teachers and students, a lack of cultural synchronization is inevitable; that is, when teachers are unable or unwilling to acknowledge and understand the culture, race, ethnicity, and class of their students, lack of understanding between teachers and students is unavoidable.

The interconnectedness of the relationships between teacher and student within the microsystem of school must be investigated and considered. The next section will focus further on this interconnectedness, focusing particularly on the dangers of

stereotyping African American males, and teachers' impact on their growth and development.

The danger of stereotyping African American males

Teachers play an important role in the development of all students, including African American males. They have the most powerful and often underappreciated ability to alter the schooling experiences of their students, unfortunately both positively and negatively. For example, Robert Merton (1957) developed the self fulfilling prophecy concept. He claims that it occurs when "a false definition of the situation evokes a new behavior that makes the originally false conceptions come true" (as cited in Irvine, 1991, p. xvii). However, these false conceptions can only be changed through "societal structures and norms so that attitudes and behaviors change" (p. xix).

This concept is recognizable in the educational arena when considering teacher expectancy theory and stereotype threat (Steele, 1997). Teacher expectancy theory states that teachers' expectations for their students' achievement eventually affects student performance as the student eventually reinforces the teacher expectations, be it positive or negative. These outcomes can be related to "academic achievement, self concept, motivation, aspirations, conduct, and teacher-student interactions" (Irvine, 1991, p. xix). It is, however, important to consider that the student in this theory is considered a passive being. It does not take into consideration student agency, nor can it fully explain student achievement be it positive or negative (Wiggan, 2007).

Slightly different is the general theory of domain identification, which "is the threat that others' judgments or their own actions will negatively stereotype them in the

domain" (Steele, 1997, p. 613) (i.e. school). Different from teacher expectancy theory,

where the assumptions on academic achievement resides with the passive student and the

active teacher's expectations, domain identification assumes that a student's success in

school is based on the students' identity and their identification with success in school.

Derived out of domain identification theory is *stereotype threat*. Coined by Claude

Steele (1997), *stereotype threat* is a theory describing those who already have domain

identification. This threat arises in situations where an individual is doing something

where a negative stereotype about the individual's group may apply. According to

Steele (1997):

> It is a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can
> affect the members of any group about whom the negative stereotype
> exists (e.g., skateboarders, older adults, White men, gang members).
> Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups
> can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with
> the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be
> self-threatening. (p. 614).

Teacher expectancy theory and stereotype threat suggest strong power structures

systemically in place in schools today. Although both theories may provide useful

insight into understanding an individual's environment and system of schooling, both

theories must be considered in conjunction with other risks and vulnerabilities present in

an individual's life. Some potential risks include institutional racism and the role of the

hidden curriculum in schooling systems, and teacher pedagogies.

Pedagogies

Since the 1980s, many terms have surfaced, attempting to examine and explain

the pedagogies used by teachers to make curriculum relevant to the everyday lives of

students. According to Ladson-Billings (2001), terms such as "'cultural congruence' (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981) (focusing on communication patterns consistent with their students), "cultural appropriateness" (Au & Jordan, 1981) (focusing on methods used by teachers to relate to their students),…[and] "cultural compatibility" (Jordan, 1985; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987) (focusing on accessibility of learning for all students,) all insinuate the "accommodation of student culture to mainstream culture" (pp. 75-77). This can be problematic as it does not alleviate the issue of mainstream culture being based on White, middle-class norms. Vogt (1987) would argue that schools should incorporate student culture into mainstream culture, thus, changing mainstream culture.

In hopes of changing mainstream culture, "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2002) provides the most promise, which focuses specifically on improving educational experiences for all students, but particularly with African American students in mind. Ladson-Billings (2001) uses cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy to depict a consciousness, understanding, and plan of action for creating an equitable education for all students.

Various researchers (Kachur & Altshuler, 2004; Meaney, 2005) and organizations have a slightly different spin on how they define cultural competence. In fact, one of the first ways cultural competence was introduced to educational vocabulary was by way of social workers and medical clinicians. They found a need to discuss the meaning and implementation of cultural competence in pre-service programs as the clientele they were servicing or going to service was growing more and more diverse in terms of race, class, and culture (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989; Kachur & Altshuler, 2004; Meaney, 2005; Ward & Ward, 2003).

One of the earliest articulations of cultural competence came from a report by Terry L. Cross (1989) and colleagues. In this report, aiming to create a model with the ability to respond to the needs of diverse populations, they break down the words *culture* and *competence* in an effort to define cultural competence. *Culture*, "implies the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group" (Cross, et al., 1989, p. 18). *Competence* "implies having the capacity to function in a particular way…within the context of culturally-integrated patterns of human behavior as defined by the group" (Cross, et al., 1989, p. 18). Terry L. Cross et al. (1989) acknowledges that achieving cultural competence is difficult, a bit idealistic, and a process.

As theory and practice progressed, parallels were drawn between the medical, social work, and educational fields as a need was identified to address the changing, more diverse populations. There was a call in the educational field for teachers who were interested in preparing to teach students of various backgrounds, races, and ethnicities, and who will require a multitude of instructional needs (Ward & Ward, 2003).

I believe that Ladson-Billings' (2002), who relied on the work of Irvine, has the most all encompassing ideas regarding teachers, students, and cultural competency and culturally relevant teaching. In her book, *Crossing Over to Canaan*, she examines the experiences of pre-service teachers to learn about and demonstrate a culturally relevant pedagogy based on academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Ladson-Billings (2002) describes culturally competent teachers:

> Teachers who are prepared to help students become culturally competent are themselves culturally competent. They do not spend their time trying

to be hip and cool and "down" with their students. They know enough about students' cultural and individual life circumstances to be able to communicate well with them. They understand the need to study the students because they believe there is something there worth learning. They know that students who have the academic and cultural wherewithal to succeed in school without losing their identities are better prepared to be of service to others; in a democracy this commitment to public good is paramount. (p. 97).

Ladson-Billings (2002) goes on to describe indicators of a culturally competent teacher, citing that the teacher "understands culture and its role in education, takes responsibility for learning about students' culture and community, uses student culture as a basis for learning, and promotes a flexible use of students' local and global culture" (p. 98).

The term cultural competence is not to be confused with culturally relevant teaching which is a pedagogy that focuses more on empowering students by drawing on one's culture when teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 17-18). For example, the culturally relevant teacher addresses the negative impact of dominant culture by helping African American students to understand their own histories in helping them to develop a "relevant Black personality" even though it may be left out of their text books (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Culturally relevant teaching has the potential to alter the schooling experiences for African American males as well as other students.

Given the importance of teacher pedagogy, I also fully acknowledge that not all responsibility resides with the teachers and institutions. The idea is not to "save the children" or to view adolescent, African American males as helpless victims. On the contrary, empowering students to advocate for change in their own settings and environments is the ultimate challenge and goal. Ignoring the responsibility and power that resides with the students would serve to perpetuate systemic inequities. However,

this does not negate the factors over which they do posses control and responsibility. Cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy aim to create an understanding of and sensitivity to students' cultures in hopes of building the relationships necessary to empower all students to learn.

In summary, identifying and understanding the interconnectedness of settings within microsystems for African American males is essential to gaining insight into their voices. In some sense, researchers must develop a cultural competence of sorts before entering into school settings. Developing this raised awareness includes an understanding and familiarization of the risks and protective factors present in the schools. This includes the challenges and supports students may face thus defining the risk level of their setting. It also includes accounting for the interrelatedness between the individual and the risks and protective factors to which they may consciously or unconsciously be exposed, including institutional norms.

As a part of institutional norms, dominant ideology inevitably finds its way into schools, creating a microcosm of society within schools. Without a raised awareness of the institutional norms present in schools, students with different cultural norms than those expected in schools are at a clear disadvantage and at risk of being misunderstood. Often this manifests itself by way of perceived behavior on the part of teachers and administrators, often resulting in often definitions of deviance and disciplinary practices. Because students spend the majority of their school day with teachers, it is often they who are the reporters of this perceived deviance.

Given this vast amount of time spent daily between students and teachers, an understanding of how teacher's ideologies and practices have the potential to impact students is important as well. This section specifically addressed the dangers of stereotyping, the hidden curriculum, and non-inclusive teacher pedagogies. As a suggestion to addressing stereotyping is a culturally responsive and culturally relevant pedagogy. This pedagogy, if adopted and carried out by teachers, has the ability, in part, to transform the school setting for all students, particularly African American males. This raised awareness and cultural competence will also direct teachers to develop an understanding of and sensitivity to the adolescent lives of all students. This life-stage, particularly for African American, adolescent males, includes an ever-changing time of identity development. For adolescent, African American males, identity development, particularly in high school, can be a turbulent time where life's paths are often paved. The next section will focus on identity development as it relates to adolescent, African American males, focusing on the importance of understanding the life-stage of adolescence.

Identity Development

It is important to simultaneously consider the microsystem of school in conjunction with the lived experiences of African American males from a developmental perspective, including how identity development manifests in schools. There are many forms of identity (social, racial, ethnic, cultural, academic, age-related, etc.), which often are defined and utilized differently in various pieces of research. There is no one definition of these forms of identity, which is highly problematic. However, for this

paper, I am conceptualizing identity as including multiple, intersecting dimensions; that is, individuals construct their identity through interacting and reflecting upon experiences and interactions with the world. This will inevitably include issues of society, race, ethnicity, culture, school, etc. I recognize that all of these different identities are important; however, they all collectively help to shape one's identity. In my own experience, I do not recollect consciously separating the formation of different identities. These entities are complex, interconnected, and dynamic. Thus, I am most concerned with how African American males conceptualize their own process of identity development as a whole, which can include all or some of the separate identities mentioned above.

The next section of this chapter will focus on the ways in which adolescence, race, and group membership inform the process of identity development in school settings for African American males. The first section focuses on how the life-stage of adolescence contributes to one's identity development. The second section defines and situates the concept of racial group identity as it relates to the influence of group participation and shaping one's identity development. This is the only form of identity discussed in isolation due to its unique dynamic involving group participation and identity development for African American males. Although these sections will be read linearly, they are not to be considered in this nature. Alternatively, these concepts must all be considered simultaneously as part of the dynamic process of identity development.

Adolescence

High school is a time of adolescent development, where students are constantly constructing and reconstructing their identities. Understanding the dynamic nature of identity development during adolescence is important when carefully examining the schooling experiences of African American males. This includes understanding how adolescence intersects with race, peer groups, and an individual's perception as well as others' perception of those concepts (Billson, 1996). Billson (1996) adds that "the process of identity formation is seen in a dual perspective: the individual's perception of who he is and who he would like to be—and the perceptions of others in his life" (Billson, 1996, p. 23). Furthermore, identity development also includes investigating the various ways in which students are reacting to and engaging with risks and protective factors within their setting. When these engagements and reactions become stable, they contribute to new identities.

A popular theory regarding identity development during adolescence is Erikson's (1968) developmental theory. Identity development is important for all human beings; however, it is important for adolescents, in particular, as their teenage years are the most formative (Erickson, 1968). Rosenthal (1987) adds, "achieving a sense of identity is one of the most important psychological tasks for an adolescent" (p. 156). It involves knowing who one is, what one stands for in their setting and the world, and includes associating and prescribing to groups and settings to which one belongs. This is a life-stage where physical growth, cognitive and social growth, development, and maturity take place. It is a time where one learns how to think critically (Rosenthal, 1987). And to further complicate the issue, adolescents are caught in a place between childhood and

adulthood. This is a place of mixed messages from society and home, which asks for adult like responsibility and behavior while at other times treating adolescents as children (Rosenthal, 1987).

Considering the multiple facets of development that adolescents undergo, researchers must pay special attention to their methods and methodologies for accurately capturing the cognitive, cultural, and social factors of development. Rosenthal (1987) argues that "Erikson has come closest to focusing simultaneously on the internal and external worlds of an adolescent" (p. 157). Erikson (1959) argues that adolescence:

> …can be viewed as a psychosocial moratorium during which the individual through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him. In finding it the young adult gains an assured sense of inner continuity and social sameness which will bridge what he was as a child and what he is about to become, and will reconcile his conception of himself and his community's recognition of him. (p. 111).

This process occurring during adolescence that Erikson describes is the process of identity development. Critical to this development is a complex process involving social group experimentation to help in defining oneself. Peer groups and social acceptance and belonging into social groups is critical, particularly in high school. The process of identity development is ever changing as the adolescent grows (cognitively, culturally, and socially), conceptualizes their place in society, and comes to understand their changing self as a dynamic being. In helping to understand the role that social groups can play in the life stage of adolescence, the next section focuses on group identity and social identity theory, which talks about the link between acknowledging and participating in social groups, and the relationship between self-esteem and group identity.

Group identity

The link between group membership and self esteem was drawn by Tajfel & Turner's (1986) social identity theory. This theory "consists of those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he [sic] perceives himself as belonging" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 16). According to social identity theory, the members of the group view their own group as being more favorable than another, thus increasing the groups' self image. Being a member of the favorable group then plays an important source of self esteem (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits that there is an underlying need to maintain self-esteem and that this need is linked to group identity (which can include racial-ethnic group identity as well as other types of social groups). It is important to note that if a person is a member of a stigmatized group that is looked at negatively by society, self esteem among group members may go down (Tajfel, 1981).

However, other researchers believe that if the person has a positive sense of belonging to a group, regardless of society's view, self esteem should be enhanced. The same is true if a person has a negative view about their group; it may reduce self esteem (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; Helms, 1990; J. S. Phinney, 1993). In their study examining group identity, Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz (1997) found that racial-ethnic identity[6] was a significant predictor of self esteem for African American, Latino, and White adolescents in predominantly non-white schools.

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[6] In research, vast overlap exists in the terminology used to define racial identity and ethnic identity. However, they ways in which Phinney uses the term ethnic identity when speaking specifically about African Americans, describes my understanding of the essence of racial identity. However, in staying true

These findings on racial-ethnic group identity are consistent with other research showing a significant relationship between self esteem and a positive attachment to one's racial or ethnic group in ethnically diverse settings (Crocker, et al., 1994; Phinney, et al., 1997). In Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz's (1997) study, their results show that "for adolescents in [racially or] ethnically diverse settings, the higher their [racial-]ethnic identity—that is, the more committed and positive they feel about their [racial-]ethnic group, the higher their self esteem" (p. 178).

One must acknowledge potential problematic issues surrounding group identification such as adverse effects of peer group rejection. Although a controversial claim, some researchers find that ethnic group identity can have just as many negative or adverse effects on adolescents as it can positive. For example, the effects of a group excluding or not accepting an adolescent could be catastrophic. Similarly, adverse effects could arise from "feelings of inferiority…[stemming] from such factors as relatively lower status, poverty, and perceptions of prejudice and discrimination" (Rosenthal, 1987, p. 172). That is to say, given Rogoff's notion of participation, if adolescents are acknowledging and participating in these notions of inferiority projected upon them by peer groups, it could manifest itself in the form of a risk, instead of a protective factor. By understanding identity development from the perspective of the individual within their own microsystems, researchers can begin to understand how these positive and negative effects of group identity affect one's personal identity development.

When students of color are navigating the terrain of adolescence, they are engaging in a process of identity formation which includes conceptualizing being a part

to Phinney's original language, I use the term racial-ethnic identity when referring to her body of work around ethnic identity for African American males.

of a group different from mainstream society. This conceptualization often includes

awareness of discrimination, power, and oppression. When these issues are explored

over time, research shows that it leads to an improved self concept in terms of racial-

ethnic group membership as well as a secure sense of racial-ethnic identity (J. S. Phinney,

1993). Because this process occurs over time, it may or may not be achieved during

adolescence. Often this process of maturation occurs in adulthood. As a result,

researchers must consider identity development as a dynamic process of emerging

identities, and understand students from their own perspective within the dynamic life-

stage of adolescence. Their own meaning making is of the utmost importance as it is

their own reality that matters in their world. However, it is important to note that the

realities of African American males is a racialized one. An inevitable part of selecting

peer groups and gaining peer group membership involves race, particularly in

predominantly White schools. The next section discusses the role that race plays in the

process of African American male identity development.

Race and Identity

One of the most hindering elements of writing this literature review is being

forced to write about the concepts of setting, identity, and race as isolated parts as I

recognize that they do not exist in isolation. While considering these dynamic concepts,

one should always acknowledge that all should be understood in relation to one another,

that is the interconnectedness of each concept within one's ecology. I have chosen to

write about race as a major section of the Identity piece because how one acknowledges

and identifies race, ultimately contributes to their identity development, particularly in

schools where African American males are in the racial minority. One should not place any more or less emphasis on race due to its placement in this literature review; rather, one should recognize how the concept of race fits into how one understands African American males in the school setting. Equally important, one should seek to understand how race serves as an important component to the identity development process, in this case for African American males. In fact, how an individual understands their own race, ultimately contributes to their collective identity. It is one more concept to consider along with the life stage of adolescence.

Race defined

Race is a social construct based on how others perceive and categorize an individual that in turn affects how that individual perceives themselves, thus helping to construct one's emerging identities. Some conceptualize race as a biological construct, when in fact, it is not (Bulmer & Solomos, 1998). Race is, in part, a categorization forced upon us by "the state" and state institutions for the purpose of categorizing individuals. Omi and Winant use the term "racial formation" to describe "the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings" (Omi & Winant, 1986, p. 61). Racial identities emerge out of these racial categories, taking shape over space and time, and influenced by macro-level social processes (Omi & Winant, 1986), as well as experiences within an individual's microsystem.

By interacting with those who are racially similar and racially different, individuals begin to understand and conceptualize the meanings of racial categories and

implications for those categorizations within the world. However, these racial

categorizations are not static; they change, taking on new meanings over space and time

(Lewis, 2006; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007), and are

often born out of social and political movements (Lewis, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1986).

Adding to this point, curricularist William Pinar (Pinar, 1993) ponders historical

movements as well:

> What is the meaning of race? It is hardly an unchanging, biological
> concept. Race is a complex, dynamic, and changing construct.
> Historically, those groups identified as "people of color" have changed
> according to political circumstance. For instance, before the Civil War,
> southern Europeans, Jews, even the Irish were considered "non white"
> (Omi & Winant, 1983). The racial category of "black" grew out of
> slavery. "Whites" collapsed the diversity of African-and native-peoples
> into monolithic, racialized categories. (p. 61).

The mere understanding that race is dynamic across space and time, does not

minimize the need for understanding the realities of individuals on a daily basis. Omi

and Winant (1986) believe that "we should think of race as an element of social structure

rather than as a irregularity within it; we should see race as a dimension of human

representation rather than an illusion" (p. 199). Researchers must recognize race as

"fluid, multiple, relational, socially constructed, and intersecting with other social

positionings" (Phoenix, 1998, p. 860), while also recognizing it as a social reality for

individuals, which has the ability to determine life chances (Lewis, 2006). Individuals'

daily realities are shaped by how they understand their environment and their position

within it. This understanding and participation in their environment then cyclically

affects the environment in which they live Lewis (2006) adds,

> To comprehend how race shapes social experience and educational
> outcomes requires a focus on every day practice. Determining how racial

narratives and understandings shape people's lives, how their social location shapes their life chances, and how they understand these processes requires both speaking with people in depth about their lives and spending time with them in their real-life contexts. (p. 7).

This is precisely why research in specific settings, seeking to understand experiences from the participant's perspective is so important. Furthermore, given that educational settings are places of reproduction and transformation of race (Lewis, 2006), it is appropriate that researchers examine students in the school setting.

Race and schooling

Relating to school, school administrators, teachers, and researchers must pay close attention to the ways in which race manifests itself in schools, at times creating an inequitable learning environment for students. This understanding should also include and be examined from the point of view of the student. The reality is that strong assumptions regarding students' ability levels are linked, consciously or unconsciously, to race (Pollock, 2008a).

In Pollock's (2008a) book section, "No Brain is Racial", she concludes, "Being brought up white typically involves learning to believe that we are smarter than those who are not white; being brought up nonwhite often means battling the fear that perhaps we will be judged less intelligent that those who are white" (Pollock, 2008a, p. 10). These assumptions have strong, often negative implications for the ways in which students experience school. For example, the disproportionate number of White and Asian students enrolled in gifted or advanced placement classes and the number of African American and Latino students tracked into Special Education and enrolled in

skills level classes may have a lasting effect on student perceptions in terms of

associating race with ability level (NEA Education Policy and Practice Department,

2008). Noguera (2001) adds, "As schools sort children by perceived measures of their

ability and as they single out certain children for discipline, implicit and explicit

messages about racial and gender identities are conveyed" be it unintentional/explicit or

intentional/implicit (p. 14). Tracking, labeling, and categorizing students in this way can

result in perpetuation of stereotypes or a self fulfilling prophecy by the student; that is,

the student takes on the stereotype, label, or categorization as truth and ultimately part of

their identity.

Again, schooling systems have long been recognized as places where

socialization occurs, preparing students for productive citizenship in the real world. High

school, in particular, is a time where adolescent students are forming their sense of

identity, making sense of their race as well that of others' races (Noguera, 2005a).

Noguera says, "As young people enter into adolescence and develop a stronger sense of

their individual identities (Erickson, 1968), the meaning and significance of race also

change" (p. 13). How students become socialized in relation to how they identify racially

affects their identity development. Various researchers (Cross, Parnham, & Helms, 1991;

Noguera, 2001; Tatum, 1992) believe that it is during these critical years that "race

becomes a more rigid identity construct as children learn the historical, ideological, and

cultural dimensions associated with racial group membership" (Noguera, 2005b, p. 444)

within their microsystems.

However, it is also important to recognize the role that teachers and staff play in

influencing individuals' microsystems. The ways in which teachers perceive race can

have a massive, negative impact on the academic achievement of all students, particularly African American males. The next part will focus on the impact that teachers and institutions can have on the academic achievement of African American males.

Academic achievement and institutional racism

At the Harvard Achievement Gap Initiative Conference in June, 2008, Dr. Heath Morrison, said, "Let us aspire to create a school system where student achievement is no longer predicted by race" (Morrison, 2008). The connection between race and achievement is powerful and real, and needs addressing in order to provide an equitable education for all students. The reality is that we live in a society where race matters and affects the lives of students.

Just as it is difficult to address the schooling experiences of African American males without addressing the achievement gap, it is also difficult to responsibly deliberate over academic achievement without acknowledging the institutional racism that affects their life chances. According to Majors (1992), "Institutionalized racism refers to the policies and rules, traditional practices, and informal networks that operate in major social institutions (politics, economics, and education) to keep minorities 'in their place' and out of the mainstream" (p. 24). Although institutional racism can take on many forms in today's society, this literature review will focus on its appearance in the educational arena.

Because institutional racism is rooted in historical, Eurocentric thinking, prior research is generally approached through a Eurocentric lens. Gillborn (2005) adds, "One of the most powerful and dangerous aspects of whiteness is that many (possibly the

majority) of white people have no awareness of whiteness as a construction, let alone their own role in sustaining and playing out inequities at the heart of whiteness" (p. 490). By engaging in the exploration of Whiteness, researchers can challenge and "disrupt the assumptions that currently shape education (in policy *and* practice)" (Gillborn, 2005, p. 497, emphasis in the original). In short, one would be disrupting hegemonic processes in places that often feed institutional racism. If this important research, reflection, and action doesn't take place, inequities will be reproduced institutionally, systemically, culturally, and racially (Ferguson, 2001)[7].

Furthermore, teachers and staff must take the time to deconstruct their position as it relates to race, hegemony, and institutional racism. Those who are White and non White alike, must take the time to conceptualize and deconstruct the meaning of their race-ethnicity. This will assist in the deconstruction of institutional racism, which must be understood from a historical as well as a present-day perspective. We must develop a critical consciousness regarding the unfair, hegemonic processes that go unchallenged every day in schools.

Institutional racism is important to consider, as it is a contributing factor influencing why African American males have difficulty achieving and identifying within certain schooling systems. It allows us to think beyond relevance of self esteem, inclusion within the school, early detection, marginalization and the like (Dei, et al., 1997). Instead, it forces us to consider the rules, policies, and practices in place that may not serve all of our students in an equitable manner.

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[7] For more information, see Ferguson's (2001) study which focuses how institutional norms in schools "are used to maintain a racial order, and how images and racial myths frame how we see ourselves and others in a racial hierarchy" (p. 19).

In summary, understanding school settings as well as individuals' perception of that setting is of great importance as it helps to piece together what and how students are navigating in their process of identity development. However, as illustrated in this section, this process of navigation is complex, dynamic, and different for each individual based on their own personal perceptions of their microsystems. Furthermore, these perceptions are often muddled, confused, and complicated by the turbulent times of adolescence for any individual. Still further, navigating these processes is particularly difficult for African American males, given their increased risk factors[8] surrounding racial stereotypes. In some instances, African American males find themselves trying to establish and carry out who they are and what they stand for within their ecology, while fighting for acceptance and independence among peer groups and adults who often misunderstand them.

Social constructions of race do not make this process of identity development any easier for African American males. They are forced to understand and navigate what it means to be African American within their own microsystems, which may be laden with overt and hidden racism. Furthermore, conceptualizing race is often difficult in the process of identity development as the meaning of race can change in different spaces and times. The very nature of conceptualizing identity as being socially constructed, paves the way for potentially turbulent adolescent years of identity development for African American males.

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[8] Risk is viewed as "an exacerbation of normative challenges and competencies due to larger sociopolitical processes (i.e. racism, sexism) and/or lack of resources" (Spencer, et al., 2004, p. 230)

PVEST as a Tool for Practice

This review of literature seeks to examine concepts that will assist in understanding the schooling experiences of African American males in affluent, predominantly White schools. The last section of this literature review offers Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) as a tool to influence future practice in schools. PVEST serves as a systems-focused way to filter and interpret the experiences of African American males in their purest form, from their reality. The system from which to understand African American students will be their own ecology, stemming from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (as described after the Introduction of the literature review). Spencer's PVEST model is grounded in the theoretical notion that individuals are at the center of their ecological environment. Specifically, PVEST has the ability to examine individuals within their own ecology; however, it does so also within a specific life stage (in the context of this study, adolescence). A person's responses to and interactions with the systems present within his or her environment, help to create his or her identity.

Given the theoretical grounding of Ecological Systems Theory, PVEST will be used as the lens by which to understand the risks and protective factors (stage 1-net vulnerability level) to which African American males are exposed within their school setting. Those risks and protective factors individuals choose to engage with and acknowledge, then have the potential of becoming challenges and supports (stage 2-net stress engagement). The ways in which individuals respond to and interact with the challenges and supports in their lives, then creates reactive coping mechanisms/methods (stage 3-reactive coping processes). When an individual has consistent reactions over

time to specific challenges and supports, the coping mechanisms then become a part of

the individual's emerging identity (stage 4-emergent identities). One's emergent identity

then contributes to their life stage (in this case adolescence) coping outcomes (stage 5-

stage-specific coping outcomes). The following sections will explain the PVEST model

in greater detail.

First, I will focus on one of the fundamental principles of PVEST, resiliency.

One of the most unique aspects of the PVEST model is that it does not solely focus on

individuals with a deficit lens. It considers the resiliency piece of an individual as well.

Then, I will describe in detail the PVEST model, including a fictional scenario to help the

reader apply the model to a particular individual. This section will include the

fundamental assumptions, the inner workings, and a specific break-down of each stage of

PVEST.

Resilient Adaptation and PVEST

Statistics commonly cited by researchers studying the progress of African

American males indicate their failure in school (Gibbs, 1988; Irvine, 1990; Polite &

Davis, 1999; Fashola, 2005). Oftentimes this research is conducted in high-risk settings,

citing violent communities, insufficient facilities for schooling, and inadequate teachers

and resources that are often named as some of the noted causes for low achievement.

Although research in high-risk, low resource settings with low achievement

outcomes has been quite popular for the past 40+ years, some researchers (Fashola, 2005;

Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Spencer, et al., 2004) choose to look at African American

males through a resilience lens, focusing on processes and trends of success rather than

failure, and engaging "in research exploring and isolating the multiplicity of factors that contribute to the academic success of Black students" (Fashola, 2005, p. 3). These researchers are interested in the structures and practices in place that help African American students to achieve; that is to say that they are focused on "positive outcomes and not just negative ones" (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 861). With a resilience model in place, successful research can lead to positive change within schools; educational systems can then focus on intervention strategies (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000) to foster African American achievement (Fashola, 2005).

Why a resilience framework?

There are a number of advantages to using a resilience framework when investigating African American adolescent males in their school setting. Five specific advantageous features are described by Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) in their article called, "Construct of Resilience." They contend:

> Applying the resilience framework implies attention (a) to positive outcomes in the presence of adversity rather than positive adaptation in general and, more specifically, (b) to empirically derived knowledge about vulnerability and protective mechanisms that are salient within, and possibly unique to, particular risk conditions. From an intervention perspective, the implication is (c) a shift away from maladjustment to consider competence as well (thus implicitly emphasizing prevention), (d) attention to at-risk individuals' strengths in addition to their "deficits", and (e) systematic exploration of processes that might explain or underlie links involving empirically identified vulnerability and protective factors. (p. 861).

Masten and Powell (2003) add that "within a resilience framework, it is recognized that promoting competence is one of the best ways to prevent problems" in schools and

educational organizations (p. 17). Thus, a resilience framework can be beneficial to the

exploration of African American male students.

Definitions of resilience

Resilience must be understood as a dynamic process or phenomenon "of positive

adaptation despite adversity" (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 862) and must not be

considered as a depiction of a personality trait or an attribute of the individual (A. S.

Masten & Powell, 2003, p. 4). Instead of saying that a person is resilient, it would be

more appropriate to say that the person "shows a resilient pattern" or "shows the features

of resilience."

Although researchers tend to define resilience in their own varying words, the

main components of the definition are generally the same: adversity (commonly referred

to as risk), positive response (also referred to as coping mechanism), and dynamism; that

is, if risks change, resilience may change as well. For example, some of the most

frequently cited researchers on resilience are Luthar (2003), Rutter (1987), and Masten,

Best & Garmezy (1990), all of whom define resilience in like terms. Luthar (2000)

contends that "resilience is a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive

adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma" (p. 858). Rutter (1987)

defines resilience as "a term used to describe the positive pole of individual differences in

people's response to stress and adversity" (p. 316). Masten, Best & Garmezy (1990)

contend that resilience is "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful

adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (p. 425). This literature

review will utilize Spencer's (2004) definition of resilience, similar to others explained in the next section.

Risk and resilience in terms of PVEST

When synthesizing definitions of risk and resilience, Spencer's (2004) understanding is similar to the previous scholars, contending that resilience is one's ability to successfully cope with challenges of risk. Risk is viewed as "an exacerbation of normative challenges and competencies due to larger sociopolitical processes (i.e. racism, sexism) and/or lack of resources" (Spencer, et al., 2004, p. 230). These risk factors may predispose an individual to adverse outcomes. When determining one's risk or resilience, the researcher must do so within the cultural settings/contexts to which the subject belongs. An understanding of cultural settings/contexts is of importance to Spencer (2004) and her colleagues (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). Spencer adds,

> Instances of resilience, success, and competence displayed by minority youth in spite of adverse living conditions often go unnoticed and unrecognized, thus denying individuals a sense of success and accomplishment. For example, social resources such as caring parents and involvement in extracurricular activities help to facilitate positive youth outcomes (McLendon, Nettles, & Wigfield, 2000; Nettles, Mucherah, & Jones, 2000). However, these activities must exist within a culturally sensitive context. A lack of understanding of cultural context leads to a misinterpretation of minority youth behavior and development. (Spencer, 1999) (as cited by Swanson, Cunningham, et al., 2003, p. 610).

It is also important to acknowledge that vast amounts of research and literature, focused on a specific race of people in specific settings and in specific times, often make sweeping generalizations about resilience. For example, African American males in low income settings are often noted as living in high risk environments with low rates of

resilience and high rates of academic and social failure. However, more attention must

be paid to differences in resilience among this specific population and in this specific

setting and time as it is not uncommon to see a range of responses within African

American males in high risk environments (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994). PVEST

can account for this variability as it seeks to understand both risks and protective factors

within an individual's environment.

Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)

*The most important and critical overarching flaw in research on Black
youth, and boys particularly, is the absence of systems-focused theoretical
framework that can analyze, represent, and explain the mechanisms of
experiences and outcomes. A comprehensive theory is needed that takes
into account both normative developmental processes and specific risks
faced by African Americans, the effect of experiences on coping and
identity processes, and the effect of these on life outcomes.
(Fashola, 231-232).*

Spencer's (1995) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory

(PVEST) is a resilience-based theoretical framework, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's

(1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST), which values the linkages between setting and

perception. Unlike Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST, which illustrates the *what* of

development (i.e. illustrating the interactions between the individual and setting),

Spencer's (1995) PVEST focuses our attention on the *how* of human development (i.e.

how individuals perceive and respond to their stage-specific setting), "while

acknowledging behavioral and genetic perspectives[9] (e.g. Spencer & Harpalani, 2004)"

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[9] By "genetic perspectives," Spencer is referring to phenomenon of ADD, ADHD, Schizophrenia, and
autism, potentially scientifically linked to human genes. Spencer and Harpalani's (2004) article, "Nature,

(Spencer, 2006, p. 830). More specifically, PVEST is a process-oriented, developmental, and identity-focused systems theory that values the setting and perception of an individual. This theory is a "tool for examining human development, focusing on identity formation while taking into account structural factors, cultural influences, and individual phenomenological experiences and perceptions of these contextualized features" (Swanson et al., 2003, p. 748). A detailed explanation of these concepts will follow in the upcoming sections.

The PVEST model includes five main phases (see Figure 3) that an individual experiences recursively over a lifetime, which will be discussed in further detail in section III.B.2: (1) the inevitability of *vulnerability* (i.e. the presence of both risks and *protective factors* in a person's life), (2) *stress* as a normative experience, (3) the need for *reactive coping responses* from an individual, (4) the role of *emergent (stable) identities*, and (5) the links with the unavoidability of stage-specific and patterned *coping outcomes* (Spencer, 2006).

Foundational assumptions of PVEST

PVEST acknowledges the historical and contemporary impact of social policy, including the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, and its role in and significance to the cultural, social, and political context on an individual. According to Spencer (2006),

> The theory's value emanates from simultaneous attentiveness to (a) multiple layers of the environment, (b) normal human processes that unfold in various settings with multiple others, (c) historical factors and social policy that are associated with long-standing and contemporary structural conditions and social relations, and (d) cultural sensitivity to the

nurture, and the question of How?" examines the linkages between an individual's genetics and their environment.

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traditional ways the authentic everyday experience of human development in context is interpreted. (p. 830).

Figure 3. Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)
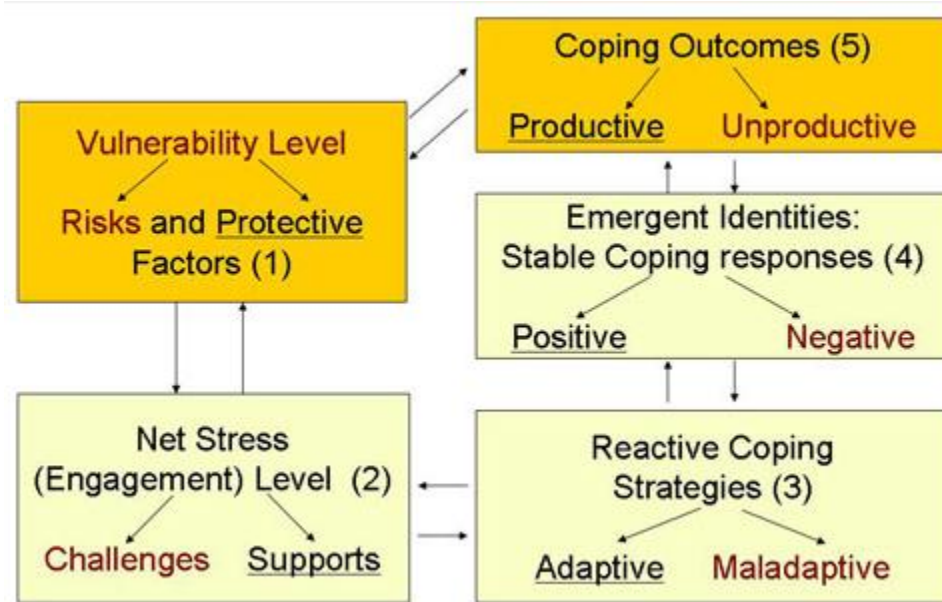
Source: Center for Health Achievement Neighborhoods Growth and Ethnic Studies (2007). "Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)." Retrieved January 16, 2007, 2007, from http://www.gse.upenn.edu/changes/spencer.html.

Spencer's PVEST model particularly suits research aiming to understand the schooling experiences of African American males because it considers both perceived and observed aspects of setting. In exploring the *how* of development, it offers a variety of interpretations for individuals in the same setting who appear to share the same opportunities in a particular space, who demonstrate different behavioral responses to seemingly equal tasks, and who demonstrate unequal behavioral outcomes in response to a variety of challenges that go unacknowledged (Spencer, 2006). The term setting and context are used interchangeably in this model, and encompass an understanding of the historical factors in an individual's life as well as acknowledging the different levels of

vulnerability (i.e. the presence of risk and protective factors) an individual may face. Likewise, it also enhances understanding of different or varied outcomes (i.e. coping outcomes-unproductive and productive) experienced by individuals.

The PVEST framework "focuses on the roles mediating processes play between vulnerability levels and coping outcomes individuals experience" (Spencer, 2006, p. 831). Vulnerability and coping outcomes are unique to this model as they are understood from two perspectives: risks and protective factors, and unproductive and productive coping outcomes. Too often are risks and unproductive coping outcomes considered independently (Spencer, 2006). This shortsightedness only perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices, particularly when used to describe "marginalized" groups. Spencer (2006) adds, "for those youth perceived as marginal individuals (i.e. African Americans, low-resource persons, Hispanics or subgroups of Asian Americans—e.g. Hmong), too much emphasis is often placed on unproductive coping products" (p. 832). As a result, numerous, relevant protective factors are overlooked, resulting in a limited and inaccurate overall picture of an individual's vulnerability and coping outcomes, which are then used to determine inaccurate a priori assumptions about individuals and often groups.

Inner workings of PVEST

As mentioned, PVEST values the critical link between setting and perception. Because identity development occurs over the course of one's life and is "especially relevant for adolescents given their heightened self-consciousness" (Spencer, 2006, p. 847), PVEST allows for an individuals' meaning-making during this process. This is especially important to allow for individual's different experiences within the same

setting. For example, it can account for two siblings who have grown up in the same family, setting, and socio-economic status, where one sibling earns A's in high school versus the other in a juvenile detention center.

PVEST is a complex and dynamic model. Because this model is stage specific (i.e. examines individuals in specific stages of their lives), and can be applied to any individual at any given time, regardless of their stage, it can be difficult to understand without practical examples. In the following sections, and when necessary, I have included a running scenario, indicated with italicized text, about a fictional boy named William. I use scenarios about William to help the reader to understand this dynamic and complex model, PVEST.

Figure 4. Spiraling and interactive systemic processes: An assumed "unfolding" of human processes occurs across the life course from conception to death
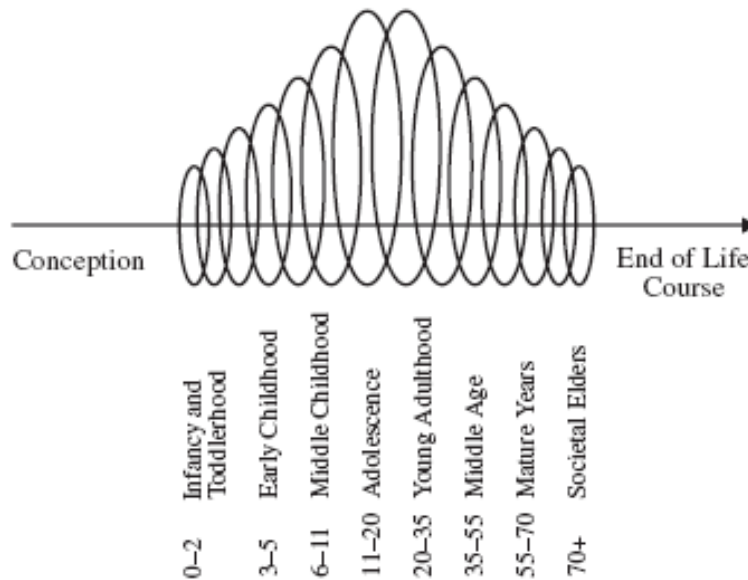
Source: Spencer, M. B. (2006). Phenomenology and Ecological Systems Theory: Development of Diverse Groups. Handbook of Child Psychology. W. Damon and R. Lerner. New York, Wiley Publishers. 1: 829-893.

Stage specific model

When Spencer asserts that PVEST is a stage-specific model, linking setting and perception, the term "stage-specific" refers to the different developmental stages in an individual's life (see Figure 4). That is not to say that PVEST's phases are linked directly with life-stages described in Figure 4; rather, the life-stage model is used to depict the flexibility and dynamic nature of the model, in that it can be applied to any life-stage from birth to death. PVEST is also a recursive, process oriented model, as it can be used to understand human processes within and between life stages, circling from one life-stage to another.

For example, consider William, an African American male who is at the end of his 5th grade school year. Within a few months, William will enter 6th grade, which in his school district is middle school. Developmentally, this is a specific time in William's life where he is not only transitioning from one setting to another, but also from one life-stage to another (i.e. between middle childhood and adolescence). When William was in his 5th grade (elementary school), he was exposed to a variety of risks and protective factors. Those risks and protective factors will change when he enters a new setting.

There can be a variety of risks and protective factors that take on various forms for different individuals. Some general risks and protective factors include racial/ethnic isolation, gender, faith, community, body type, immigration status, skin color, privilege, health quality or disability status, cultural traditions, social class, and temperament.

According to Spencer (2006), "all are linked to the character of the context [/setting] and the individual's history of experiences and even the group's history in the nation (e.g. generational experiences of immigrants as newcomers and long-term

adaptations of indigenous groups such as Native Americans, Hispanic, and African

American youth and families)" (p. 840). That is to say that the risks and protective

factors in an individual's life and life-stage are directly linked to their prior and current

experiences within their microsystems.

Among the risks mentioned above, it is important to note that they "may be offset

by protective factors" (also listed above) (Spencer, et al., 2004, p. 232) to assist in

determining the net vulnerability of an individual. According to Luthar and Cicchetti

(2000), protective factors are "those that modify the effects of risk in a positive direction"

(p. 858). In most instances, protective factors can be seen as the opposites of risk

mechanisms. However, it is interesting to note that both risks and protective factors can

be used to predict levels of resilience and an individual's response to risks (Rutter, 1987).

That is to say that deficiency models that evaluate risks are leaving out another large

resiliency piece, potentially found in protective factors. Resilience researchers must be

careful to dig a bit deeper and analyze the "why" and the "how" of the processes taking

place. Rutter (1987) contends that "it is not enough…to say that academic success or

self-efficacy are protective (although they are), we must go on to ask how those qualities

developed and how they changed the life course" (p. 319) with emphasis on the latter.

Stage 1 of the PVEST model is Net Vulnerability, which Spencer (2006)

describes as a "net balance between evident risk factors and accessible protective factors"

in a particular period of time (p. 847). An individual's vulnerability level in "high risk"

environments is often attributed to the subject's levels of protective mechanisms. In

Figure 5, Quadrant I depicts instances when individuals have high risk factors, and low or

no protective factors present in their setting. In schools in particular, the result is a highly

vulnerable student with potential special needs. Quadrant II, depicts an individual with

low risks, and low or no protective factors. The result is a student with "masked"

vulnerability, with symptoms that may not be evident or may be overlooked.

Figure 5. PVEST-Linked Vulnerability Level and Resiliency Prediction Dual Axis Model

Risk Factor Level			
		High Risk	**Low Risk**
Protective Factor Level Presence/Experience	Low Protection (Not Evident)	Special Needs Evident: I (Highly Vulnerable)	Symptoms Not Evident/Overlooked: II ("Masked" Vulnerability)
	High Protection (Significant Presence)	Resiliency Expected: III (Low Vulnerability)	Untested: IV (Undetermined Vulnerability)

M.B. Spencer, 2004 (Adapted from J. Anthony, 1974)

Source: Spencer, M. B. (2006). Phenomenology and Ecological Systems Theory: Development of Diverse Groups. Handbook of Child Psychology. W. Damon and R. Lerner. New York, Wiley Publishers. 1: 829-893.

 Quadrant III, depicts individuals with high risk levels, and high protective factors. The

result is a student with low vulnerability, with high projections of resiliency expected.

Lastly, quadrant IV, depicts individuals with low risk levels, but high protective factors.

The result is undetermined vulnerability, as groups of students who fall in this category

are largely untested; that is, research studies are generally not structured around

participants who fit this category. This quadrant also depicts the high performing

student, considered the norm (middle income or non-minority status) in schools (Spencer,

2006). Protective factors include but are not limited to high levels of familial, environmental, and instructional support.

Although this information is helpful, ultimately, it is not the measurement of risks and resiliencies that will help schools to better provide for their students. It merely provides one perspective or piece of the puzzle. Rather, researchers must take their frameworks a step further to answer the "why" and "how" questions. For example, Rutter (1987) asks why and how is it that some individuals demonstrate high levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy despite their high risk circumstances while others do not? He concludes that as researchers, we should not be searching for protective factors, but rather, for the mechanisms present in the developmental process that help to create the protective factors (Rutter, 1987). Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) add that a resilience framework helps schools and organizations to identify the factors that contribute to high-risk settings. With this information, school teachers, administrators, and staff, can work to eliminate the identified factors, "thus yielding specific directions for intervention efforts" (p. 860). An idea of what protective factors may look like is exemplified below in another scenario about William.

William is living in a two-parent (biological) household where both parents work split shifts. He has two younger siblings for whom he is responsible for getting to school. His mother is going to night school to earn her G.E.D., and his father is always home after school to help with school work and make dinner. William performs well academically and has many friends at school and in the community. Each of these factors can be considered as just some of the possible risks and protective factors to which William is exposed during this specific stage in his life.

How William chooses to engage with these factors make them either risks or protective factors, creating his net vulnerability. For example, if William resents his mother for going to night school to earn her G.E.D., and rebels at school because he wants to show her that she isn't spending enough time with him, that factor would be considered a risk. However, if William looks at this factor as a way for him to bond with his mother as they are able to do homework together, as well as a way for his mother to earn a better education to get a better job that pays more money, this factor would be considered a protective factor. How researchers understand each factor depends on how the individual conceptualizes the factor.

The beauty of this framework is that it accounts for dynamic settings and perceptions during different stages in one's life. There is also an unavoidable link between risks and protective factors, creating the net vulnerability of an individual during a particular life-stage. Spencer (2006) describes this link: "as individuals transition across time and place, net vulnerability is itself recursively linked to its transformation as everyday stress processes for individuals as each interfaces with multiple environments of varying character" (p. 848). That is to say that as individuals transition across space and time, their net vulnerability will always be in a state of flux as their risks and protective factors will be continuously changing as well, based on the dynamic nature of changing systems.

The second phase of PVEST is Net Stress Engagement. The risks and protective factors that an individual actually acknowledges, become challenges and supports. The balance between one's actualized challenges and available supports create one's net stress engagement. Unlike stage 1, where the risks and protective factors include all

vulnerabilities (i.e. demographics or descriptors relevant to individuals, family members, or community) to which a person is exposed, net stress only refers to the balance between "the actual experiences of challenge and support that can impinge on an individual's wellbeing" (Spencer, 2006, p. 848). Because net vulnerability and net stress are recursively linked, meaning one's stress engagement can create new vulnerabilities, there tends to be a balance between the actual challenges faced and the supports available. Again, a key underlying assumption of the PVEST model is perception of the individual. It is then important to remember that net stress is measured by the perceived risks and protective factors encountered, and acknowledged by the individual.

If William's two parent household is interrupted due to divorce, the prior supports related to the roles his parents played in his life may no longer serve as available protective factors. This, in turn, changes William's balance of vulnerability. In this new scenario, William will be exposed to new risks and protective factors, which will also affect his net stress engagement.

Furthermore, challenges and supports may exist in the form of social stigma or stereotypes for William (which can be understood as challenges and supports depending on how William responds to and understands them). In William's new middle school, he is one of very few African American students. Among the African American students, William is among the even fewer who are academically successful. These factors (i.e. racial isolation and academic success) presents a new set of stresses (possibly manifesting themselves psychologically)[10]. Another stress William faces includes the

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[10] An example of a psychological factor could be internalized feedback from peers, social groups, or society that affects one's psyche. Spencer (2006) reminds us that "diverse students also receive ranges of feedback

massive amounts of media that have bombarded his life for 13 years, conveying messages

about what is hip, in style, and mainstream (which may or may not include things with

which William identifies). He is well aware of what it means to "act cool" as well as the

social and academic implications for doing so, particularly with his African American

social group at school.

   Although he may not be developmentally mature enough to articulate these

factors as challenges and supports as those individuals who are further along in their

identity development, William is aware, on some level, of the stereotypes that follow his

African American heritage, his dark brown skin, and his tall, slender stature. He is

aware that before a person even knows his name, they most likely expect him to be a good

athlete. How William internalizes and engages with these factors (which separates net

vulnerability from net stress engagement) based on the balanced challenges and supports

in his life, cumulatively creates his net stress level.

   Thus, risks often recursively transform into challenges and protective factors into

supports. A distinguishing difference, however, between net vulnerability and net stress,

is that the risks and protective factors associated with net vulnerability generally portray

demographics or descriptors relevant to the individual, their settings, and stage; however,

the net stress level serves as the balance between challenges and supports actually

experienced by the individual.

The ways in which an individual problem-solves and responds to their net stress

engagement, has the ability to produce reactive coping methods, which is phase three of

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about their status and inferred social station, which is not independent of the protective factors available
and contributes to the youths' level of net vulnerability (i.e. first component of PVEST)" (p. 849).

the PVEST model. According to Spencer (2006), "reactive coping methods include problem-solving strategies that can be either adaptive or maladaptive" (p. 850).

For example, in response to the stress of the stigma of "acting cool" or "acting White" in school, William may choose to find support to help him balance good grades while maintaining his friends (adaptive), or he may choose to cope by engaging in negative peer influences, keeping his social life intact, and earning failing grades (maladaptive).

However, Spencer (2006) reminds us that "as youth employ various reactive coping strategies consistently over time and place, self-appraisal continues, and those strategies yielding desirable results (i.e., objectively viewed as either positive or negative) are repeated" (p. 850). William may feel psychologically safer choosing to engage in negative peer influences because he maintains his social life, rather than creating an adaptive solution to his stress. When the reactive coping strategies are consistently repeated over time, they become stable coping responses. Stable coping responses over time give way to emergent identities.

The fourth phase of PVEST (seen in Figure 3) is emergent identities. Like other phases of PVEST, consideration for setting and one's perception are vital to understanding emergent identities as perception defines how individuals perceive themselves within different settings (i.e. school, family, peer groups, community). Spencer (2006) adds, "the combination of factors such as cultural/ethnic background, understandings about gender roles, and self and peer appraisal all define our identity" (p. 850). Emergent identities can be negative or positive depending on how the individual copes with the stresses in his/her life.

William, for example, may choose to cope with the stress of "acting cool" versus "acting White" in school by talking with his favorite teacher/mentor in school to help him find ways to navigate academic success and his social life. If sustained overtime, William may perceive this tactic of navigation pleasing and successful, creating an adaptive and stable coping response. This adaptive coping response may lead to a positive emergent identity in association with his life-stage of adolescence. William may be portraying a positive role of early adultification (portraying adult-like behavior or advanced maturity for his age) as he is forced to problem-solve to navigate adult-like spaces that are uncommon to his current life-stage of adolescence.

When adaptive coping responses become part of an individual's emerging identity, it has the potential of becoming a coping outcome, which is stage 5 of the PVEST model. The act of problem-solving and decision-making that William undertakes can lead to productive or unproductive life-stage specific coping outcomes, which is phase 5 of the PVEST model. Productive outcomes may include academic achievement, positive peer relationships, positive family relationships, and low levels of high risk behavior. Unproductive outcomes may include dropping out of school, disengagement in school, disengagement from family and/or peer groups, illegal means of earning income, and activity that results in incarceration.

Again, one of the most notable things about PVEST is its recursive nature. Once an individual has developed coping outcomes, they may enter into a new stage of their lives, creating an entirely new set of vulnerabilities and stresses, thus perpetuating the PVEST cycle.

As William develops through puberty, transitions into adolescence, and changing schools (i.e. elementary school to middle school and then to high school), he will be in a different stage in his life with a different set of vulnerabilities and stresses. Due to his growing maturity, experiences, and identity development, he will likely cope differently with his new set of stresses. How he copes will influence how he perceives himself (as well as how others view him) in his setting, developing new emergent identities and thus new stage-specific coping outcomes (Swanson, Spencer, et al., 2003). Thus, the recursive nature of the PVEST model cycles throughout the stages of William's life.

Although PVEST is a recursive model and thus serves as all encompassing when investigating an individual's life stages, it is notable that not all phases must be investigated to provide value and understanding. According to Spencer (2006), "one could use this framework for testing any set of orienting issues as an entire system or as easily pursue its use for examining variable relationships both within and between only two or three phases (e.g. Net Vulnerability and Net Stress Experienced)" (p. 850). Choosing the factors for determining which phases to investigate should depend on the populations of individuals of concern (e.g. African American males) and their developmental stage (e.g. adolescence). For further understanding, Figure 6, at the end of this chapter, presents an example of factors and phases that came up in Spencer's (2006) study examining the effects of economic policies and requirements for parents on academic and employment outcomes. This figure is included to provide a graphic organization of variables associated with different phases of PVEST. The value PVEST can provide for unpacking and understanding the lived experiences of African American, adolescent males in school settings, is invaluable. If schools, including administrators,

policy makers, support staff, teachers, etc. can be armed with real knowledge about individuals, they can better make decisions which will provide a more equitable experience for African American males in schools.

Conclusion

This review of literature suggests strong relationships between setting (also referred to as context), and identity, adolescence, and race, which must all be considered in unison, from a developmental perspective, and from the perspective of the participant. Though the literature relating to the above concepts is generally vast as it relates to African American males, I find that most if not all of the literature focuses on African American males in urban, high poverty, high risk settings. We need to know more about the experiences of African American males in suburban, predominantly White, affluent areas, particularly from their perspective. Scholarship documenting the experiences of African American males who have come from urban or urban-like settings to suburban areas due to gentrification is scant if not nonexistent. Although this research will not be limited to students from these settings, it will undoubtedly include them.

Research valuing the perspectives of the participant is necessary and important work as an individual's perception is their reality. Without this perspective, we risk falling into the superfluous trap of imposing our own perspectives onto their lives and settings. Thus, Spencer's (1997) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) serves as an appropriate tool to influence future practice, as it addresses *how* individuals experience their setting in a particular life-stage, and as they see it.

In aiming to understand the lived schooling experiences of African American males in a predominantly White, affluent suburb, an extensive understanding of the vulnerabilities associated with a particular setting, a working knowledge of adolescence and identity development, and the sensitivity to what it means to experience this setting in a particular time for individual African American males is of utmost importance. This understanding will provide a solid grounding for understanding the risks and protective factors to which they are exposed. This may include adult supports, awareness of stereotypes or racism, cultural values or beliefs, family setting, etc.

It will then be important to examine how those risks may be translated into challenges and how the protective factors may translate into supports which makes up what Spencer terms *net stress engagement*. The challenges and supports one experiences then turns into maladaptive or adaptive behavior, termed *reactive coping methods*. Once these behaviors are practiced over time, they can eventually become part of the participant's identity, be it positive or negative. This is what Spencer terms *emergent identities*. This framework can help researchers, policy makers, school administrators, staff, students, and even parents and community members to better understand the schooling experiences as understood by African American males in specific suburban settings.

Figure 6. Demonstration of PVEST application: Using frameworks for analyzing the effects of specific economic policies and requirements for parents on adolescent academic and employment outcomes
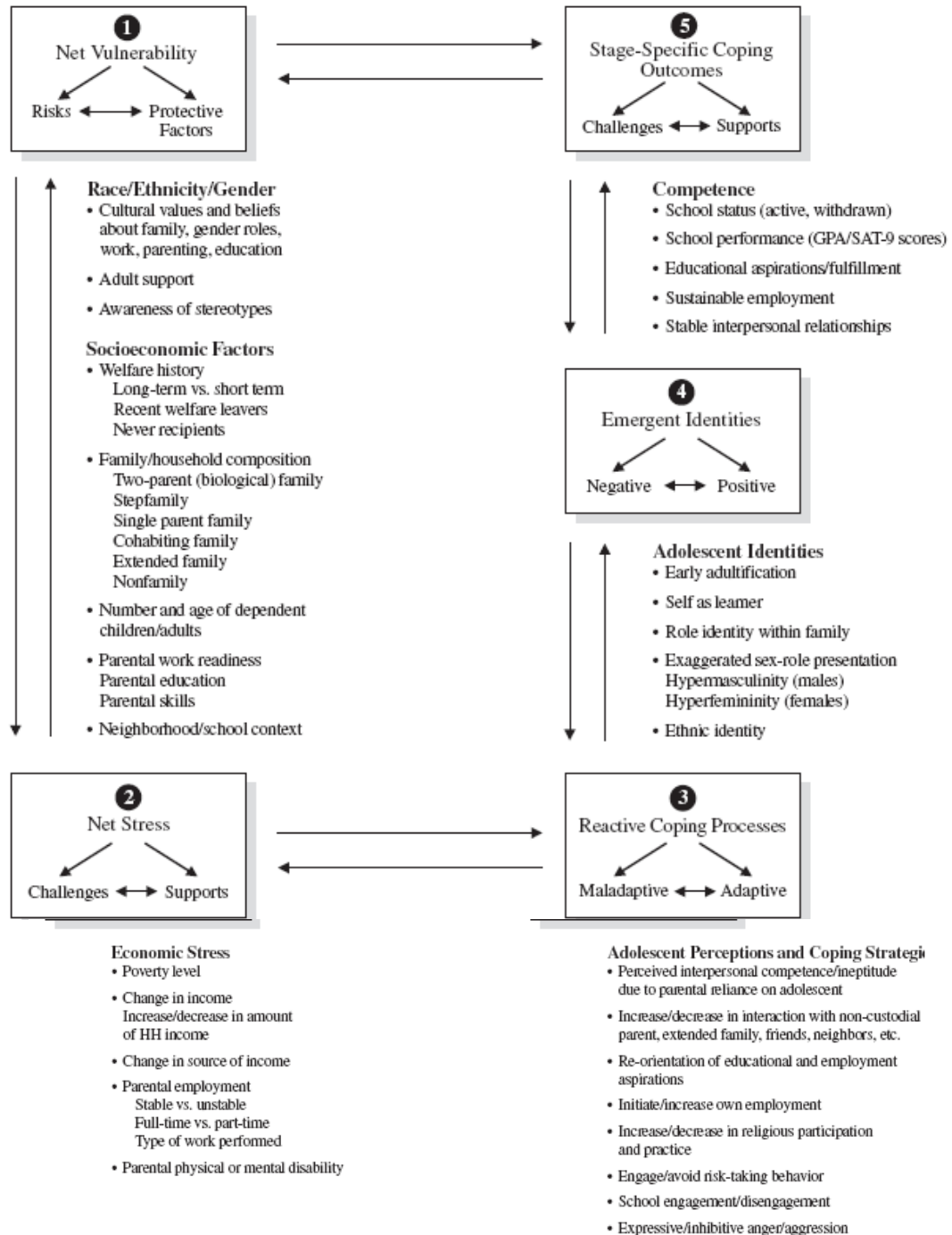
Source: Spencer, M. B. (2006). Phenomenology and Ecological Systems Theory: Development of Diverse Groups. Handbook of Child Psychology. W. Damon and R. Lerner. New York, Wiley Publishers. **1:** 829-893.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative inquiry as the methodological approach. Although there are many variations to understanding qualitative inquiry, I believe it to be research conducted in a natural setting, where "the researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words…, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language" (Cresswell, 1998, p. 14). This methodology suits my research study well, as the aim of the study is to gain an understanding of African American males' schooling experiences at Sunnyside High School. Their experiences are understood through methods consistent with qualitative inquiry: interviews and focus groups, and from through the lens of the participants. Understanding their experiences as they see it, will hopefully enlighten administrators, teachers, and possibly even students to help their understanding of what life is like as an African American male at Sunnyside High School.

Methods

To answer the research questions, I used a variety of methods, including a questionnaire (see Appendix A), focus groups, and in-depth interviews. A cover letter, questionnaire, parent consent/permission form, and student assent form were organized in a single envelope and given to potential participants when they were informed about the study. The questionnaire consisted of a series of questions that aimed to gather general contact, and prior and current demographic information. This information was then used

to place students into focus groups based on how long they have lived in the Sunnyside community.

Recruitment strategy

Recruitment for this study began in September of 2009. Various strategies for recruitment were used, including meeting students in the lunch room and finding students before or after school in spaces widely known as places where African American males congregate. However, the most effective method was emailing all second hour teachers, asking them to email me back if they had any African American males in their second period classes. If they did, I went to each class one by one, and spoke with students about the study. It was at this time that I was able to follow up with the students I had already spoken with in the lunch room and other spaces. For the students I had not spoken with yet, it was a time to explain the study, hand out permission forms and documents, and answer any questions.

The recruitment process took approximately three months, as multiple contacts with students were necessary to remind them to have permission slips signed and brought back. Out of 36 total 10th, 11th, and 12th grade African American male students contacted, one student moved out of the district during first semester, four students didn't turn in the appropriate permission slips, one student turned in the appropriate permission slip, but couldn't attend the assigned focus group, two students turned in appropriate permission slips, but didn't show up for their assigned focus group, three students turned in student permission forms and questionnaires, but never turned in parent permission forms, and two turned in student permission forms and questionnaires, but their parents

did not support their student's participation in the study. Out of eight total students who were placed in alternative settings, four were contacted to participate in the study, but were placed in alternative schools during first semester, thus they were unable to participate. 15 total students participated in the study. Ten students (Bill, Mike, Aaron, Ty, Corey, Jason, Devin, Milo, Gabe, and Jamal[11]) participated in focus groups, while five students (Darnell, Jaylen, Arnold, Cedric, and Darryl) participated in interviews. The breakdown of who participated in which focus group and interview can be found in Tables 4 and 5 and discussed in subsequent sections. Of the 15 participants, six were in grade 10, three were in grade 11, and six were in grade 12.

Questionnaire

I used a questionnaire (see Appendix B) for the purpose of collecting general contact information, and prior and current demographic information from student participants. Contact information was collected for the purpose of contacting participants during their school day if needed, or for contacting parent(s)/guardian(s) before, during, or after the study.

Demographic information such as address was originally collected to be used as a general proxy to determine neighborhoods in which participants live. However, this information was not needed. Instead, I gained this information through their stories. Data regarding the length of time they have lived in the community gave me an idea as to who has lived in the community for a number of years or who was a newcomer.

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[11] All personal and institutional names in this study are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the students.

Information regarding grade level was collected for the purpose of deeming students eligible for participation, as I only included 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students in the study. Because data was gathered in the fall semester, 9th grade students had not yet experienced the high school setting for long enough to contribute to answering the research questions. Lastly, information regarding the participant's class schedule was gathered so that I could find them during the school day to remind them of their upcoming focus group or interview date.

Although the student information could have been gathered in the focus groups, I instead gathered this information via questionnaire so the data could be used to categorize students into focus groups. Furthermore, I was able to devote my full attention during the focus group to gathering group data, not individual contact information.

Again, I facilitated gathering questionnaire data by including the questionnaire in the envelope of forms presented to the potential participants when I initially made contact with them to describe the study. I gave them the option of filling out the questionnaire at the end of our conversation, during their free period during the day, or on their own time. They then returned it to me in my main office mailbox. The data from this questionnaire was then analyzed to place students into focus groups, which are described in the next section.

Focus groups

Focus groups were used because I was interested in listening to the ways that adolescent, African American male students dialogued with one another, collectively making sense of their schooling experiences. I also conducted in-depth interviews, using

purposeful sampling, for the purpose of delving deeper into the data. DePaul

University's IRB approved this research (see Appendix A).

I anticipated that all interested African male students in 10th through 12th grade

would be included in focus groups; however, some were not included because they

responded too late or couldn't be accommodated in a focus group due to insufficient

numbers of participants. I spoke with some of the students who were unable to

participate in focus groups due to insufficient numbers in interviews instead. Focus

groups were formed around the length of residency in this school district. The intention

was to group students by commonalities in experiences prior to and during high school so

that focus group conversations could revolve around those experiences. Because

Sunnyside was seeing increasing numbers of African American students moving in from

outside the district, the way they articulated their schooling experiences were different

from those who have grown up in the Sunnyside community.

The categorization of focus group selection criteria, which reflects longevity in

Sunnyside, is illustrated in Table 4. For example, focus group A was comprised of

participants who had lived in the Sunnyside community for less than two years, and had

moved from a community similar to Sunnyside. Focus group B was designed for

participants who had moved from a community unlike Sunnyside in the past two years.

Focus group C was designed to gather information about participants who moved to

Sunnyside from a similar community in the past five to eight years. Focus group D was

designed to gather information about participants who had moved from a community

unlike Sunnyside in the past five to eight years. Focus group E was designed for

participants who had lived in the Sunnyside community their entire lives. The few

participants who had lived in the Sunnyside community for three to four years

participated in interviews instead of focus groups as it was unclear whether or not they

shared common experiences with focus groups A/C or B/D. Furthermore, there were no

eligible or willing participants who fit into focus groups A and C. One focus group

session was conducted for each of the focus groups B, D, and E.

Table 4. Categorization of focus group selection criteria

Focus Group A: less than a year-2 years in the district + Moved from a similar community	**Focus Group C**: 5-8 years in the district + Moved from a similar community	**Focus Group E**: Has lived all of schooling life in the Sunnyside community
Focus Group B: less than a year-2 years in the district + Moved from a community unlike Sunnyside	**Focus Group D**: 5-8 years in the district + Moved from a community unlike Sunnyside	
*Participants who have lived in the community for 3-4 years participated in interviews instead of focus groups as it was unclear whether or not they shared common experiences with focus groups A/C or B/D.		

I conducted focus groups at the convenience of the participants in terms of time

and space. Focus groups took place at Sunnyside High School, and were conducted

during school, often during lunch hours and study hall periods. Due to scheduling, some

participants missed classes to participate; however, I made sure that the

parent/guardian(s) of these participants had signed permission slips indicating that this

was permissible. Further, I worked with each participant ahead of time, asking them to

indicate on the questionnaire which periods were the most optimal for them to participate.

Sunnyside personnel communicated to me that they were in full support of my study, and

supported me pulling students out of class if needed. Thus, if participants missed a class,

I wrote them a pass out of class, notified the teacher, and notified the attendance office.

My goal was to be as unintrusive as possible, by not interrupting the students' schooling experiences, unless the interruption was deemed minimal and there were no other options for scheduling the focus groups and interviews. If anyone—parents, teachers, administrators, students—objected to taking students out of class for the focus groups or interviews, I did not; however, this was only the case for a few participants.

Since most focus groups took place during lunch or in the afternoon hours, I provided pizza after the focus group for the participants, which I informed them ahead of time. Providing lunch allowed students to report directly to our meeting place, avoiding the need to stop by their lockers to pick up brown bag lunch or the cafeteria to purchase lunch. To avoid attracting non-serious participants with the enticement of food, I told them that lunch would be offered after questionnaires and consent/assent forms were turned in.

Once students were categorized, they were placed into focus groups based on their longevity in the Sunnyside community. Again, I conducted one focus group for each categorization that had enough willing and eligible participants. In the focus groups, I asked questions about their experiences in high school, their perceptions of how others (i.e. teachers and other students) viewed them and how they viewed others, academics, challenges they faced socially and academically, and acceptance in the school community (see Appendix C for focus group questions). I audio taped and videotaped all sessions to ensure accuracy in capturing dialogue from participants. All focus group audio was transcribed by MedEase Transcription and coded and analyzed by me. The video was watched multiple times to revisit the body language of the participants when speaking as well as accuracy of dialogue.

In-depth interviews

Once focus group data was collected, I used purposeful sampling to choose participants to participate in in-depth interviews. Interviews were administered during the school day, during the student's lunch hour or free period. If they were not able to meet during that time, I requested a meeting during a class period. Again, I gained permission from their specific teacher as well as the parent/guardian, and student.

One in-depth interview was scheduled with five participants. Table 5 illustrates the categories in which the participants fell into. For example, interview F was comprised of two participants, who participated in two different interviews, who have moved from a community similar to Sunnyside in the past three to four years. Interview G was comprised of one participant who moved from a community unlike Sunnyside in the past three to four years. Interview H was comprised of a participant who moved from a community unlike Sunnyside in the past two years. Interview I was comprised of a participant who has lived in the Sunnyside community his entire life.

Table 5. Interview Categorization by Participant

Interview F: 3-4 years in the district + moved from similar community Participants: Arnold, Cedric	**Interview H**: less than a year-2 years in the district + Moved from a community unlike Sunnyside Participant: Darnell
Interview G: 3-4 years in the district + moved from a community unlike Sunnyside Participant: Jaylen	**Interview I**: Has lived all of schooling life in the district Participant: Darryl

The interview guide (see Appendix D for interview questions) asked about issues such as individual academic and social experiences in their high school, their perceptions and definitions of success, obstacles they may face, and supports in place in high school. The interviews lasted anywhere from 45-70 minutes.

I also had follow-up conversations with the participants for the purpose of member checking. At this time, I shared my emerging analysis, to see how my understanding resonated with theirs.

All in-depth interviews were audio-taped, videotaped and transcribed by MedEase Transcription. The transcribed focus group and interview tapes and interview data were coded and analyzed by me.

School and district data

Informational and anonymous data about Sunnyside was collected at the school and district level. For example, I accessed accurate numbers regarding the total enrollment of African American males at Sunnyside High School. This helped me to determine how many students I was recruiting in relation to how many 10th, 11th, and 12th grade African American males were enrolled at Sunnyside. At the school level, and with the permission of the parent(s)/guardian(s), I planned on obtaining additional data, specifically related to the individual students in the study. Generally included in the school records are historical documents regarding prior schools attended, grade history, IQ testing, etc. However, I chose not to access this data because the quality of nuanced stories that the participants shared were enough to make sense of their experiences. I valued their perceptions more than what was in their formal personal records.

Ethical Issues

While conducting research, there were a number of ethical issues I needed to consider and address such as my position and access as a teacher, informed consent, data storage, anonymity of participants and the school, and issues related to protecting the best interests of participants. Each ethical issue is addressed below.

My dual roles: researcher and teacher

As part of my job at Sunnyside High School, I had access to a number of student records as a school staff member. However, I did not use any of this data for research purposes without permission from the participants and their parent/guardian(s).

I communicated with parent(s)/guardian(s) and students that the information they revealed to me would not be revealed to the school in a manner that could compromise their identity in any way. Furthermore, there were no consequences to grades or anything school-related, given my position of power in the school. I had no grading power or authority over the students. I reiterated that I was not conducting research as a teacher, but rather as a researcher.

As a teacher in the building, I had a legal responsibility to report particular information that had the potential of putting students in harm's way. As a result, I informed the group that if there was ever a safety concern (i.e. participants are or have an intention of hurting themselves or someone else, or someone else is or has an intention of hurting them), these actions would be reported to the appropriate people (i.e.

parent(s)/guardian(s), social workers, school administrators, etc.). However, although I was prepared for this instance, thankfully, no occurrence of this type came up.

Informed consent

To ensure that all participants and their parent(s)/guardian(s) were aware of the purpose of my research study, how their participation would be included in it, and potential risks and benefits, I provided participants and their parent(s)/guardian(s) with informed consent/assent forms, in accessible language, and made sure that parent(s)/guardian(s) and students understood how this research would impact them as participants. I took as much time as is needed to speak with participants and parents, making myself available for questions (only one instance required a conversation with a parent via email). All participants were aware that their participation was voluntary, they could choose to drop out of the research study at any time, and they could ask questions at any time. The results of the study will be made available via written report, providing a synopsis of the study without revealing any personal information of any participant; it will focus on the issues that are central to the study. They can obtain this by contacting me via the contact information provided in the parent/guardian/participant letter.

Data storage

To ensure the confidentiality of all data, I stored the data in a locked cabinet in my home to which only I have the key, and in password-protected computer files.

Pseudonyms

Pseudonyms were used for all personal, location, and institutional names, including the school community, district, and participants. I refrained from using any information and details in the research that would reveal identity.

Data sharing

I did not and will not share any information which may reveal the identity of students or their families. If requested by the school or district, I will make available a written report that provides a synopsis of the study, without revealing any personal information or compromise the confidentiality of the participants or their families. It will focus on the issues that are central to the study. Data was shared with peer reviewers, but without real names or identifying information.

Location

All focus groups and interviews took place at Sunnyside High School to mitigate any feelings of being unsafe or being taken advantage of. I did not publicly advertise where focus group meetings or interviews were held for confidentiality of the group and participants.

Providing food

I understood that providing food for participants during focus groups and interviews may have posed an ethical issue, where participants may have participated because of the food, thus potentially providing unauthentic responses. As a result, I did

not announce that food was going to be provided until students and their parents had already consented to participate. When I scheduled the focus groups and interviews, if they were during a lunch hour, I then, after they were scheduled, let students know that lunch was going to be provided. I also attempted to mitigate this possibility by talking with students about the importance of authentic answers for the quality of the study.

Quality

Studies of this sort benefit from various strategies to ensure strong data and analysis. I employed member checking, peer review, thick description, and an audit train in striving for trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln 1989).

Member checking

I used member checking to ensure that my data was credible. I facilitated this process by having conversations with participants during the course of my emerging data analysis. I did this to ensure that the analysis was either consistent with participants' understanding, or to better understand why my analysis may diverge from theirs. Even if our perspectives were different—they rely on their lived experience, and I benefit from more practice in intellectual critique and know the existing body of scholarship that informs my thinking—it didn't mean that either perspective was incorrect. Understanding why they were different was the goal, in order to make sure that my analysis was grounded in as full an understanding of their lived experience as was possible. Undergoing this process of member-checking with the participants validated that my

understanding of their school experiences were in fact as they had intended to tell their stories. I did not have any divergent analysis that the participants spoke to.

Peer review

I periodically met with colleagues to bounce ideas off of them regarding patterns I found during my process of coding and analyzing the data. This strategy helped to determine whether my coding and analysis was logically constructed. The peer reviewers were two classmates who had taken the Human Subjects Research training, passed it, and were working on or had just completed their dissertations.

Thick description

Qualitative inquiry requires the use of thick description. I made sure to use a lot of detailed description so that the reader could easily make sense of the research. I also used direct quotations when necessary to ensure I was capturing key points in focus groups and interviews accurately. My goal was for the reader to "see" (through the data) what I was asserting. This will hopefully enable other educators who read this study to determine which parts of the study they find useful to their setting (transferability).

Audit trail

In the methods chapter of the dissertation I delineated the actual procedures undertaken in doing this research. In the methodological reflection appendix, I discussed in more detail how the research process unfolded and took place. Readers should be able to use this detailed information as an additional lens in making sense of the study.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study sought to understand the voices of African American males in the school setting. Further, it sought to determine how they made sense of their school setting in terms of how they navigated challenges, as well as the sorts of supports accessible to them. Through their authentic stories and dialogue, I made sense of how their words revealed their perceptions of success. Lastly, I sought to understand how they transcend adversity in school, demonstrating resilience. The best methods to answer these questions were through small focus groups and in-depth interviews.

In accordance with Ecological Systems Theory and PVEST, it is very important to have a strong understanding of the setting in which African American males in this study reside. Understanding their setting provided a context by which to understand their experiences. By using the theoretical framework of PVEST as a lens by which to view the data, I was able to focus closely on how African American males perceived and experienced their own microsystem of school. In their particular life-stage of adolescence, I listened to their stories to uncover their level of vulnerability within school. Further, I listened to how individuals perceived challenges and supports within school and determined how they coped with those challenges in a positive or a negative way, thus creating emerging identities.

By studying African American males through the lens of PVEST, this research provides valuable information necessary for teachers, administrators, parent(s)/guardian(s), and students. By focusing on both challenges and supports, instead

of just a deficit view, all stakeholders should have a deeper understanding of ways to mitigate challenges, providing more useful and informed supports for African American males in high school.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Having the opportunity to speak with 15 African American males at Sunnyside

High School provided insight into who they are and how they experience school. By

talking with them, it became clear that although they share the same race, gender, and

school setting, their experiences were not all the same. In fact, their experiences varied

most greatly by the number of years they had lived in the Sunnyside community;

however, this was not always the case.

To refresh from chapter 3, Table 6 describes the participants in terms of the

amount of time they have lived in Sunnyside. For ease of terminology, the following

labels are used to describe the participants in each focus group: lifers, urban old arrivals,

urban newcomers, suburban transitioners, and urban transitioners. For example, those

who have lived in the Sunnyside community their entire schooling lives are "lifers". The

participants who participated in this focus group are Bill, Mike, and Aaron. Those who

had moved from a community similar to Sunnyside in the past five to eight years are

"suburban old arrivals". There were no eligible participants who fit these criteria. Those

who had moved from a community dissimilar to Sunnyside in the past five to eight years

are "Urban Old Arrivals". Milo, Gabe, and Jamal participated in this focus group. Those

who had moved from a community similar to Sunnyside in the past two years are

"suburban newcomers". There were no eligible participants who participated in this

focus group. Those who had moved from a community dissimilar to Sunnyside in the

past two years are "urban lifers". Ty, Corey, Jason, and Devin participated in this focus

group. Those who had moved from a community similar to Sunnyside in the past three to

four years, and participated in interviews, are "suburban transitioners. Lastly, those who

had moved from a community dissimilar to Sunnyside in the past three to four years are

urban transitioners.

Table 6. Participants: time in Sunnyside and the type of community lived in previously

Length of time in Sunnyside	Type of Community Lived in Prior to Sunnyside	
	Similar **	Dissimilar **

Entire life
"Lifers"
	"Lifers": FOCUS GROUP E
	    Bill
	    Mike
	    Aaron
	    Darryl (interviewed)
		N/A

5-8 years
"Old Arrivals"
	"Suburban Old Arrivals":
	    N/A
		*"Urban Old Arrivals":*FOCUS GROUP B
		    Milo
		    Gabe
		    Jamal

3-4 years
"Transitioning"
	"Suburban Transitioners"
	    Arnold (interviewed)
	    Cedric (interviewed)
		"Urban Transitioner"
		    Jaylen (interviewed)

1-2 years
"Newcomers"
	"Suburban Newcomers":
	    N/A
		"Urban Newcomers": FOCUS GROUP D
		    Ty
		    Corey
		    Jason
		    Devin
		    Darnell (interviewed)

* Similar refers to suburban communities that are of the same approximate SES, and similar racial demographics.
** Dissimilar refers to urban communities, namely urban low income neighborhoods in the nearby metropolitan area, where the racial demographics are unlike Sunnyside.

This chapter will describe how the participants made sense of their experiences at

Sunnyside. The data is organized and presented categorically in three main sections:

stereotyping and racism, influential people, and the process of identity development. A

complete model of the relationships among the categories will be presented at the end of

the chapter (see Figure 7). At times, and when appropriate, attention is brought to the

particular focus groups in which the various participants participated; however, as stated, the focus group affiliation was not always salient.

The first section talks about the ways in which the participants defined, understood, and navigated racism and stereotyping at Sunnyside. The data reveal that participants reject stereotypes for various reasons. Some rejected them to show the school community something other than the racist stereotype placed on African American males, some rejected them to show themselves that they can be something other than the stereotype, while others rejected them for fear of being negatively labeled. I found it interesting that those who most often rejected the stereotypes for fear of being labeled talked about how other African American males (generally referring to the newcomers) gave into the racist stereotypes as they felt it created a sense of belonging to a racial group. This was part of an emerging phenomenon where lifers often found themselves racially stereotyping the newcomers. Regardless, it was clear that all African American males faced a quandary of sorts, making decisions on whether to reject or to give in to the stereotypes. It was clear that each decision had social and personal repercussions, both positive and negative, presenting a difficult social space to navigate.

The second section discusses the influential people at Sunnyside that affect them the most, contributing to their emerging sense of self. These influential people most often included teachers and coaches, peers; however, some spoke of parents and themselves. These people were most influential to the participants in terms of helping them to determine who they are and how they fit into the Sunnyside setting. When talking about the role that teachers play, the participants revealed both positive and negative experiences. However, above all, they expressed feelings of wanting to be

treated the same as their peers. Part two of this section talks about the complexities involved with peer group membership and navigating peer groups in an age of adolescence. However, the life-stage of adolescence was only complicated by navigating race and gender in a school where racist stereotyping was prevalent. Navigating these complexities involved a process of identity formation where the participants made decisions about peer groups based on race in some instances and common interests in other instances.

The last section presents data around how the participants process and understand their place at Sunnyside, given the racist stereotyping and process for interacting with and understanding the influential people present in the setting. The participants talked about how their process of understanding themselves in the Sunnyside setting led to feelings of isolation, belonging, feeling misunderstood, and feeling understood.

Stereotyping and Racism

As I talk about the experiences of the participants below, I use the term "racist stereotypes" to emphasize the salience of race-based stereotyping in their talk. With the exception of Darnell, who did not speak to issues of racist stereotypes, participants across all focus groups and interviews spoke clearly to the stereotypes associated with African American males that are present in the media, society and their own specific setting at Sunnyside. They named descriptors like being good at sports (particularly basketball), and having disregard for the future, no productive future goals, interest in self-gratification, poor academic performance, poor behavior, including getting into fights and being disruptive in class, short tempers, gang affiliation or participation, speaking in a

"ghetto accent," dressing in baggy clothes, liking rap music, knowing how to rap, getting into mischief, and having interests in money, women, and jewelry.

Racism present in the school was at times overt, spoken clearly through the voices present in the school setting. However, there was a constant and inescapable, racist, hegemonic fog in the air of the school. These racist stereotypes inform and perpetuate the hegemonic processes present in the school setting. Note that in the students' own experiences, you will hear various places where racist stereotypes emerge from four categories of individuals mentioned by the participants: teachers/coaches, peers, parents, and the students themselves. The participants did not speak of these four categories in static terms; thus, this section will thematically discuss the ways in which participants grappled with ideas around rejecting stereotypes, giving in to stereotypes, and how within-group stereotyping manifests within the African American male community at Sunnyside.

Rejecting Stereotypes

Every day, participants must navigate this very difficult issue of racist stereotyping. Their experiences revealed multiple ways to deal with these issues, while justifying reasons for their actions. For example, some participants choose to reject the racist stereotypes, acting in ways that combat the stereotypes for the purpose of showing the larger school community or even oneself that African American males can be something other than this racist stereotype, while others choose to reject the stereotypes for fear of being negatively labeled by the larger school community.

Among many participants who use this approach of rejecting stereotypes, Jamal, an urban old arrival, revealed the following in response to a question asking how he feels African American males are perceived by teachers:

> I try to show everybody, not just teachers, students, like everybody that not all black males or females, whatever, are all like what they think they are, as what the media shows them. You know, I just like I try to show them that way, and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work; but you know, I just try to, you know, show them that me as me like that, I'm respectful and everything. You know, give me respect; I'll give you back. You know, I just try my best to show them that basically ... I don't know how to word it. I'm trying to think of the right word, but I just show them how I'm different from everybody else.

When speaking about how he feels about the predominantly White students' perceptions of him, Darryl, a lifer, indicated very positive perceptions. Like Jamal, Darryl spoke about his efforts to reject stereotypes as well:

> For me it's always kind of been like I have something to prove, to show like since I do have so many White people around me showing me that like not every black person is like what they see on TV or like even what they see like on an average day. I want to show them that like we do have goals, we are ambitious, that we like can be very intelligent and that we're just like any other person and it doesn't matter like what color we are, we're just all the same.

For these and many other participants, rejecting these racist stereotypes requires a strong self concept and a strong sense of identity. Without these attributes, the social stigma stemming from the African American community, as well as the larger White community within the school can be devastating.

Yet another motive for rejecting stereotypes is simply to prove to oneself that he can be something other than these racist stereotypes. It is sort of a reverse of self-fulfilling prophecy. When speaking about why academics (getting good grades and

doing well in school) are so important to him, Aaron talked about proving the dismal

statistics about the academic success of African American males wrong. He added, "It's

partially that [I want to show them something different], but then mostly it's just to prove

to myself that I can do it."

Some participants revealed that they reject the stereotypes for fear of being

unfairly labeled and thus unfairly treated at Sunnyside High. For example, Bill and

Aaron, who are lifers, shared that they reject racist stereotypes by carefully selecting their

friends, choosing peers who do not fit the negative stereotype of African American males

through their lens. Bill spoke very specifically about fear of being labeled "just another

one of them[12]."

Jamal, an urban old arrival, talked about why he needs to be selective with his

peer groups in an effort to reject racist stereotypes toward himself.

> I'm honest, I'll be hanging, when I hang out with my black friends, I got to
> watch what they do. I've got to calm down and everything because we can
> be in a very fancy restaurant or McDonald's or whatever and they just act
> up, and I got to calm them down.

Similar to Jamal, who rejects racist stereotypes for fear of being unfairly labeled,

is Arnold, who has many African American friends. Arnold talked about the same

notion, and navigated this quandary in his own way by talking about creating boundaries.

That is, although Arnold might hang out with African American males who frequently

get into fights, he chooses to refrain from behavior that may get him into trouble.

Furthermore, Arnold added:

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[12] Jamal and Bill used the term "them" throughout the focus group. It was clear that they were speaking about other African American males in the school, with whom he clearly did not identify.

I don't like to get into fights, I stay away from that like I said before like I stay away from that drama and stuff. When I see a fight happening I break it up or like if it's like close to a fight happening I'll break it up. I like to try to stay out of it so I don't want to be involved in it or anything.

Arnold's actions involve a tricky navigation of choosing a peer group that is often labeled with racist stereotypes, where they get into occasional fights in school; however, although he chooses to stay away and refrain from this behavior for fear of being labeled as deviant or accused of doing something he didn't do, he still maintains friendships with them.

Giving in to Stereotypes for Sense of Belonging

Although some participants talked about rejecting stereotypes for a number of reasons, Mike expressed an interesting theory about how some African American males give in to stereotypes for a sense of belonging. The next section will reveal how Mike understood this phenomenon.

Equally as fascinating, was when some participants spoke about from where stereotypes originate and how they are perpetuated. Mike, a lifer, talked specifically about how stereotypes are perpetuated and never fade because of the value that some African American males (specifically those who act and perpetuate the stereotypes) place on the stereotypes. From his perspective, the racist stereotypes create a certain sense of belonging for some African American males. He believes that "they still want to have that separated category for themselves" because it creates a certain sense of belonging.

Mike makes an interesting point. In a mostly White school, where the participants spoke specifically about the lack of clubs and activities geared toward the

interests of the African American community, African American male students may indeed struggle to feel a sense of belonging in the school community. And in a critical developmental stage of adolescence and teenage identity development, where group membership and peers are generally so very important, Mike's understanding may make sense. However, this is an opinion through Mike's lens; that is, no other participants spoke to this phenomenon.

The ways in which African American males navigate racist stereotypes has thus far been discussed in relation to how they understand other racial groups, particularly Whites, perceive them at Sunnyside. However, another interesting phenomenon appeared in the participant experiences relating to how some African American males racially stereotype one another. The next section will discuss what this looks like at Sunnyside High School.

Dissonance: Within Group Stereotyping

Some participants experienced dissonance when speaking of their willingness to reject the stereotypes on one hand, while on the other hand, acknowledging the contradictions they see (in their every day experiences or in the media) regarding behavior that supports the racist stereotypes. This dissonance often created a phenomenon where lifers found themselves racially stereotyping urban newcomers and often urban old arrivals.

Below are some discussions from the lifers in focus group E. This focus group spoke most frequently about their perceptions of "other" African American males at Sunnyside.

Aaron shared his feelings about African American males who act in a manner that perpetuates racist stereotypes:

> I mean I don't want to be like pointing fingers at anybody, but then it's like normally the people who live in the apartments or whatnot or try to…or the Black kids who've lived in the suburbs and they try to act like they are Black…They try to cause commotion and, I don't know, that's showing a bad example, I guess, and that's…I guess that's like having teachers generalizing us.

One can hear in Aaron's voice the dissonance he experiences, navigating his own, racist stereotypes. One can only imagine the difficulty Aaron and many other African American adolescent males face navigating racial stereotypes, peers, and issues of identity development. Aaron added a little later in the focus group his thoughts that separate himself from his African American male peers who have not grown up in Sunnyside their entire schooling lives:

> It's just that maybe it's just because we don't want to be seen as that other stereotype, just another stereotype, that we want to actually branch off from that and show that Black people can be this or that or do this or that that's not usually associated to black people; whereas, people who live in the apartments in the ghettos, I guess they do limit themselves as to what they can do. And basically the media is just ... They see their future how it's being portrayed in the media. In order for them to be successful in life, they have to become rappers or singers or whatnot. I'm not saying that there's nothing wrong with that, but it's just showing that that's their only option.

What Aaron is speaking about is a clear us/them divide that exists between and among some African American students at Sunnyside High. The housing dynamic within the Sunnyside community is such that many of the African American families who have moved for various reasons (some voluntarily, some due to gentrification in their former neighborhood) reside in a very small and segregated part of the community where

apartment buildings exist in pockets next to subdivisions of multi-million dollar homes. This very literal housing divide within the community creates an us/them divide between those who live in houses versus apartments, those who rent their home versus own their home, and those who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives versus those who have just joined the community and may live in apartments.

As a researcher, having resided in the community and heard the racist stereotypes first hand from the mostly White community members, I have heard the African American community members who live in homes assign the same racist stereotypes to the African American families who live in apartments as do the White families, suggesting not just a racial divide, but an economic one as well. However, a major difference between the African American families and the White families who reside in houses is that the African American families still experience the racist stereotypes on some level from the larger White community.

Quandary: to reject or to give in?

Hegemonic attitudes regarding racism and racist stereotypes are unfortunately part of the current school setting that one cannot discount. It can manifest itself in overt and profound ways, or can be as subtle (and equally profound) as the air in which we breathe. Thus, when understanding the experiences of the African American male participants, their voices must be listened to with an understanding of this complex hegemonic process.

Having considered the manifestations of racism and racist stereotypes at Sunnyside, one must then consider how participants navigate and cope with this

phenomena. The data show that some coped in ways that reject the stereotypes 1) out of a need to demonstrate behavior other than the racist stereotype to others in the school as well as themselves, and 2) for fear of being labeled negatively and unfairly. Some participants reveal that some African American males at Sunnyside (not necessarily themselves) feel a need to give in to stereotypes for a sense of belonging to their racial group. Lastly, the data reveal some within group stereotyping that often served to perpetuate racist stereotypes.

It is my belief that the quality experiences that an individual may have in multiple settings contributes to the broadening of his or her world view along with his or her perspective thus contributing to his or her growth, development, and maturity. It is, therefore, interesting to ponder whether or not some participants have had enough experiences prompting growth and change in their adolescent life-stage to have developed a critical lens to understand and call into question their notions of racist stereotypes. Interestingly, in no instance did students reference *racist* stereotypes; rather, they used the word "stereotypes".

For example, Cedric spoke about how he tries really hard not to jump to racist notions for fear of manifesting the stereotype of victim that African American males often play. However, I do wonder about whether or not high school students have ever been asked in school to think in critical terms about issues of race and racism. Alternatively, are they forced to navigate the racist hegemony existing within schools and society without a support system to call these racist stereotypes into question? Society is telling Cedric not to be a victim. However, does Cedric have the tools and support in a school setting to call this notion into question and reject it if it is false? Likewise, do

other participants have the tools and support to call into question their preconceived notions and understandings about African American males who have come from lower income communities or who frequently get into trouble at Sunnyside? When they say "most Black kids at Sunnyside," do they have an accurate idea of exactly how many African American male students there are at Sunnyside? At the start of a few of the focus groups, when I mentioned how many African American males attend school at Sunnyside, the participants were surprised, thinking the number was much smaller. These questions must be considered when understanding the experiences of African American males. Their experiences are racialized in a setting that is often laced with racist traditions. However, if these racist traditions are never discussed or called into question, African American males, as the very individuals who are being racially stereotyped, are left in a very risky predicament of how to think about and understand ways to navigate racist stereotypes.

This section demonstrated how stereotyping and racism are manifested within Sunnyside High School through the lenses of the African American male participants. This included how the participants defined and understood the stereotypes associated with African American males, what they thought of the stereotypes, and how they chose to navigate through them within the school. The purpose is to gain an understanding of how stereotyping and racism exists within the school, as well as how African American males navigate this phenomenon.

Influential People at Sunnyside

Conversations with the participants revealed four categories of people who most often inform and perpetuate the hegemonic racist stereotyping present at Sunnyside: teachers/coaches, peers, parents, and the self[13], that eventually contribute to the participants' process of identity development. Most salient, were conversations around teachers/coaches and peers, which are represented in sub-sections to follow. However, I include parents and the self in the diagram, as they, too, emerged as important contextual influences to consider when understanding the participants' experiences and the identity development process. Participant experiences with parents and the self can be found infused throughout the upcoming sections.

Figure 7 represents two elements of the broader conceptual model that this research revealed: stereotyping (as discussed in the previous section), and influential people at Sunnyside (as discussed in this section, namely teachers/coaches, peers, parents, and the self). As this chapter progresses, pertinent sections of the broader conceptual model will be presented. The entire conceptual model will be presented at the end of the chapter.

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[13] I have included "the self" as one of the influential people in the lives of the participants because the data revealed a constant, inner dialogue and often struggle within their own minds to define who they are. This inner dialogue was integral to their process of identity development.

Figure 7. Racism/racist stereotypes mediated through relationships with teachers/coaches, peers, parents, and the self
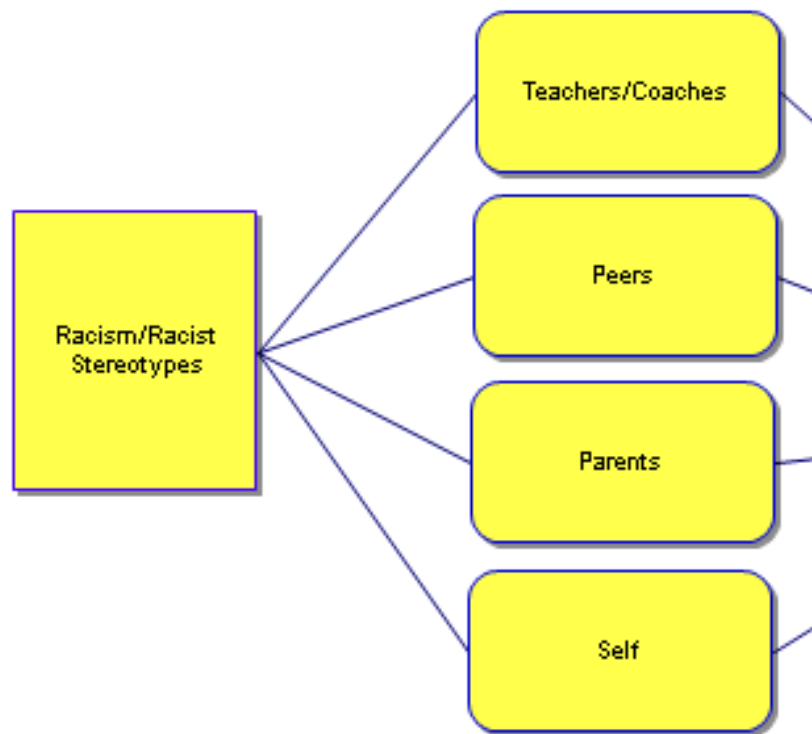
The first and most often discussed, influential people were teachers/coaches. However, because the conversations were dominated by experiences with teachers, the section is titled "The Role of Teachers" which includes various experiences with coaches interspersed throughout the section.

Teachers

Given the power structure between teacher and student, it was no surprise that all participants talked about having both positive and negative interactions with teachers. These interactions were filtered through the lenses of the participants, who all the while were in a constant state of assessment as to whether or not teachers liked, accepted,

supported, or approved of them. Further complicating this process of understanding was the role that racism and racist stereotypes can have on some teacher perceptions of African American males. The ways in which students perceive teacher perceptions of them greatly influences student experiences at school.

Positive experiences: the power of teacher allies

The participants who revealed positive experiences and relationships with their teachers talked about supportive and helpful teachers who genuinely made their students feel cared for and supported. The participants who spoke the most positively about teachers were Arnold, Cedric, Darnel, Darryl, and Gabe.

In an interview, Arnold talked about how he gets along with all of his teachers. Arnold is in special education classes. Teachers in the special education department have a reputation of being supportive, encouraging, and helpful at Sunnyside. Revealing experiences in support of this positive reputation, Arnold talked about his special education classes:

> I like to help my teachers out if they need help or like I don't know, my teachers they sometimes, if I'm failing a class, they like help me to like get extra credit points or like give me full credit on something that was like due a week ago to help me to get my grade up or something. So I'm pretty good with my teachers. I like to be good to my teachers because like I want to get good grades in that class so I can pass the class and get where I need to go.

Arnold went on to talk about one of his teachers, specifically citing instances where this teacher had encouraged and helped him to pick up his grades, specifically in math. Because Arnold had experienced so much support from his teachers, he was very clear that he didn't think they were racist at all. He added, "Especially not with me because

my teachers treat me the same as any other people because my teacher helps me with everything…If I raise my hand, she helps me, she do the same if some White male do the same."

Cedric, another student who receives services from the special education department, also had very positive perceptions of and relationships with most of his teachers. When asked how he felt about his teachers as well as how his teachers felt about him, Cedric spoke of the maturity and level of cultural competence that they possess. He tells his story:

> Well for the most part I honestly want to say that my teachers have been very, like throughout my high school years my teachers have been very kind to me. I feel that like teachers are more mature and I think they've been in those situations[14] already and they've already learned from these mistakes a lot of the times so they already know how to approach it. I don't think they go in as much with like preconceived notions, and even if they do they know how to hold their tongues and I honestly think I've been like respected by a lot of my teachers and actually I am very fond of a lot of teachers at this school. I think they've done a, I don't know if they like train them in like diversity meetings or something, but they're really good and like really aware of things and I think it's awesome.

Darnell also spoke positively about how he perceives his teachers understand him, stating, "I think teachers understand me like a lot more here than any other teacher really has." He goes on to talk about their effort to get to know him as a student and a human being, adding, "If they can't understand you, they'll try to. They take time if you are having trouble; they really do their best to help and a lot of teachers…I've had in the past don't do that. So here at Sunnyside, that' a good thing."

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[14] When Cedric says, "those situations", he is referring to situations where teachers have already been exposed to people of color and diverse situations.

In a discussion where Milo and Jamal revealed their experiences with negative teacher perceptions, Gabe offered a counter-story to Milo and Jamal. He indicated,

> [Teachers] just seem cool to me because like every teacher I had, they didn't like treat me different or like I had no special privileges or they didn't like put me down or nothing. They just treated me like everyone else, and it's like I'm not saying that there ain't teachers that don't do that. I'm just saying like I never had a teacher that did this, so it was like my perspective of teachers is pretty good.

Darryl is in mostly advanced and A.P. classes. Darryl said he had all positive experiences with his teachers, adding,

> I had a very close relationship with all of my teachers, like I still talk to them all now and they like just prepared…me for college, and I like talk to them and come in for help a lot. They just understand that I do have goals [and] that I want to achieve and that like I'm really trying to break a barrier, like set a good example.

He continues, talking about teachers' fairness toward not only him, but his peers:

> I feel that for the most part, everyone has given me a fair shot. I can honestly say that I've had a majority of the really good teachers in the school and they like understand that like everyone is the same; they don't judge people. And I also think that because I did so well my freshman year, the teachers talk, obviously, and like some of the teachers that I would end up having later if they didn't' know me personally, knew of me, so they knew I was a good student. So I kind of like by doing good freshman year, I kind of set it up that like I wasn't like the stereotype.

Positive experiences in school in relation to race reveal two important points. First, special education and advanced track programs have historically been recognized for their supportive role with students at Sunnyside High School. Thus, Aaron, Arnold, and Cedric's experiences should be understood as unique in that they receive special education services. Alternatively, Darryl, is enrolled in an advanced academic track, which again have historically provided more support to their students than those in the

mainstream track. Furthermore, there are a select group of students in each grade level who take mostly advanced placement classes. Thus, many of them are learning from and with one another in five out of eight 50-minute periods a day. However, although its structure provides support, it can also limit one's understanding of what goes on in the mainstream and basic skills track, and vice versa.

The second salient point is the connection participants drew between positive experiences with teachers and being treated fairly, the same, and without special privileges. This point I understood as the right of any student to feel safe, be treated like a human being, and operate on an equal playing field.

However, I also found this point interesting when pondering the different types of positive, individualized treatment that each participant might need. The extra help needed for a student in an advanced placement class is very different from the student receiving special education services. These students are also different from those in need of social support, or those in the thick of navigating race, racism, and stereotyping. At some point, it seems that the participant *experiences* revealed a need to be treated differently, with differentiated help or special treatment based on various needs, although this is not what their *words* revealed. Perhaps the structure of special services in schools, whether for special education or advanced placement classes, cultivate an environment for students that is more humane and caring, and thus more interpersonal in nature.

Regardless, and very simply, positive teacher interactions generated positive student experiences. And one cannot discount the power that a teacher has in a student's life. The participants revealed just how powerful teacher encouragement and support can be.

Cedric, explained his feelings regarding positive teacher support:

> I think teachers play a key role [in the academic success of African
> American male students] because teachers are the ones that, well
> obviously they teach you things, but again, they're the ones that
> make you feel that you aren't stupid. You want them to make you
> not afraid to raise your hand in class; you want them to make you
> feel like you aren't alone. Like even though you might be the
> African American person in class, you're not the only one on your
> side, you know that helps out a lot. I remember back when during
> the election times, we talked about all this stuff, I was actually in
> government class and the teacher, like I would always feel like I
> wasn't so backed against the wall because the teacher was always
> there to back me up a little bit if I ever felt a little bit staggered.

Similarly, Jaylen talked about positive teacher support and its affect on his

academic performance. He revealed,

> I don't think there's too many obstacles as far as teachers trying to
> hold you back. I feel if there's a teacher who I know wants me to
> do good, like I don't want to let them down.

From these positive experiences with supportive teachers, some participants

revealed that high teacher expectations became a self-fulfilling prophecy to them. Jaylen

continued his sentiment with a story about his math teacher:

> Mr. [Dale], he was like, "Jaylen," at the start of the semester because I got
> a D on his final last semester. Mr. [Dale] come to me and told me, "If you
> have to come to me every day, you know, come to me. I want to make
> sure you at least get a C in this class." And that in turn makes me not
> want to disappoint him, so now I know I'm going to make sure at least I
> want to get a B in his class if I have to. I got a B on the quiz yesterday, so
> that makes me feel good, like I'm not like letting him down.

Darryl also spoke of a positive experience with his biology teacher, revealing,

> I remember last year my biology teacher. It was like I never got an A in
> an honors class up until that point, and then I remember…I got like an A
> on the first test and then didn't do too well on like our next quiz. And then
> [my teacher]…told me, "This one quiz doesn't matter. I know you're

gonna get an A in this class." And…she actually was sincere about it. At first I was like oh, that's a teacher-thing to say, but then I like thought about it more as time went on, and it actually happened; I ended up getting an A both semesters in Enriched Biology and that's when like I knew I could like compete with like the most high caliber students.

Cedric, Jaylen, and Darryl all revealed their own conceptualizations of what teacher support means to them. Specifically, three significant points emerged from their experiences. 1) Cedric talked specifically about teachers making him feel safe in the classroom, 2) Jaylen talked about his math teacher making himself available for extra help, thus Jaylen held himself accountable, and tried hard to not let him down, 3) Darryl talked about the expressions of sincere care and encouragement that his biology teacher gave him. These experiences reflect positive interactions between teacher and student, as well as positive outcomes for the individual participants.

Although there were many positive experiences cited by participants, some also spoke to the ways in which teachers prejudge or stereotype African American males. These were articulated through negative experiences with and perceptions of teachers.

Negative experiences

This section shares various negative participant experiences with, and perceptions of, teachers. Note that many participants exposed their negative perceptions stemming from issues of race, racist stereotypes, and racial group membership. These themes are connected in very real and non-linear ways for the participants. For example, Jaylen talked about how he feels pre-judged by his teachers when he walks into class. He shared,

I think teachers, when they see an African American student come in to their class, I automatically assume that they think, okay, like here comes trouble, which maybe isn't the wrong assumption to make because honestly, African American students need to kind of step up their game when it comes to behavior—we're the main ones getting in trouble at the school. But it's like the same thing. They come in there and automatically assume I'm going to be trouble, and that's like that's not always the way it is.

Jaylen continued to reflect on his experiences with teachers adding, "Honestly, probably 75% of the teachers [prejudge] you as soon as you walk in the classroom." When I asked Jaylen whether he could talk about or name a positive experience with a teacher, he cited his English teacher who is an Asian, but attributed her ability to get to know and not prejudge students to her status as a person of color.

Similar to Jaylen's experience of feeling racially stereotyped when walking to classrooms, Milo, an urban old arrival, expressed, "Well, honestly, teachers, I can tell how they reacting and things like that; and some of them…are cool with us, you know, and some of them, they just stereotype." He went on to say,

As soon as you walk into the classroom, the first couple days you can tell whether the teachers, you know, kind of have like…they look at you and you can either tell if they are cool or they are going to be like kind of, you know, unsure of how you're going to act since you are Black because you can see there's other students around here that may be some of the ones that just moved that haven't adjusted as well.

I found the latter part of Milo's experiences interesting, particularly when he talked about the students who had just moved to Sunnyside. Milo's voice revealed not only a negative perception of how some teachers prejudge and stereotype African American males, but also revealed his own opinion about those who had just moved to Sunnyside. This

perception is taken a step further by Milo when he indicates that the stereotype he holds about those who have just moved to Sunnyside is shared by the teachers.

Jason, who moved from a community unlike Sunnyside less than 2 years ago, talked about his perception that teachers treat White students more fairly than African American male students. He shared his personal experience:

> The way that they talk to me. It's like they'll be on one side of the room and they talk to one student or whatever and they're all happy and all that and laughing joking and when they get back to me, it's like okay…"did you do this," or whatever. It's like I don't get the same love the other students get. It's like why am I being treated differently? I mean, I never did nothing to them. You know what I'm saying? I mean, I don't even know them, and I just don't think it's fair that [African American students] are getting treated differently.

Jamal, an urban old arrival, also talked about the discrepancy in fairness between teachers and African American students versus teachers and White students. He expressed,

> I honestly think it's easier for like White kids to go up to a teacher and ask [for help] because I seen that. You know, I feel like they are expected to. And like with most teachers, they think that the Black kids don't know the material. They feel like they are not expected to come ask for help. They are just expected to fail.

Jason, Devin, and Ty, went on to talk about teachers assuming negative behavior from African American male students based on their friends or acquaintances who demonstrate poor behavior. They spoke of their frustration in teachers not getting to know them or certain situations, assuming that they are bad or doing something wrong when they are not. Jason, while speaking specifically about instances when some African American students fight, talked about how teachers will stereotype all African American males based on racial group membership. He also expressed his frustration with adults at

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Sunnyside who see fighting and immediately move to discipline instead of determining why the fight was going on, who instigated it, and who was involved. He gives voice to this issue, stating, "They don't try to get down to the bottom of it, they don't try to figure out what happened. It's just what they see."

In an interview, Cedric, who generally spoke very highly of his teachers at Sunnyside, talked about a specific, experience with a teacher that upset him at the time. He shared,

> I've had one teacher that kind of upset me a little bit because I felt that he was a little bit prejudice and I don't know, I just honestly, I don't think I have an attitude or anything, but like since the first day he met me, he didn't like me and once I was like talking to him about something and he goes, "You know what, you think the world owes you something? I want to let you know that you're not entitled to anything and…whatever I give you is what you're going to get." And that just like really upset me. And I think it probably was because I was Black and maybe he just didn't like Black people or something. I was just like I don't feel entitled to anything. I feel like honestly everything I have in my life I've worked for and everything I think I will ever have in my life I'm probably going to have to work for them. I don't believe anything is going to just be handed to me.

Along with citing some negative experiences with teachers, some participants revealed their own perceptions that some teachers are racist, having negative perceptions and racist stereotypes of African American males. For example, when comparing his prior school to Sunnyside, Jason said,

> At my last school, the teachers were nicer. There's a lot of like asshole teachers here that just don't care…And I hate to say it, but it's definitely because of my skin color. I mean it's a shame that that stuff still goes on but its life though.

This notion of teachers having pre-conceived notions about African American male students appeared when speaking to the lifers in focus group E. Bill in particular spoke to this issue with regard to negative preconceptions. He revealed,

> For me, for teachers I think they have a preconception of what you might be, [not] how you are. Like they might have had other students in the past, but I think they…kind of expect you to act one way. But if you decide to act differently, then they are probably—at first I would say shocked because they are more like, okay, well he's definitely not like any of the other students—and then they'll probably change their thinking a little, but they probably…not all the way. They'll still have some of their preconceptions remain the same. They'll still think, okay, well maybe he's acting different but he might still be like the rest of them. Like they might think it might just be a front or something like that.

The stories mentioned in this section expressed feelings that negative teacher perceptions of the participants stemmed from racism, racist stereotypes, and racial peer group membership. I found it interesting that a common thread was that of being treated unfairly based on negative preconceived notions that teachers harbored about African American males. Jaylen, Jason, Jamal, and Bill all spoke of unequal treatment and negative stereotypes whether it manifested as not starting on an even playing-field, not getting "the same love" as the other kids, or assuming that the African American kids don't know the material, or just having teachers assume that they know all about you and what you're capable of based on their prior experiences with African Americans, particularly males.

Alternatively, Milo talked about teachers judging all African American males based on how they perceive the ones who "haven't adjusted as well." I find this quote interesting because, as earlier stated, Milo, himself, has moved from a community unlike Sunnyside five years ago. In the focus group, he articulated a time of transition where he

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needed to learn his new surroundings. However, I wonder whether or not Milo learned

how to navigate his new surroundings at a personal cost. He speaks as though he

considers himself well adjusted to the school community. However, I wonder: Has he

been socialized into the White, middle class norms often perpetuating the racist

hegemony that exists at Sunnyside? He, too, reveals a level of us versus them when

speaking about other African American males. I wonder when in his process of

development did he move from considering himself "them" to considering himself "us"?

Delving deeper into this notion of within-group stereotyping, the following

paragraphs discuss how some participants revealed that the negative prejudgments and

racist stereotypes that some teachers harbor about African American males were in a

sense, justified; some participants faulted the African American males who act out, as

those perpetuating the racist stereotypes.

Previously, Jaylen spoke about how "African American students need to step up

their game when it comes to behavior," and may justify why teachers have negative

preconceived notions about African American males. In an interview, Arnold spoke to

this same issue, adding, "Some teachers think we're like trouble, I might say, because we

always have fights and stuff."

Aaron, who has lived in Sunnyside his entire life, indicated that racist stereotypes

harbored by teachers originate from the bad behavior demonstrated by African American

males who live in apartments in the Sunnyside community. He explains,

> It's like maybe in the past [teachers] had Black students that they have
> caused commotion in class. I mean, I don't want to be like pointing
> fingers at anybody, but then it's like normally the people who live in the
> apartments or whatnot or try to…or the Black kids who lived in the

suburbs and they try to act like they are Black—they try to cause commotion[15].

Aaron went on to acknowledge that his sentiments could be a bad example because it then represents his own "generalizing" of other African American males.

Again, while revealing feelings about negative teacher perceptions, many of the students who felt as though they were the target of the racism, echoed sentiments of wanting to be treated fairly. However, the phrase participants used to request this fairness was a need to be "treated like a human being."

"We're just like everybody else."

The participants' process for understanding teachers' perceptions of them as well as understanding the perceptions of other African American males is important for researchers to understand when piecing together the African American male experience at Sunnyside. The data suggest that the relationships that exist between teachers and students can greatly affect the quality of schooling that the students experience in both positive and negative ways. And although this seems like a rudimentary concept, it is a surprise to hear the plethora of both positive and negative interactions that the participants experienced with teachers. It was clear that not all teachers fully understand the power they possess in helping all students to succeed.

Furthermore, participants expressed a plea to be treated fairly. By using the term "fairness", they were asking to be treated as human beings, particularly by their teachers. It is heartbreaking to hear students talk about the longing to be treated like a human

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[15] Here, Aaron is using the phrase "cause[d] commotion" as meaning *being disruptive* or *acting out*.

being, like everybody else, and with no special attention. The participants who

articulated these words felt as though they weren't treated fairly because of their skin

color. What a painful reality to have to face every day, complicating the normative

stressors already present in the life-stage of adolescence. I learned through these

conversations how vulnerable the participants were every day along with their resilient

ability to cope with the stressors in their lives. Ultimately, the participants expressed

wanting to be treated like everyone else because they are human beings, just like

everyone else.

Peer groups also play an important role in contributing to the tumultuous life-

stage of high school adolescence. For many of the African American males in this study,

the tricky act of peer group selection is complicated by racial group membership. And

complicating peer group selection and racial group membership is the fog of racism and

racist stereotypes present at Sunnyside among teachers and students. These become

added layers of complexity for African American males as they cope with and navigate

the process of peer group membership. The next section will focus on how the

participants navigate peer group membership in both positive and negative ways.

Peers

It's important to acknowledge once again the developmental (cognitive and

psychological) maturity level of the participants in the life-stage of high school

adolescence. Some may be making conscious decisions about peer groups and social

identification in light of racism and racist stereotypes, while others may not be explicitly

aware of these very real influences in the deepest sense. Ultimately, all students cope

with the peer group and racial group quandary in different ways based in part on their developmental place. Some influences present in selecting peer group and or racial group membership include student interests, self concept, and whether or not they think they can survive socially if they reject the racial group. Some participants revealed evolving views. Some articulated prior experiences as early as elementary school where racial group membership didn't matter because perhaps this was an age when race didn't yet matter to peers.

Below, I will bring these issues to life with the words and voices of the participants, navigating and negotiating this rocky terrain each day at Sunnyside.

Peer identity based on race. Although only one participant was bi-racial (African American and White), many participants articulated feelings of being caught between two racial groups. Jamal, for example, talked about the difficulty of wanting to identify with his African American racial group, but struggled because he didn't share common interests with them. He said,

> Like with me, yeah, I hung out with the Black kids. I had some White friends and different races, but I usually just hung out with the Black kids, but I had secrets I didn't really tell anybody or show anybody until this year.

Later on in the focus group, Jamal revealed that as he progressed through high school, gained stronger self confidence and sense of identity, he moved away from his racial group membership and moved towards peers who shared common interests. As a result, he is happier. As a senior, he tries to be true to himself, make as many friends as possible regardless of race, and focus more on other dimensions of his individual identity

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rather than his racial group identity. Also, when talking about moving beyond racial group membership toward a more multi-dimensional, individual identity, Jamal shared his process of development, voicing, "earlier in life I used to act like [the stereotype] more but now I'm starting to accept myself more for who I am."

In the same focus group, Milo spoke of a similar experience as Jamal, revealing, "As soon as I moved to Sunnyside…the first friends I made were African American because, you know, I naturally just kind of gravitated toward them and they kind of gravitated toward me." However, soon after, he gravitated toward other students of color who were "very supportive of each other." In Milo's case, racial group membership was not rejected, but became less important. He instead takes great pride in being on the basketball and dance team. His peer groups in these activities are more important to him than establishing membership in the African American racial group. At the same time, Milo acknowledges that there are those "people in the building who don't feel like [they] belong here and who will not, you know, get out of that circle of just their Black friends, like stay with that circle because that's where they feel comfortable." This acknowledgement by Milo revealed that his self concept was not solely contingent on his racial group membership; however, it may be more so for some African American males at Sunnyside.

Aaron and Bill, who are both lifers at Sunnyside, spoke of the difficulty they face with racial group membership. Speaking to this difficulty, Aaron shared,

> In certain areas, if I don't act stereotypically Black in a certain way, then in another area, I would try to be more like that stereotype even if it's not like my own personality…I would probably try to act like the stereotype just to…feel like…I'd probably be more accepted.

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Bill goes on to talk about the benefits of having more African American friends, stating,

> Black males who hang around themselves and other Black males, they kind of have a sense of who they are and what they are capable of; and if you hang around students of different races, then you kind of aren't really sure, you might not be sure exactly what you are capable of.

Aaron provided an alternative perspective to Bill's view about having a diverse group of friends when talking about his two best friends who are Canadian and Mexican. He adds, "It's just like the fact that they are not White American, that they are of a different nationality that just helps me see things in a bigger picture."

Regardless of how the participants choose to navigate this terrain, they all spoke of peer group issues associated with their ultimate decision regarding which group or groups to belong. For example, the judgments by peer groups can be quite hurtful and unsupportive, even if unintentional. Devin, an urban newcomer, talked about being judged from both White and African American peer groups. He shared, "You can be friends with Black people and you can be friends with White people [but] people judge you because you're friends with White people." Later on, he continued to say, "You still have White friends who have friends that don't like you because you're Black…think[ing]…oh yeah, he's going to steal my stuff just because he's Black and they don't even know you." Devin's comments again bring to the forefront the ever-present nature of racism and racist stereotypes when navigating peer group membership.

Cedric shared many experiences where navigating two racial worlds was necessary, but often difficult and hurtful. Cedric currently has friends from all different races and ethnicities, including White. In his reflections, he speaks of always remembering the "Black table in the cafeteria." He continues, "I remember whenever I

would go to that table like I would always feel a little bit more relaxed and a little bit more comfortable because I always felt different from everyone else in a way." Then, his interests started to deviate from the African American students, and he was faced with a feeling of being "stuck in the middle." As his interests changed, Cedric began to join clubs and groups, typically not joined by African American male students. On a school retreat with one of his clubs, he met a number of students, including a newly found friend, Alex. As the months ahead progressed, they started to hang out more, when one day, Alex revealed to Cedric how happy he was that they had met on the retreat, and that he couldn't believe he thought "those things" about Cedric when he first met him. The exchange continued,

> Cedric: Oh, what did you think?
>
> Alex: I just remember seeing you and you were laughing a lot and just having a lot of fun and I just thought oh there's some Black kid who's just going to come and mess everything up.

Cedric went on to talk about how hurtful this was to him. He added that he continued to be confused about this exchange with Alex, and that after this, he was more aware of his race around his White friends.

Regardless of this one experience, Cedric still affirms that he likes to take a color blind approach to choosing his friends. Having friends who accept him and perhaps share the same interests mean more to him than sharing racial group membership. He shared:

> You know what? I really just don't even care. I'm just going to hang with whoever is closest to me this day because I don't feel like running around or like trying to hold up all these different images."

At a later point in the interview, he went on to say, "You have to be around people that want to go to the same places as you; you want to be around people who have the same mindset as you." In a sense, Cedric has chosen to place less of an emphasis on notions of race with regard to himself and others. He talked about selecting friends based on acceptance and interests being easier.

The experiences described above talk about the issues that the participants faced when grappling with racial group membership. As touched on by Jamal, some participants began placing a stronger emphasis on shared interests rather than on sharing the same racial group. The next section will discuss how various participants conceptualize peer group identification based on interests.

Peer identity based on interests

After a series of experiences selecting peer groups based on race, Jamal decided that he valued sharing common interests with his peers more than basing friendships on sharing a common race. Jamal began a conversation about peers by stating, "I feel like people just need to get out of their comfort zone and get to know somebody." Jamal has found his sense of belonging and a sense of group identity in school by selecting friends who share common interests with him like skateboarding. In talking about his experiences, he shared:

> Yeah, about eight years ago like nobody really wanted to like hang with me and stuff...I was like with this group of kids and they skated—I skateboard and everything. Some of them did musical [theatre] and all that, and some of them played basketball, and like they were just like, they were just cool. Some of them were African-American too, and they just seemed normal to me.

Jamal went on to stress that he was just looking for happiness. For him, happiness meant finding group membership based on interests, helping him to explore and define who he is.

Darnell articulated similar thoughts; however, he also spoke of the value of having a diverse group of friends. In talking about the perspective one can gain from having a diverse group of friends, he added, "I just think that the broader your spectrum is of people, it's like you can soak up so much from two different sides of life, and you can relate to so many more people." To Darnell, the perspective he gains from having a diverse group of friends enables him to connect with many more people than those who choose to engage in friendships solely based on racial group membership like Arnold, Jason, and Devin[16].

Jamal echoed Darnell's thoughts, speaking of the positive impact of having a diverse group of friends. He shared:

> What I think most African-American…males [need] to do or females to do, they need to...spend their social life with other groups—because I hang out with skaters. I hang out with the White kids. I hang out with the Black kids. I hang out with the Italians. I hang out with the Mexicans. Basically,...I'm mixed with most of those things, and I just like that stuff. Like with me, I get into it. I'm learning how to play drums, and I'm starting a band and everything. I skate and I do fashion, things like that. You know, I just get into every group, and so you learn that everybody is cool and not everybody is against you, and that's why I think most African-Americans think everybody is against them because [White kids] are not [the] same color or they are smarter than them so [Black males] think that everybody doesn't like them because they come from [the city]. And I'm not saying that that's not true because I know some people they just like can't keep their mouth shut and they gotta say something.

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[16] Observations before school, after school, and during lunch indicate that Arnold, Jason, and Devin engage with friends who are mostly, if not all, African American. However, this information was not explicitly addressed in the focus groups and interviews.

Participants all revealed a connection between peer groups and how they factor into their process of identity development. Some participants talked about their process of defining oneself, changing peer groups multiple times throughout their middle school and high school years. For some participants, racial group membership seemed to be of the utmost importance, while others valued most a sense of belonging and shared interest with their peer groups. Regardless, these decisions all factor into their own sense of self concept, thus, their process of emergent identity development, discussed in the next section. As illustrated in this section, peers play an important role in the life of any adolescent teenager. They often determine one's acceptance in the school and into particular groups, and ultimately have an overall effect on one's self esteem and emerging identity. However, for an African American male, this life-stage and process of identity development is much more complex in schools that are often laced with racist traditions and stereotypes. African American males must navigate the normative stress involved with being a teenager at the disadvantage of operating on an unequal playing field; that is, they will walk into school being judged on a different set of parameters than the other students, including White students and other students of color (although not to the same extreme). These parameters begin with the stereotypes and the hegemonic processes that the participants previously talked about. Thus, how these resilient young men navigate this difficult space of establishing peer groups and friendships while attempting to define who they are, is of great importance.

Parents

In addition to teachers, peers, and the self, one's parents also influence the process of identity development. Not all participants talked about the parental influence. However, the ones who did expressed a relationship between racial group membership and parental disappointment based on participant's decisions to select peer groups based on interests, and not racial group membership.

Cedric (in an interview) and Aaron (in a focus group), both talked about pressure for racial group membership from one or both of their parents. Cedric, who has mostly White friends, was clearly frustrated when he said, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Because even my mom would be like how come…none of your Black friends ever come over? Then I'm just like, what are you supposed to say to that?"

In a bit of a different struggle, Aaron explained in a hurtful tone, the difficult conversations with his dad. He tells his story:

> I remember it. It was like around just about when I was getting into high school. I don't know. He was surprised in pretty much the interests that I had, like the taste in music. I'm more into rock, and I don't know, he was…the way that I saw it in him, he was really disappointed in me because apparently he saw it as…like not being proud of my Black heritage…But I don't know, just the way he was talking to me just made me feel like I was not accepted, like he didn't accept me as who I was only because I felt like he was trying to make me into, not in the sense as like a stereotypical Black guy, but just like a Black guy in general. I am Black, but it's like I'm supposed to like the type of music that Black people do.

For Aaron and Cedric, this is an added struggle to their process of peer group identification, with real implications for their self concept and emergent identities. The process for selecting peer groups does not end at school. As explained by participants,

pressure from home can add to the struggle. Sadly, loneliness was ever present in Aaron's voice when he spoke of his struggles for acceptance at school and at home.

Self

After listening to the participants' experiences, one must think about the multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of identity development. Through the very process of seeking out friends, the participants were in a constant state of development as they learned about themselves. Jamal, for example, learned through experimentation, that he values common interests more and racial group membership less. That is not to say that a duality exists, rather, a preference and emphasis on interests. Milo, had a similar experience, in that he spent his time with all African American students and wasn't quite settled there. Over time, he decided to focus on his own interests: dancing and basketball and inevitably he came to value the friends who shared these same interests regardless of race.

Bill and Aaron's comments regarding the value of having all African American friends or not, were quite interesting. Bill's argument was centered on racial group membership. He felt that a stronger sense of self can be established with all African American friends. It is with these friends that one can determine "what you are capable of." I found this comment fascinating. Perhaps attempting to understand one's self in a space where one shares the same race might mitigate some of the racial tension that might cloud the process of identity development when one is around those from various races, and thus vulnerable to stereotyping and racism. That is not to say that stereotyping

and racism does not exist within racial groups; however, perhaps Bill feels safer to explore himself around other African American males.

Aaron, Darnell, and Jamal, on the other hand, had very different views on why they chose friends who are not African American. They feel that a broadened perspective can be achieved by having friends who come from diverse backgrounds. Perhaps a greater understanding of one another can be achieved if we make more of an effort to have friends of all races and ethnicities.

Process of Identity Development

In review, Figure 8 below represents the process of how participants came to understand their experiences at Sunnyside. The model begins with the social processes of racism and racist stereotypes that exist in the school. They formally and informally, directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously affect how all people act, interact, think, and exist within the school. Experiences at school are mediated through interactions with teachers and peers in school, with parents around school-related issues and peer relationships, and one's own process of identity development (teachers, peers, parents, and self in Figure 7), all within a context in which racism is socially constructed, reproduced, and challenged.

Figure 8. African American Male Process of Identity Development
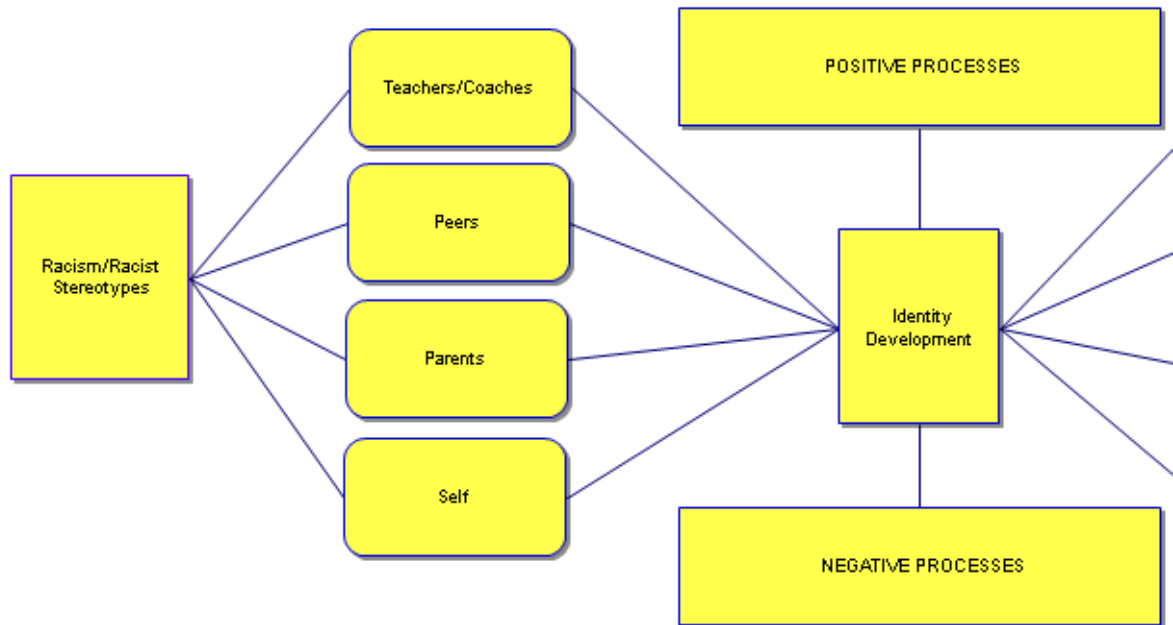
Participants engaged in a process of identity development when making sense of their interactions with individuals at Sunnyside. This process was on-going; that is, the participants were constantly in a state of making sense of their experiences and interactions at school. The interactions they choose to process were talked about in positive and negative ways. For example, through their perceptions of and interactions with the individuals at Sunnyside, they revealed feelings of isolation or belonging, of feeling misunderstood or understood, of a need for a diverse group of friends. These concepts will be explained through the participants' process for understanding their setting, and their methods for navigating it. In a sense, this reveals not only feelings and experiences, but also ways of coping, either positively or negatively, with understandings of and interactions with these influential individuals.

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Positive and Negative Processes

While processing experiences in both positive and negative ways, many participants spoke about issues of race when discussing isolation (a negative process). Participants spoke about inclusion in clubs and group activities along with feelings of acceptance from teachers, coaches, and peers at Sunnyside when talking about belonging (a positive process). Feelings of belonging were often followed by expressions of a strong self concept. The paragraphs to follow will examine feelings of isolation and belonging. The ways in which the participants process and cope with these influences in positive and negative ways ultimately has affected their identity development.

Negative process: isolation

When voicing feelings of isolation, Cedric, among others, articulated having these feelings while in class. Very aware of his own race and the predominantly White schooling context, he revealed,

> If I go into a new class or something, I'll always look around the room and count how many black people [are] in the class and usually, I'm the only one…I guess that always makes me a little like iffy because I know whoever, [is] like getting into anything about politics or race, I'm usually the one sitting there fighting about how I feel and that really feels like I'm cornered. It's really hard being the only one.

Cedric's experience revealed a feeling of isolation. His feelings are not necessarily a result of any one person. Rather, this is a feeling based on the racial dynamic of the class, which is indicative of the larger school dynamic. In a sense, this is a battle between the setting and the self.

Speaking a little differently about isolation, Bill, who has lived in the Sunnyside community his entire life, talked about an experience in his sociology class where students were asked if they welcomed Black students into the school. His experience follows:

> I kind of feel like I kind of belong but I kind of don't…Recently we did an experiment where it was all [anonymous] but...my teacher had different questions about different races and how you perceive them, and then one of the questions was…"Do you welcome Black students as students in your school?" And then I'm the only Black in my class. The percentages were what really shocked me because people might say that they are but in reality what they are thinking, like the numbers were 67% said yes and then 33% said no, and that's what kind of shocked me because even though it was anonymous, the fact that ... it just kind of makes you feel like not everyone is really accepting of me here. Do I really belong here?

Like Bill and Cedric, Aaron articulated feelings of isolation as well; however, his feelings emerged from experiences with his peer groups, not specifically in class with teachers and students. His words reveal an inner struggle in terms of how he navigates his existence as an African American male in the Sunnyside setting. He shares,

> I feel alone because, I don't know, I don't feel like acting like a stereotypical Black guy all the time…It's just that I don't have the same interests as them, and the way that White people see us as how the media thinks…since I don't fit that mold, I tend to feel, like, really alone.

However, Aaron goes on talk about how although he secluded himself from other African American students in middle school and part of high school, he made the decision to be involved in more "programs like marching band and steel drum, and…I started feeling more a part of the school more than I was before. From time to time, I still feel [lonely], but…I…feel more accepted now." These activities helped Aaron to find a sense of belonging in the school.

In the same focus group, Mike talked about feeling isolated and alone in middle school. He explained feelings similar to Aaron's, feeling alone, and forgetting those who may be experiencing the same issues. Out of Mike's feelings of isolation and loneliness, he felt a "need to conform in some ways to that mold of the stereotype." However, as Mike progressed through middle school and high school, he has come to a place where he felt, "I am just…accepting of who I am right now, and I'm not really having a problem anymore. I feel like a lot of people are accepting of me."

Mike is a perfect example demonstrating that the process of defining one's self within the school setting is dynamic. There is a process of negotiation and understanding one's self in particular times and spaces. Oftentimes, the feeling of isolation resulting from how one understands one's self within a setting requires a process of time to change and address feelings of isolation.

Positive process: belonging

While some participants spoke of isolating experiences, others spoke of experiences of belonging. The next section will discuss these instances. Note that the language and tone of the participant's voices often revealed a strong self concept when talking about instances of belonging.

When participants talked about a sense of belonging, they spoke specifically about clubs or sports, peers, teachers, and coaches, often in a positive light. Aaron, for example, previously described his participation in marching and steel drum band as a space which generated a sense of belonging in the school community.

Mike, who has lived in Sunnyside his entire life, talked about the friends he made participating on the track team, creating a sense of belonging in the school community. These newly found friends were 12th grade African American males, and were very accepting of Mike. He describes his experience:

> These twins, they were…so nice. They were accepting of me. I knew that they weren't the best influence, but it was more like how I felt around them. It was just like I felt they included me regardless of whether I talked like them.

Likewise, Darryl smiled brightly and confidently when talking about his participation on the boy's basketball team for the past 4 years. However, this is not the only way that Darryl feels a sense of belonging in the school community. He proudly talks about how his friends look up to him, explaining, "I think they just come to me because they know that I have the work ethic that like I want to succeed." Having a sense of pride in oneself, feeling smart, and being a person that others look up to can create a powerful and positive impact on one's self-concept, thus their sense of belonging in school.

Equally powerful, is the influence a teacher or a coach can have on an individual. Darryl went on to talk about strong teacher relationships:

> I had a very close relationship with all of my teachers, like I still talk to them all now and they…prepared me for college and I like talk to them and come in for help a lot. They just understand that I do have goals, that I want to achieve, and that like I'm really trying to break a barrier, like set a good example.

Speaking specifically about his A.P. Chemistry teacher, he shared:

> He really…keeps you focused like all of the time, and he's always like making sure that you're staying on task and like showing you how to use your time wisely. And like those are important things I need for college.

Especially being in his AP Chem. class, he's helped me a lot with that, to like prepare [me] for really hard classes.

Jason and Devin, urban newcomers in focus group B, talked about how a physical education teacher, Mr. Nelson, helped them to feel as though they belong in the school community. The exchange between Jason and Devin was so exciting and powerful to hear as they bounced their words back and forth to one another in agreement. I started out by confirming, "He makes you feel like you…"

Jason enthusiastically interrupted, "Like you belong!"

Devin chimed in, sharing, "He gives you motive. Like last year when me and [Jason] were in the same gym class, like Mr. Nelson gave me motive of coming to gym class. Like I actually wanted to come to gym class just to like be in that class because I knew we could like joke around and act like how we normally act without him…like…

Jason interrupts, "Without him judging us! Because he loved all people, but he loves Black people. Like he don't treat us different at all.

Devin added, "He don't treat us no different from nobody. He treats everybody equal."

"Right, he loves all people," Jason concluded.

The incredible power that one teacher has over creating positive experiences for students is evident in the participants words and experiences. After speaking with these young men, it was clear that their experiences at Sunnyside were more positive with Mr. Nelson there. Other positive individuals in Devin's life are his football coaches who, to Devin,

make me belong here because…the head coach is my health teacher and everyday he'd like talk to me. Not like talk to me, he'd like, like normally teachers don't like talk to me, make jokes. Like we can make jokes in his class, just like Mr. Nelson...It seem like he likes Black people.

The participants talked very clearly about experiences that made them feel isolated or like they had a sense of belonging. Ultimately, the participants made decisions about how they felt about themselves and others (including peer groups) based on the ways they chose to acknowledge and process these positive and negative feelings.

For example, the feelings of isolation that Cedric and Bill talked about in class, and the feelings that Aaron and Mike articulated with peers, were all processed and understood in ways that affected how they understood themselves and continue to understand themselves. These feelings of isolation led them to process and ultimately make decisions about how they interact with others and exist within the Sunnyside setting. An example illustrating this point comes from Aaron's experiences of feeling isolated by his African American peers. The way he processed his feelings of isolation (based on not fitting his perceptions of the stereotypical African American male) ultimately led to his self-isolation from the African American students at Sunnyside. This decision becomes a part of Aaron's process of identity development.

Likewise, when Mike expressed positive experiences of belonging with his two African American friends on the track team, he then made a decision to accept these individuals into this social life because they included and accepted him even though he didn't talk like them. When Mike talked about this experience, he expressed a sort of new-found hope in African American male peers; prior to this experience, Mike had not had African American male peers because he felt as though they didn't have any common interests. This decision to accept his new track friends into his life also helped Mike to conceptualize African American males, in general, in a more positive light, thus affecting his own process of identity development as an African American male. Mike talked

about how this new understanding helped him to take on a new attitude of acceptance of all people, giving everyone a chance instead of prejudging them. He now sees his old ways of prejudging as limiting in terms of the number of people that he could ultimately be friends with.

Similarly, the experiences of belonging that Darryl expressed about this teachers, ultimately affected his overall view of teachers at Sunnyside. How they treat him as well as how he perceives them in positive ways also has positive implications for how he views himself and his potential in the classroom and beyond. In a different experience, Jason and Devin talked about Mr. Nelson giving them a sense of belonging. However, though they viewed Mr. Nelson as a supportive member of the Sunnyside community, he did not restore their faith in the already skeptical view they held of teachers at Sunnyside. Thus, their experience with him was positive even though their skepticism did not waver for their other teachers.

The prior sections of this chapter discussed the ways in which stereotyping and racism were present at Sunnyside High School along with the impact that stereotyping and racism has had on the participants followed by how school experiences are mediated by significant individuals: teachers and coaches, peers, parents, and the self (see Figure 7). The next part of the model portrays the ways in which participants made social decisions based on how they processed their experiences. The social decisions made also contribute to the process of identity development of each participant.

Identity Development: Social Decision-making

The ways in which participants engage with, acknowledge, and process their interactions with teachers and coaches, peers, parents, and themselves, ultimately affect the ways in which they think about others and themselves and inevitably their process of identity development. (See Figure 8). In addition, the data showed that the decisions participants made as a result of their experiences with significant individuals along with their understanding of these experiences were often socially based.

Figure 9 represents the decisions the participants made as a result of their process for understanding the significant individuals in their lives. These decisions fit into four main categories, represented as the four ovals in Figure 9: social acceptance, racial group membership, personal goals and interests. The following sub-sections will provide short examples typical of how these social decisions manifested in various participant experiences.

Figure 9. Process for Social Decision-Making
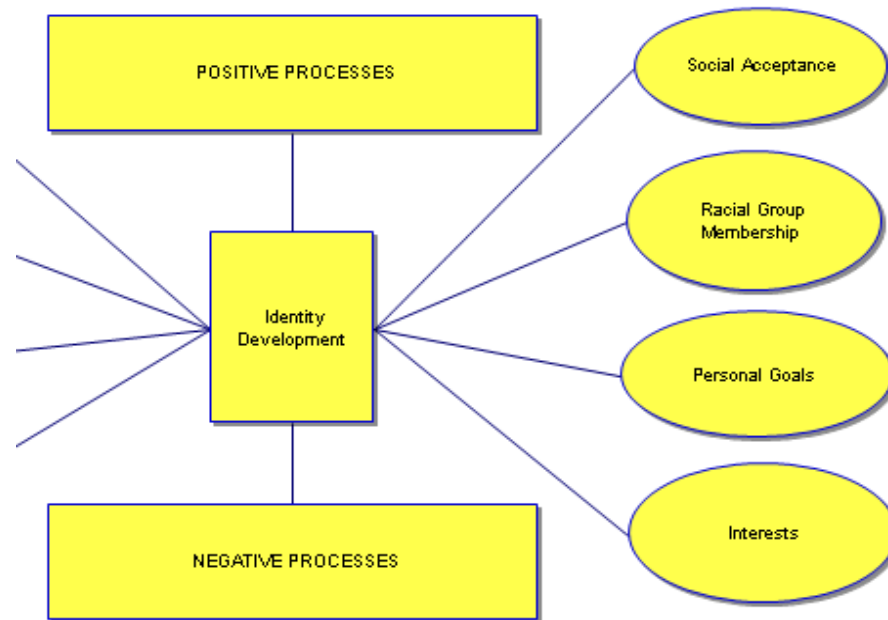
Social acceptance

Some participants selected friends based on social acceptance; that is, they selected their friends based on who would be accepting of them—common race, common interests, etc. were not the most important factors in peer group selection. For example, Cedric is typical of an individual who has historically selected his friends based on social acceptance (although he alluded to an overlap between interests and social acceptance). He talked about hanging out with whomever he had the chance to, talking specifically about how he didn't see color or differences between people. As seen in the previous section, Cedric's awareness of race changed after his sophomore year, bringing him to the realization that he would rather take a color-blind approach to starting and maintaining friendships. He now selects his friends based on social acceptance because "it's just easier that way."

Racial group membership

Some participants chose peers based on racial group membership; that is, they chose to have all African American friends regardless of common interests and fulfillment of personal needs outside of racial group membership. Although many participants have mostly or all African American friends, the participants who talked about the act of selecting friends based on racial group membership did so when talking about when they first moved to Sunnyside or when they were in middle school. That is, they talked about it as an early stage of their identity development process.

Personal goals

Other participants (some whose identity development process steered them away from racial group membership) chose to make decisions based on their own personal goals; that is, they chose to forgo selecting friends based on race, common interests or even others perceptions of them, for fulfillment of personal goals. These participants, who tended to be seniors in high school, articulated attitudes of not caring what others thought. They chose, rather, to do what they need to do to be successful in their own eyes, often demonstrating a strong sense of self concept. For example, Jaylen is typical of this method, demonstrating peer group selection based on personal goals. In an interview, Jaylen, who is biracial (African American and White descent) talked about his struggle with navigating the White and African American peer groups.

Jaylen talked about the absurdity of the expectations that his White and African American peers placed on him in terms of how he should act. With the struggles he faces

in school and at home, Jaylen talked about how life is hard enough, he doesn't need peer

group pressure complicating and adding stress to his life. Thus, Jaylen has a small group

of friends; however, they are not the center of his life at school. He has shifted his

thinking to value himself and his girlfriend, expressing that he comes to school to do

what he needs to do, to do well in school, and to graduate. Friends have fallen into the

periphery of his life and he is okay with that because his personal goals are what he

values most.

Interests

Furthermore, the participants spoke of their ultimate evolution away from their

racial peer group for various reasons mentioned in previous sections, including a greater

need for common interests and beliefs (often involving personal views about how to think

about school). Typical of this method of peer group selection is Mike, specifically in his

late middle-school, early high school days. Mike talked about hanging out with all

African American students. However, when in the peer group, he felt different; he felt as

though they were behaving in ways that mirrored the stereotypes of African American

males. Thus, Mike decided to steer away from his racial group and began selecting peers

based on similar interests. For Mike, as well as other participants typical of this process

of peer group selection, other factors such as race and others' perceptions of them

(including the perceptions of other African American students) didn't matter as much as

sharing a common interest. Like students choosing peers based on their own personal

goals, these participants tended to be seniors, also demonstrating a strong sense of self.

Although Mike was typical of a student who chose peers based on racial group membership and then changed peer groups to reflect those with common interests, Darryl is typical of a student who has always selected peer groups based on common interests. Enrolled in mostly advanced placement classes, Darryl socializes with those in his classes who share a common interest in academic success (also with shared definitions of what academic success means).

The four ovals presented in Figure 9, represent the process of social decision-making that the participants talked about. Interactions with and perceptions of experiences with the significant individuals (teachers and coaches, peers, parents, and themselves), led them to process who they are in particular times and spaces at Sunnyside. In defining who they are, they talked about making particular decisions about who to hang out with and for what reason. The participants often talked about this as an on-going process; that is, often, when they made social decisions, it forced them into a space of reflection. If they were not satisfied with how these decisions made them feel, they made new ones based on their current and evolved identity.

Understanding School Experiences

Participant experiences in this study can be best summarized by putting the parts of the model together (see Figure 10). Operating in the background of how African American male's experiences are created, experienced and understood, are the hegemonic racist stereotypes present at Sunnyside High School. Not immune to this hegemonic racism were the influential people (teachers and coaches, peers, parents, and themselves)

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in the participants' lives, who often served to mediate the participant's schooling

experiences.

Figure 10. African American Male's Understanding of Schooling Experiences
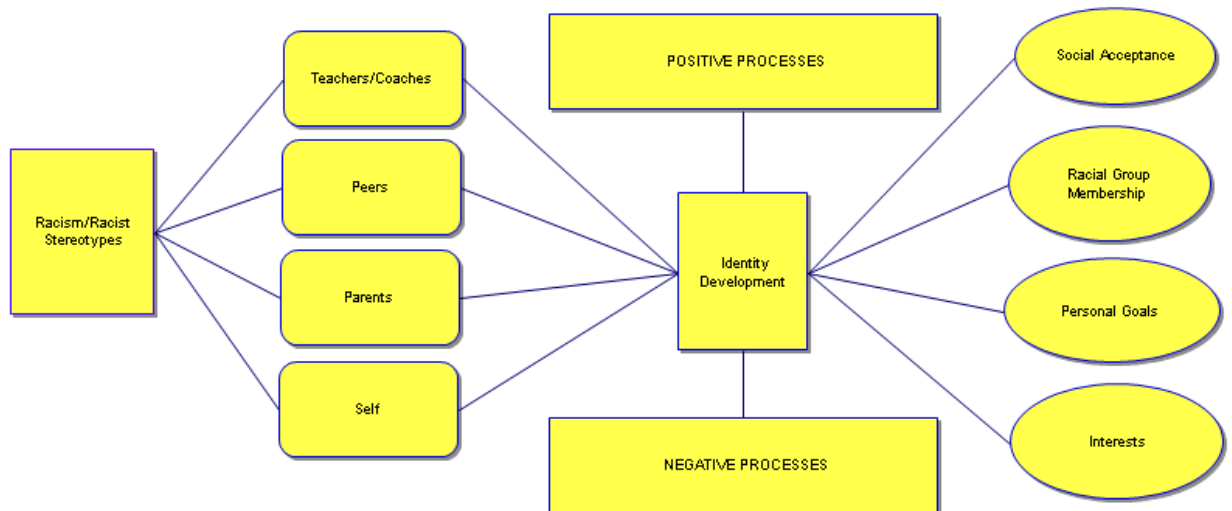
In a constant and iterative process of understanding and interaction, the

participants engaged with these influential people, whereby they processed the positive

and negative ways their interactions with these individuals made them feel. Positive

feelings included a sense of belonging, while negative feelings included isolation.

The ways in which the participants processed these feelings, ultimately informed

the decisions they made regarding peer group selection. These decisions manifested into

four different ways of making social decisions: social acceptance, racial group

membership, personal goals, and interests. These social decisions were again processed

and understood by the participants, and thus evaluated for salience in their lives. At

times, based on new and emergent ways of understanding themselves, they made new

and informed decisions. A deeper discussion of ways to understand these processes is

discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

What I found fascinating in my conversations with the participants was the different ways they chose to navigate the school setting, as well as the various reasons for making particular decisions. Decisions were made based on how participants understood themselves in the school setting. However, their experiences and stories that often reflected a process of identity development cannot be understood in isolation. This process must be understood within the context of the life-stage of adolescence, acknowledging the normative stress that any adolescent endures each day that they enter the school setting. However, for African American males, an added layer of complexity must be acknowledged and considered as pertinent to the process of identity development, particularly in a predominantly White, affluent, suburban high school.

This chapter will discuss the complexities that emerged from the data. It will begin by revisiting a broader discussion of identity development during high school adolescence and the normative stress involved with being in this life-stage. Three sub-sections will follow, discussing how concepts of race, social categories and the microsystem of school affect the emerging identity of the participants. More specifically, the sub-section on race will hopefully add to the existing literature by discussing how race is understood by African American males in a predominantly White school setting, and from various perspectives based on longevity in the community. It will also discuss how the participants made sense of racist stereotyping that often informed social decision-making. The sub-section discussing social categories will complicate the notion of social categories often used by researchers and school officials to pigeon-hole African American males into particular social norms; these categories were not always

acknowledged as relevant by the participants. Lastly, the sub-section will discuss the

individuals present in the microsystem of school that influence the experiences of the

participants and, ultimately, their process of identity development.

Identity Development during High School Adolescence

Establishing a sense of identity is one of the most challenging, yet self-defining

processes that a teenager undergoes. This section will revisit the literature on the

normative processes of identity development during adolescence and discuss the ways in

which the participants demonstrated processes discussed by the work of Erickson (1959),

Billison (1996) and Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Although humans are constantly defining and re-defining who they are, what they

stand for, and where they fit into their multiple settings and the world, engaging in this

process of defining oneself during high school can present a struggle for all teenagers.

Given that high school teenagers are in the life-stage of adolescence, this presents an

added stress in their lives, as adolescence

> …can be viewed as a psychological moratorium during which the
> individual through free role experimentation may find a niche in some
> section of his society which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely
> made for him. In finding it the young adult gains an assured sense of inner
> continuity and social sameness which will bridge what he was as a child
> and what he is about to become, and will reconcile his conception of
> himself and his community's recognition of him. (Erickson, 1959, p.
> 111).

The participants in this study told stories in line with this process of identity

development during adolescence that Erickson (1959) discusses above. However, their

processes were even more difficult and complex than what Erickson describes.

Participants explained a specific set of issues that are unique to navigating the process of identity development for African American males; that is, they expressed issues such as making sense of and navigating issues of race, racism, and racist stereotypes. Thus, they were forced to understand themselves in a racialized setting. The questions typical of a White, middle-class teenage adolescent, become laced with a racialized lens for African American males. The normative questions associated with adolescent identity development: "Who am I?" "What do I stand for?" and "Where do I fit?" are conceptualized for the participants as "Who am I as an African American male in this predominantly White, affluent setting?" "What do I stand for and how do I achieve this in a community that doesn't always understand me because of my race?" and "Where do I fit as a racial minority, and as a highly stigmatized and stereotyped racial group?" It is important to note that the participants in this study shared experiences and examples of how they navigate these questions, without explicitly stating the aforementioned questions.

Just as some high school adolescents ask themselves variations of these questions with varied depths of questioning and comprehension, African American males experience this same variation in their process of identity development. Participants expressed stories of understanding themselves through a process of understanding their environment, who they would like to be in that environment and perceptions of how the influential people in their environment understand and perceive them.[17] This process is consistent with the dual process of identity formation that Billison (1996) talks about as, "the individual's perception of who he is and who he would like to be and the perceptions

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[17] The participants' length of residence in the community sometimes offered another layer of complexity, discussed in a subsequent section titled, Contrasting Extremes, Multiple Perspectives.

of others in his life" (p. 23). Further, the participants discussed experiences consistent with the dynamic nature and process of identity formation, where the individual is constantly redefining who they are in school based on how they engage with and make meaning of their experiences with the influential people (i.e. teachers and coaches, peers, parents, and the self).

The process for understanding who one is and where one fits in a school setting can be complex in nature. And although the data revealed teachers and coaches, peers, parents, and the self as the most salient people affecting the identity development of the participants, one cannot discount the work of Bronfenbrenner when considering the multiple and intersecting ways that other systems can influence an individual (see Figure 1).

In Bronfenbrenner's model, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem that make up an individual's environment offer complexities to consider when understanding the participants' development beyond even what they shared in their stories. And although the complexities that these other systems offer are not the focus of my study, it's still important to note that these systems, no doubt, still affect the participants' process of human development from Bronfenbrenner's perspective, and I would argue, identity development. That is, the ways that individuals understand the multitude of influences present in Bronfenbrenner's model (i.e. family, neighborhood, school, family friends, social services, work setting, social, cultural, and historical influences), can directly or indirectly contribute to how that individual understands himself.

However, relevant to this study, the participants most often shared experiences relative to the microsystem of school, although some shared experiences relative to the microsystem of family, particularly parents. If one were to focus in on Bronfenbrenner's microsystem ring, significant to the participants in this study, one might see overlapping circles of race and social categories as they play out in the school setting, and the educational system, specifically the role of teachers and the structure of schools. The following sections will analyze the ways that the participants talked about these overlapping circles, beginning with a discussion of race and racism, and followed by social categories and the microsystem of school.

Race

Race, racism, and racist stereotyping are an interesting phenomena within the Sunnyside setting, where African American males are attempting to understand themselves within their predominantly White, affluent school, characteristics which become the normative value by which to understand themselves. Although racism and racist stereotypes are a part of the larger society that also find their way through the doors of schools in all communities, how African American males experience, engage with and navigate race, racism, and racist stereotypes in Sunnyside is important to examine, given the suburban, affluent, predominantly White nature of this setting.

Overall, this section discusses the salience of race present in the experiences of the participants, particularly the importance of understanding the participants in this study from their particular racialized setting at Sunnyside. It begins by revisiting the literature on racial hegemony, discussing the ways it is manifested at Sunnyside. Then, it discusses

how the ever-present racist stereotypes, often born out of racial hegemony, are navigated by the participants. Lastly, suggestion for the relationship between racist stereotypes and identity development are discussed.

Navigating Racist Stereotypes

Much of what the participants talked about regarding racist stereotypes was in response to how they feel that they are perceived by the larger White community, including students and teachers, as well as the African American student population. More specifically, participants talked about rejecting racist stereotypes for the purpose of demonstrating something different to the school community or rejecting them out of fear of being negatively labeled. Ultimately, the participants were revealing their struggle in defining who they are at Sunnyside, what their own race means in this predominantly White context, and how to balance or maintain who they want to be in this setting that is so often racist in tradition.

How the participants understand race, racism, and racist stereotypes, plays an integral role in their process for identity development. Furthermore, the ways in which the participants talked about how they navigate these racist stereotypes resonates with existing literature on domain identification and stereotype threat. Domain identification, "is the threat that others' judgments of their own actions will negatively stereotype them in the domain" (Steele, 1997, p. 613). In this study, the school is the domain of concern. By the very fact that the participants talked so prominently about the different racist stereotypes, it was apparent that the threat was present, and that they had to determine

ways to navigate others' racist stereotypes about them as well as make decisions about their own actions, including selecting peer groups, to reject these racist stereotypes.

Participants like Jamal and Darryl, talked about rejecting stereotypes to show Sunnyside that African American males can be something other than the racist stereotypes in their heads; that is, through their actions, they can portray something different. The constant in their voices was the notion that the racist stereotypes were already there. These participants, in their process of identity development, have made a conscious decision to act in ways that combat these racist stereotypes. This should be understood as a critical act of decision-making on the part of the participant. Their acts of personal responsibility should not be discounted. In short, these participants were not placing any personal responsibility on the teachers and students perpetuating the racist stereotypes to change (particularly on their own). Instead, the participants talked about their own personal responsibility in rejecting the racist stereotypes.

Furthermore, Steele (1997) talks about stereotype threat, deriving out of domain identification, suggesting:

> It is a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom the negative stereotype exists (e.g., skateboarders, older adults, White men, gang members). Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening. (p. 614).

And the domain of Sunnyside is, indeed, self-threatening. Thus, the participants make decisions about rejecting these stereotypes to cope with this threat. Present in the findings were some participants who chose to reject racist stereotypes for fear of being negatively labeled.

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For example, participants like Jamal and Arnold spoke about selecting peers who would not place them in predicaments consistent with perpetuating racist stereotypes. However, it is important to note that both Jamal and Arnold, who have not lived in Sunnyside their entire lives, still have African American peers regardless of the racist stereotypes associated with them. That is, although they are rejecting racist stereotypes, they are not rejecting the African American race, and the social inclusion that friendships based on race can provide.

Identity Development

In the process of identity development, African American males are in a constant struggle to define who they are in a school laced with racist stereotyping. As a result, the participants voiced a constant struggle to make the right decisions for them as an individual within this complex setting of school whereby they are fighting for independence, competing with one another socially, academically, and sometimes athletically, defining who they are as an African American male, all the while in a setting where they are worried about being racially stereotyped and prejudged by their teachers and peers. As a result, decisions have to be made. When thinking about the decisions that the participants made in this particular setting, I think it's important to consider Merton's (1957) notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy whereby, "a false definition of the situation evokes a new behavior that makes the originally false conceptions come true" (as cited in Irvine, 1991, p. xvii). This false definition that Merton speaks of could manifest itself as the racist stereotypes that the participants articulated hearing from the media and society, including Sunnyside and the school. I found it interesting that the

participants did not speak about participating in this self-fulfilling prophecy; however, when speaking of other African American males who act in what they termed as "stereotypical" behavior, it was as though they were suggesting that these other African American males had succumbed to the self-fulfilling prophecy. Regardless, there was a clear and constant struggle through the voices of the participants to combat the racist stereotypes in an effort to negate the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Furthermore, it is interesting to recall the voices of Bill and Aaron, who have lived in Sunnyside for their entire lives, and who have made decisions to reject racist stereotypes for fear of being labeled and thus combating the self-fulfilling prophecy. However, they revealed notions of rejecting the African American male race (and gender), instead of just the racist stereotypes, creating an us/them phenomenon of sorts when speaking about other African American males. They used the term "them" as a collective term, referring to the African American male population that they perceived to be unlike them, acting in ways that perpetuate the racist stereotypes.

Aaron and Bill spoke frequently about being strategic regarding their peer group selection. Aaron added to this notion, revealing that he chooses not to hang out with other African American males because he doesn't "want to be perceived as being in the wrong crowd because apparently there's all this stereotyping." It's important to note that Aaron acknowledges that the stereotyping comes from the media and society, but has limited acknowledgement of his own words and how they perpetuate racist stereotypes of African American males.

Although it is important to remain true to the voices of the participants, it would be irresponsible to ignore where participants are currently situated within the process of

human development, their life-stage of adolescence, and their cognitive maturity as 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students. Thus, it is important to understand racism and racist stereotyping as a hegemonic process that inevitably affects the ways in which the participants engage with other individuals at Sunnyside, as well as the ways in which it impacts the participants' understanding of themselves and their process of identity formation within the Sunnyside setting at this time in their lives.

For example, in Aaron's language revealed his own racism and racist stereotypes toward other African American males. However, as part of his own development and emergent identity, he acknowledged the racism in his voice in one instance immediately when speaking about why he felt teachers stereotype African American males:

> I don't know. It's like maybe in the past they had black students that they have caused commotion in class. I mean I don't want to be like pointing fingers at anybody, but then it's like normally the people who live in the apartments or whatnot or try to ... or the black kids who lived in suburbs and they try to act like they are black that try to act like that. They try to cause commotion and, I don't know, that's showing a bad example, I guess, and that's ... I guess that's like having teachers generalizing us.

Furthermore, there were instances where participants named their experiences, using the terms "racism" and "racist stereotypes" and other instances where they did not. The responsible researcher must consider the reasons why some did not speak of racism and racist stereotypes; perhaps they did not feel comfortable with the researcher, perhaps they are not yet conscious of this form of racism (overt or hidden), perhaps their life-stage preoccupies their brains with normative issues present in adolescence, perhaps they are caught in the hegemony. Regardless, what is not explicitly said must be considered as well.

Lastly, although the participants spoke of various ways to navigate the racist stereotypes, they all revealed a common experience of having to deal with race and racist stereotypes at one point or another and to varying degrees. However, one of the major differences was the ways in which the participants who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives talked about other African American males who have not in ways that racially stereotyped them. This is just another example supporting the notion that prior setting (i.e. previous neighborhoods and social settings) matters when considering the ways in which individuals understand their current setting.

Unchallenged racist hegemony can lead to racist stereotypes that are perpetuated in school settings. These racist stereotypes have the ability of affecting the identity development of African American males; that is, how they see and define themselves in this setting, as well as how others perceive them. However, this process of identity development is not scripted. How one understands oneself is relative to their current and prior experiences.

Along with understanding the multiple perspectives and experiences present among the African American males at Sunnyside, we must consider the ways that adults in schools as well as social scientists label and make assumptions about different groups of people, placing them in various social categories. The next section will discuss how some participants reject these social categories, creating new ways of defining themselves and their process for navigating Sunnyside.

Social Categories

It makes sense to understand the process of identity development for any individual as an intersection of how an individual understands themselves in terms of race, class, gender, age, etc. within particular settings in their environment. In other words they ask the questions: Who am I?; What do I stand for?; How do others make sense of me?; How and where do I fit in?; all of these questions are filtered through the lens of social identity, racial identity, academic identity, ethnic identity, etc. That is, all individuals make sense of who they are as a whole being. For example, for the participants, it would be difficult to understand oneself as an African American, without intersecting an understanding of being male, middle class, 16 years old, good at math, and so forth. Likewise, others' perceptions of the individual are also based on these intersecting parts of their identity. However, in thinking about the different parts of the participant's identity, the question emerged: What happens when these social categories (e.g., race, class, gender, age) are not the only salient issues to the participants? The next sub-section will begin by bringing the conversation back to concepts around group identity as discussed in chapter 2. Then, the participant experiences will be briefly revisited around the notion of selecting peer groups based on interests. Interests provided one way that the participants articulated navigating away from scripted social categories into those that made more sense for them.

Navigating Away from Typical Social Categories

It is not uncommon for social scientists to place youngsters into social categories for means of categorization and analysis. However, the participants in this study

challenged these social categories as they didn't necessarily always put themselves into stereotypical categories. One salient issue that emerged from the participants, touched on in chapter 4, was the notion of interests when selecting one's friends and defining oneself within a group.

In the existing literature, Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz (1997), define group identity as "a positive sense of belonging to ones' group," (p. 166) and contributes to self esteem insofar as it is a valued domain by the subject. Given the relationship between self concept and group identity, it is no surprise that some participants chose group membership based on interests rather than on racial group identification.[18]

Bill and Aaron, who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives, talked most frequently through a Eurocentric lens, often reflecting in pro-White and anti-Black attitudes. Articulating a similar perspective, Aaron talked about what makes him different from other African American male students. When he uses the term "we", he is referring to the other participants in the focus group who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives. He shared,

> We're all in the suburbs. We live there. I don't know. It's just that maybe it's just because we don't want to be seen as that other stereotype, just another stereotype, that we want to actually branch off from that and show that black people can be this or that or do this or that that's not usually associated to black people; whereas, people who live in the apartments in the ghettos, I guess they do limit themselves as to what they can do.

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[18] Racial group membership can also be considered an interest group; however, in this study, I separated out interest groups from racial group membership because the participants spoke about having friends based on interests in skateboarding, dancing, sports, etc., in different ways than they spoke about selecting friends based on race.

It is clear through their words that Bill and Aaron often revealed an us/them tone, with "us" being those who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives, versus "them" who were all other African American males. Their voices also revealed a sense that in their experiences, they were only able to equate striving for goals and success with African American males who have grown up in the Sunnyside community. On the other hand, their voices revealed a sense that all other African American males demonstrated behavior indicative of the racist stereotypes, often harbored by them as well.

Jamal is a senior who moved eight years ago from a community unlike Sunnyside. In Jamal's experiences, he spoke about navigating peer groups throughout middle school and high school, revealing his process for racial identity development. Jamal talks through his early journey through peer group selection, indicating that he hung out with all African American kids his freshman year. Later in the focus group, Jamal talked about how he called his race-based peer group into question and began hanging out with different peer groups based on similar interests.

Jamal talked very articulately about his developmental process regarding identity and peer group selection. This is a quality that Jamal and only a few other participants possessed in terms of maturity and clarity of thought. It is noteworthy that Jamal's process included a path toward friends with common interests, rather than those with a shared race. Whereas other participants like Jaylen, who was equally as articulate, talked about his process leading him down a different path. Instead of making as many friendships as possible as in Jamal's case, Jaylen chose to be more selective with his friends, changing his focus from

peers to himself. His new direction included doing what was best for him to be successful in the future.

As indicated through their experiences, not all African American males place themselves in the social categories prescribed to them by researchers as well as society. Their process of identifying who they are in school is neither static nor linear. Participants like Bill, Aaron, Jamal, and Jaylen all have different ways of identifying who they are that clearly do not fit into the social categories of being an adolescent, a teenager, a male, an African American, etc. Moving forward, it is essential that future research acknowledges this phenomenon to avoid making presumptions or perpetuating stereotypes about groups of individuals.

In helping to illustrate this point, the next section discusses the different ways in which the participants articulated their experiences at Sunnyside. That is, so often contrary to research and the thoughts of school personnel, all African American males at Sunnyside do not experience school in the same way. In fact, their stories revealed shared experiences among those who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives (lifers), and shared experiences among those who have moved from communities unlike Sunnyside (newcomers). However, there were stark differences between the experiences of the lifers versus the newcomers.

Contrasting Extremes, Multiple Perspectives

Contrary to current research and common ideologies in high schools, all African American males do not experience school in the same way. That is, the common

presumption that those who fit within the social categories of African American and male, experience school in the same way. In fact, the findings revealed that although there were similarities within focus groups, there were vast differences in the ways in which lifers and newcomers experience the same school setting. The following sections will unpack these differences and discuss some thoughts on why these differences exist.

Experiences of a lifer

An interesting point was the contrast in experiences of attempting to belong between those who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives versus those who have moved to this community. Their understanding of themselves as well as of the African American population who have not lived in Sunnyside their entire lives was quite intriguing. Further, the ways in which they choose to navigate peer groups and for what reasons are of great importance.

One point prominent throughout the entire focus group was an awareness of how the larger White population perceives and understands what the participants perceived as the African American male stereotype. Much of their conversation was around attempting to avoid associating with and falling into the trap of being negatively labeled and stereotyped with "other"[19] African American male groups. Thus, in a sense, they constantly understood themselves in terms of the White population's understanding of African American males. It was clear that they were caught in the hegemony present at Sunnyside.

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[19] The us/them nature in the participant voices were ever-present. Their understanding of "us" was those who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives, and "them" as those who have not lived in Sunnyside their entire lives.

The initial paradigm that was essential to their understanding of themselves situated in this setting, was their understanding of stereotypes associated with African American males. They mentioned things like having mostly African American friends, talking slang and "in a ghetto accent", not good in school, and liking rap. However, later on the focus group, they also referred to a specific population of students in the Sunnyside community who live in apartment buildings versus houses. The students who reside in these homes were referenced by participants in this focus group as "the apartment kids," indicating that they "live in the ghettos". From the start, there was a clear us/them phenomenon.

However, although these participants did not associate with the "other" African American males, a conflict was still present because they all share the same race. And although the participants in this focus group understood how they were different, they had an understanding that their teachers and peers may not know and understand how they wanted to be perceived as different. In short, the participants in this focus group were often consumed by this dynamic, shifting their behavior to distance themselves even further from "other" African American males in an effort to demonstrate to the school community how dissimilar they were.

However, this distancing did not come without internal conflict. That is, just because these participants chose to distance themselves didn't mean that the larger school population recognized their effort and reasons for it. In large part, the participants articulated feelings that the larger school population still perceived them through a racist stereotypical lens, expecting them to act and behave in line with racial stereotypes. The participants thus felt great conflict and distress in feeling that they don't act or represent

the stereotype at all. In a sense, although they didn't believe these stereotypes were true for themselves, the participants in this focus group believed the stereotypes to be true for the "other" African American population, thus perpetuating the stereotypes. Their voices revealed a mentality that defined African American males with the racist stereotypes. And since the participants didn't act the stereotypes, they didn't associate with being African American. This phenomenon was exemplified in Aaron's words, "I'm not a Black person." This deep struggle is coupled with their process of identity development including race. So although they don't see themselves as African American, they are still in a constant struggle to define who they are at Sunnyside, including making sense of their African American race. I could hear the participants getting caught in their own thought process, grappling with being African American, yet not associating with their understanding of who African American males are in this setting.

Another dimension of the identity development process, is about navigating two more facets of belonging and self definition: 1) What does it mean to "act Black" in this setting, and what do I gain or lose by acting this way?, and 2) What does it mean to act myself in this setting, and what do I gain or lose by acting this way?

Participants in this focus group (E) talked about times when they act "stereotypically Black". They talked about acting this way to be accepted by their peers (African American and White). This method of navigating the social world at Sunnyside was easy; they felt like when they acted this way, the world made sense to the students and teachers at Sunnyside because their notions of who African American males are were in synch with how they were behaving. This behavior created a space in school that was much easier to navigate.

At other times, these same participants chose to "act like themselves". The behaviors associated with acting this way were perceived by others as "acting White". To the participants, this behavior felt the most natural; however, it was the most difficult to navigate socially. The pressure they felt from African American peers, teachers, and even parents to act in more a stereotypical manner created conflict in their process of identity development. Over time, Mike, Aaron, Bill, and Darryl all chose this second method of behavior articulating that they found their place socially, rather than identifying racially. When they reported hanging out with their African American peers and acting in stereotypical ways, they felt awkward, alone, and not themselves. However, when making a commitment to stay true to themselves, they found who they consider to be their real friends, regardless of race; they are friends based on acceptance and often common interests.

I am alarmed by the hegemonic processes in place that clearly influence how these participants understand themselves in this setting. I found Aaron's process for understanding to be most troublesome, not because he was the only one to articulate negative thoughts about his own racial group, rather he articulated the "us/them" phenomenon to a much larger degree than the rest of the participants. He talked specifically about "staying away from" his African American peers for fear of being negatively labeled or as being a part of the wrong crowd. And although he may not agree with the racist stereotyping that teachers and students project onto African American males, he is not driven to actively fight against these stereotypes as a racial group. In fact, at one point in the focus group, he caught himself stereotyping African American males who have not lived in Sunnyside their entire lives and was surprised at himself for

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a moment. Thus, Aaron, although probably unconsciously, often serves to perpetuate racist stereotyping.

I also found it interesting that when some of the participants in this focus group sought peers based on social interest, they didn't report any difficulty being accepted into activities, clubs, and groups that were typically joined by White students; however, many other participants talked about how there were no activities or clubs that catered to their needs, so they didn't join. Joining clubs and activities at Sunnyside didn't seem to be an option. There are many possible explanations for this, none of which were elaborated on by participants. However, it's important to ask these questions: Are the participants who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives less stigmatized by the larger student and teacher population than those who have moved from different communities? Are the peers in these clubs and groups more open because these particular African American males share some of the same interests as they do (i.e. music, way of speaking, way of dressing, hobbies)? Although these are questions beyond this research study, they are interesting to ponder and understand nonetheless as the answers to these questions contribute to the ways in which African American males construct their emerging identities at Sunnyside, and I would venture to say, in other predominantly affluent, White school settings.

Experiences of a newcomer

Those who have moved within the last two years from a community unlike Sunnyside expressed a very different understanding of their academic experiences from those who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives. Overall, it appeared that their

understanding of racist stereotypes included being unfairly judged and mistreated by the adults in the school; however, all members of the focus group agreed with one another in talking about how this phenomenon is "just life". In fact, they had two rationalizations for why adults racially stereotype and prejudge African American males: 1) the adults act in ways consistent with what they know, and the experiences they have had, and 2) they perceive all African American males based on the negative behavior that some African American males demonstrate, which serves to perpetuate racist stereotypes.

Interestingly enough, they didn't articulate the ways in which adults think as something that they could actively work to change. Rather, they found support and belonging in the school community by gravitating to and sticking with the adults in the building who were supportive, like particular coaches and teachers, ultimately dismissing those who racially stereotype and prejudge them. Rather, the participants talked about taking control of their own destiny by being a good person, projecting and demonstrating good behavior, and trying hard to reach personal goals.

In contrast to those who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives, who generally articulate a social struggle of belonging and acceptance in high school, particularly with regard to defining who they are based on how others perceive them, those who have moved in the past two years from a community unlike Sunnyside shared a different struggle. They were not concerned with the ways in which others perceive them as a factor in how they define themselves. Their process of identity development was more self-directed; that is, they felt that it is the onus of the African American male students in the school to portray positive qualities to the rest of the school and adults. This way, others will have no other choice but to perceive them in positive ways. Furthermore,

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their struggle in high school was more about maintaining a level of patience to endure 1) school, 2) the unequal treatment, 3) the racist stereotypes, and 4) a school that doesn't always understand them, so that they can "do what they have to do" to get out and be successful.

Two interesting points emerged from the focus groups when speaking about notions of success: 1) definitions of success were different from those who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives, and 2) bad behavior does not equal being unsuccessful.

The Urban Newcomers in focus group B defined success as trying their best, meeting their own personal goals, and passing their classes. This is in contrast to those who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives who articulated success generally as having a high grade point average. Given that the lifers in focus group E were consumed by a social struggle to find and maintain friends and find a sense of belonging in the school, and the Urban Newcomers, articulating a different struggle, were consumed by their own personal battle to effectively "play the game" of school, doing what they need to do to get out and be successful, all the while keeping their cool by not getting frustrated with those who treat them unfairly, I wonder how these different experiences and points of view influence how participants come to define success. That is, if proper academic supports are in place for the lifers, where they don't have to expend extra time and energy on academics, though they're in an awkward place socially because they don't feel wholly accepted by their African American or White peers, inevitably, they will have a different struggle. In contrast, the Urban Newcomers articulated less of a social struggle, as it seems that finding and maintaining friends came easily. Rather, their struggles in school were laced with an understanding that unequal treatment and racist

stereotyping is a part of life and a part of school. They perceived this as an inevitability so they instead find ways to navigate the school (and society) as it is, discovering avenues for success as they define it. And as Devin put it, "You really don't gotta overachieve." You just need to do what you have to do to get out. This, to Devin, was also a way of defining success.

I found the conversation around success and getting into trouble or fighting quite fascinating. Unlike the lifers, who often stereotyped those who get into trouble as being bad, not getting good grades, acting the stereotype, etc., the newcomers talked about the need to understand the various reasons why African American males get into trouble. They also spoke strongly about the fact that students who act in ways that the school perceives as bad behavior (i.e., getting into trouble and fighting), can still be successful. All participants agreed with Devin when he shared that an African American male can get into trouble and still be academically successful; however, if the student is getting into trouble and dismissing school, then he will not be successful.

All urban newcomers went on to talk about why African American males fight. They talked about how adults and the larger student body perceived African American males when they fight as just perpetuating the stereotype. However, they disagreed with this perception, articulating that they don't just fight for the sake of fighting. Something had to incite the fight. They talked about not judging those who fight because everyone has a different threshold for self-control, how "pissed" they get, and different prior experiences that may have ultimately led to this fight. Furthermore, they pleaded that adults not judge those who fight or assume that they know what went on during the fight. They asked that adults take the time to talk with those involved in fighting to get to the

bottom of what happened and why. This way, adults may be more sympathetic and understanding to those involved in the fight.

Lastly I found it most interesting that the urban newcomers who were most often the ones stereotyped by the lifers, had nothing but supportive feelings toward those African American males who struggle with identity. The lifers were the ones saying it's okay to be who you are, listen to the music you want to, and "act White". Devin shared and the others agreed that "Just because you're Black doesn't mean you have to listen to hip hop or rap."

This point and many others affirmed the notion that sharing the same race, gender, and setting does not mean that experiences within the socially constructed category of being African American male are shared as well. And although experiences between those who have lived in Sunnyside for the same amount of time as well as those who have moved from communities like and unlike Sunnyside are similar, they are not the same either.

Understanding this phenomenon: that is, that lifers do not always share the same experiences as newcomers, also made me think about how all participants spoke about their need and want to be treated equally. However, I do wonder, once the playing field is level regarding basic needs, do stakeholders then need to ponder and act on the issue of equity? Given the individual challenges and supports that a participant may have in their lives, each participant may be in need of the unique supports needed by others.

Schools, by their very purpose and structure, have the ability to offer support and attempt to level the playing field for all students. And within schools, both the structure of schools as well as the teachers within Sunnyside emerged as a key influence on and

often support of the participants. The next section will discuss the ways in which school

structure and teachers influence the process of identity development for African

American males.

Microsystem of School

Within the microsystem of school, various structures are in place that can serve to

help or hinder the progress of all students, particularly African American males.

Emerging from the data were experiences around school structure, and inevitably the

teachers they encountered on a daily basis. This section discusses the ways in which the

structure of school and the role of teachers influence the experiences of the participants in

significant ways. Thus the ways in which the participants made sense of these

experiences had a considerable impact on how they understood and defined themselves at

school.

School Structure

When thinking about the role that school structure plays in the emerging identities

of the participants, two questions emerged: 1) What role does the tracking system of

having skills level, mainstream, enriched, and advanced placement (A.P.) tracks play in

how the participants understand themselves? 2) What supports present in the A.P. and

skills tracks can be replicated or used as models for the majority of students in the

mainstream, particularly African American males?

In thinking back to Darryl's experiences as an individual who has lived in the

Sunnyside community his entire life who has always taken, excelled in and found support

in his A.P. classes, how might he experience school differently based on the very nature of how the school structures the tracked curriculum? When Darryl talked about his academic experience at Sunnyside, it was positive and supportive. He reported in an informal conversation that most, if not all of his friends are White, adding that he shares the same interests and finds these relationships supportive, both socially and academically. He also reported supportive relationships with his teachers.

It is widely known that there are a select group of students who are in the A.P. track at Sunnyside High. They take almost all of their classes together, often eat lunch together,[20] and are contemplating and grappling with the same academic curriculum. The structure mimics a cohort, where students travel from class to class as a unit. This unit provides more support to one another, closer relationships with teachers, and often a safer classroom environment in which to explore, inquire, and take educational risks for enhanced growth.

In fact, Darryl's experiences were so different from the other students, including the other participants who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives, that it was almost as if he experienced a school within a school. And although he mentioned some challenges with racist stereotypes, it was clear that the supportive environment enabled him to better navigate these challenges.

Another participant who expressed a supportive structural environment was Arnold. Unlike Darryl, Arnold is in the basic skills track, and receives services from the special education department. As stated earlier, the special education department is

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[20] Students who are enrolled in A.P. science classes often have a block schedule for two periods, where they have class for the first period and lab for the second period. The school structures this around lunch hours so that students have somewhere to go when there is no lab. As a result, the students in this class have lunch together, be it in lab or in the lunchroom.

historically known for providing excellent supports to the students they service. Thus, it was no surprise to hear of Arnold's positive experiences with his special education teachers, particularly his resource teacher. And much like Darryl's experience, where he travels from class to class as would a cohort, Arnold does as well,[21] also creating a safe environment for Arnold to learn the curriculum. And although not explicitly stated, it appeared as though Arnold had little knowledge of the other academic experiences of students in the other tracks beyond a shared experience of racist stereotyping.

Thus, in terms of having a positive and supportive schooling experience, why are the A.P. and the basic skills track (including many, but not all special education students) more supportive than the mainstream settings described by the other participants? What, structurally, is in place in these two tracks from which the mainstream students do not benefit? Perhaps answers to these very important questions can provide further insight into ways in which we can provide appropriate supports to African American male students at Sunnyside and perhaps other settings like Sunnyside as well.

However, along with considering the structure of our schools, we must also consider the role of teachers within this structure. Given the inevitable power dynamic between teachers and students, teachers have the ability to create significantly positive spaces for all students, particularly African American males, to learn and grow. The next sub-section discusses the participants' interactions with teachers at Sunnyside.

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[21] I think it's important to understand that I am acknowledging that both Darryl and Arnold receive supports that the mainstream students may not be privy to. However, to be clear, they do not share the same experiences in terms of how the supportive environment promotes life chances and opportunities. As is typical of many basic skills tracks, this curriculum is not designed for students to learn the tools to excel out to join their mainstream peers. Thus, although this track has, for the most part, very supportive teachers, I must ask what those supports ultimately provide for the student. It is clear that supports in the A.P. track are far more effective in cultivating the academic success of the learner.

The Role of Teachers

The ways in which students make sense of their teachers' perceptions is important for a variety of reasons; the inevitable power relationship between teachers and the participants ultimately affected their process of identity development. In this study, the participants spoke clearly about positive and negative experiences with their teachers. It is no surprise that when the participants such as Arnold, Cedric, Darnel, and Darryl talked about positive and supportive interactions with teachers, they also cited that they tried harder in those classes, inevitably improving their overall chances for academic success. Their response to supportive interactions with teachers was positive; they expressed feelings of attaining success in the classroom.

Though it cannot fully explain student achievement, I believe that this notion speaks in part to Steele's (1997) Teacher Expectancy Theory, whereby teachers' expectations for their students' achievement eventually affects student performance as the student eventually reinforces the teacher expectations, whether positive or negative. Arnold, Darnell, Cedric and Jaylen all talked about the positive effect that teachers have on their academic performance and drive to do well in that teacher's class. Inevitably, all of the above participants performed well in the classes where supportive teachers were cited.

Many research studies also use Teacher Expectancy Theory (Steele, 1997) to describe how negative teacher stereotypes can affect students as well. An example of Teacher Expectancy Theory is when a student is aware of a negative stereotype or low expectations from a teacher, thus the student demonstrates behavior consistent with the negative teacher perceptions or expectations. What I found interesting was that the

participants in this study did not demonstrate the negative side of the Teacher Expectancy Theory when speaking about negative experiences with teachers.

For example, Jaylen, Milo, Jason, and Jamal, all spoke in very matter-of-fact terms regarding negative teacher perceptions of African American male students. They talked about negative teacher perceptions as a given, something that couldn't be changed or controlled. They also did not speak in terms of feeling greatly bothered by it; instead, they candidly spoke of their experiences, and feeling racially stereotyped by their teachers. They left me with an impression that they had been dealing with these racist stereotypes for so long that it no longer ruffled their feathers. I felt that it was only because I was asking about their experiences with teachers that they talked about these negative experiences. That is to say that although they had negative experiences with teacher perceptions and stereotypes, there was no use in talking about it because they didn't feel that teachers would change. Regardless, participants did not speak in any way to the negative side of Teacher Expectancy Theory. If anything, they talked about trying harder to prove them wrong.

Although negative teacher perceptions or low expectations did not seem to affect the participants' academic performance, they did talk about negative repercussions for the teacher-student relationship when they felt racially stereotyped, judged, or treated unfairly by a teacher. Further, although the participants did not talk about negative academic repercussions in terms of their effort in the class, I believe that there may have been learning opportunities missed due to the negative relationship that would have otherwise helped the participant in the class.

When students don't feel as though they are valued, acknowledged, or treated fairly, a cultural dissonance (Irvine, 1991) can occur between teacher and student. This dissonance has the ability to greatly affect the schooling experiences of African American males. Although I believe cultural dissonance occurs when teachers are unable or unwilling to acknowledge and understand the culture, race, ethnicity, and class of their students, I believe that when understanding African American males in this study, race was what set their experiences apart in their minds. Perhaps Irvine's term, cultural dissonance, can be narrowed to the term, racial dissonance, when speaking about the high school experiences of African American males, referring to a teacher's unwillingness or inability to acknowledge or understand African American students' race, resulting in a discord between teacher and student.

The ways in which we structure schools and cultivate positive and supportive relationships between teachers and students is of great importance. I am intrigued by the experiences of students like Darryl and Arnold. With vastly different experiences and backgrounds in some ways, they both articulated structural support in their two academic tracks. This phenomenon must be researched more carefully in order to determine ways that these supports can become more of a part of the school structure as a whole, and not just a function of the A.P. and basic skills track. A significant part of creating a supportive school structure is the teachers. It was clear in chapter 4, that Jaylen, Milo, Jason and Jamal's positive experiences with particular teachers and coaches impacted their schooling experiences in a positive way; they not only provided moral support, but also academic support to help them find success in school. These positive interactions were about building strong relationships between teachers and students. Teacher training

with current and pre-service teachers that focus on the importance of building relationships with students with a strong human development understanding of their life-stage of adolescence as well as identity development may help create more supportive schools.

The Process of Finding One's Place

The identity development process during adolescence is complicated for African American males at Sunnyside High School. They are determining, defining, experimenting, and re-defining who they are often in the air of racist hegemony, social categories that sometime do and often don't fit and among structures in school (including teachers) that may or may not provide safe and positive spaces for them to explore and develop their emerging identities.

However, given this tumultuous time, many of the participants were able to take advantage of the support systems in place to help them to develop positive ways of coping with the obstacles they face. Some, however, did not have enough appropriate supports in place to help mitigate their obstacles; thus, negative ways of coping were evident. The participant experiences that led to positive ways of coping for the participants can provide invaluable information for school personnel and researchers. Chapter 6 will discuss and reframe an understanding of the participants' experiences through the lens of Spencer's (1997) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), particularly stages one and five in hopes of providing recommendations for Sunnyside High School as well as other schools similar to Sunnyside that may find the recommendations useful.

CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS

Significant prior research has been conducted on African American males in low resourced settings (i.e. urban environments) with high risk factors (i.e. poor academic achievement, high incidents of negative behavior, high dropout rates, etc.). And although the data on African American males who fit these parameters is vast, it is often flawed in design, as it operates on a deficit model of interpreting the lives of the participants. I propose that in order to fully understand the schooling experiences of African American males, researchers must design studies that seek to understand their experiences in terms of both the risks that they are exposed to as well as the supports present in their lives that often offset their risks; that is, researchers must design studies around African American males that focus on resilience if the study aims to make meaningful and useful recommendations aimed specifically at helping African American males to achieve in school.

A theory consistent with a resilience design is Spencer's (1997) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) (see Figure 3 in chapter 2). PVEST is a useful tool that provides tangible ways for thinking about the implications of this research. This chapter will focus on how PVEST can be used as a tool for practice; more specifically, it will focus on the risks and protective factors present at Sunnyside (i.e. Stage 1-Vulnerability Level), discuss the relationships between how risks can turn into unproductive coping outcomes and protective factors into productive coping outcomes (i.e. Stage 5-Coping Outcomes), and discuss the notion of resilience (i.e. individuals who demonstrate productive coping outcomes despite significant risks or challenges). Furthermore, although the entire PVEST model has five

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stages as presented in chapter 2, this chapter will only focus on stages one and five, as examining these particular stages provides the greatest insight into recommendations for future practice. Unlike studies that examine individuals from a deficit perspective, PVEST acknowledges individual experiences from a resilience perspective. This perspective acknowledges that risks or challenges can be overcome with appropriate supports in place, resulting in more productive coping outcomes for the participants.

Studies using the PVEST framework typically determine the vulnerability level of the participants based on a combination of participant perceptions and researcher observations. However, since this study relies on qualitative inquiry methods that value the voices of the participants, I will determine the vulnerability level of the participants based on an analysis of my conversations with them. This method remains true to the essence and purpose of determining an individual's vulnerability level; that is, it should reflect the risks and protective factors to which individuals are *exposed*.

Although PVEST is a model that can be applied to any individual in any life stage, when understanding the participants in this study through the lens of PVEST, there are many shared vulnerabilities to which they are exposed. The next section will revisit the concept of stage one: vulnerability level.

PVEST: Stage I - Vulnerability Level

It is understood that all human beings are vulnerable; that is, we are all exposed to risks within our environment, with potential protective factors to offset particular risks. Vulnerability level describes just that; the risks and protective factors to which any individual is exposed in their microsystem of school. The participants in this study

demonstrated that the risks present in the school setting looked different for them than for other racial groups present in the school, particularly their White peers. Likewise, some risks and protective factors looked different for the lifers and the urban newcomers. Alternatively, there were some shared risk and protective factors across participants as well.

This section focuses on all of the potential risks and protective factors to which the lifers and urban newcomers were exposed. The list was generated by coding the transcripts of focus groups and interviews specifically looking for risks and protective factors. However, these risks and protective factors by default include the factors with which participants engaged, thus also making the factors challenges and supports (i.e. Stage 2-Net Stress Engagement). Again, by definition, the risks with which the participants actually engage become challenges. The protective factors with which the participants actually engage become supports. Thus, the mere fact that the participants spoke of various risks and protective factors, in many instances, demonstrated that they acknowledged them and engaged with them.

Table 7 represents the risks and protective factors that emerged collectively from the lifer and urban newcomer experiences. The risks and protective factors for both the lifers and newcomers are combined into the same table because by default, a risk and protective factor present in the school setting is one that all participants were vulnerable to. This doesn't mean that the participants chose to engage with or acknowledge the risks and protective factors; however, they were still present as vulnerable factors. Notice that some factors are listed in both the risks and protective factors columns. This is such

because some factors (e.g., rejecting stereotypes) can present a risk for some individuals

while operating as a protective factor for others.

Table 7. Vulnerability Level: Lifers and Newcomers

Risks	Protective Factors
- Negative self concept - Lack of support at home - Racial dissonance - Lacking peer group acceptance - Peer group challenges - Feeling misunderstood - Negative peer perceptions (of participants) based on racist stereotypes - Negative teacher perceptions (of participants) based on racist stereotypes - Refusing help for fear of feeling dumb - Perceptions of race - Perceptions of skin color - Lack of resources to attend college - Personal fear of not attending college because of GPA - Self-fulfilling prophecy - Media - Societal racist stereotypes - Limited resources; limited access to resources - Negative racial group perceptions - Loneliness when rejecting stereotype - Navigating acting as a "stereotypical black male" - Navigating "acting White" - Disconnect with parents - Sense of not belonging in community - Feeling disconnected and misunderstood by teachers - Moral challenges - Academic readiness when moving from different community - Rejecting stereotype - Acceptance in White community	- Strong self concept - Supports at home - Mentor/supportive teacher/supportive coach at school - Peer group identification - Valued academics - Value meeting personal goals - Belonging to sports or clubs - Will to attend college - Self-fulfilling prophecy - Limited resources; limited access to resources (how they engage can affect decision-making) - Acting as a stereotypical black male - Finding a sense of belonging in school community - Strong sense of self and purpose - Supportive teachers and coaches - Wanting to leave a legacy - High expectations from home - Rejecting stereotype - Acceptance in White community - Social acceptance from larger African American community based on having moved from another community

The risks and protective factors in Table 7 are useful to acknowledge because

they come from the actual experiences of the participants versus from an outside

observer. If school personnel and researchers can determine what the risks and protective factors that are present in school for African American males, and determine ways to mitigate the risks to which they are exposed, and provide more protective factors that work within the school setting, perhaps a more supportive schooling environment can be created for African American males. Thus the lists in Table 7 provide an overview of the potential risks and protective factors present at Sunnyside for African American males.

However, although the participants may have been exposed to the risks and protective factors presented above, not all African American males experience school in the same way, particularly lifers and urban newcomers. Thus, it would be helpful to unpack the vulnerability level a bit further, taking a closer look at the specific risks and protective factors mentioned by lifers versus urban newcomers.[22] The next section takes a closer look at the risks and protective factors mentioned in Table 7, breaking them down by lifers and urban newcomers.

Exploring Relationships Between Vulnerability Level and Coping Outcomes

In thinking about the actualized risks and protective factors that can ultimately turn into challenges and supports for an individual, it is important to take a closer look at vulnerability level and its relationship to coping outcomes. Coping outcomes are the productive and unproductive ways that an individual deals with risks/challenges and protective factors/supports that are demonstrated as a part of an individual's emergent

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[22] It is important to note that although this chapter doesn't specifically address stage two: Net Stress Engagement Level (i.e. the actualized risks and protective factors that turn into challenges and supports), there is a logical connection between Vulnerability Level and Net Stress Engagement Level. More specifically, Net Stress Engagement Level represents risks and protective factors with which the individual actively engages. Inevitably, since the risks and protective factors were identified through conversations with the participants, some of them inescapably represent challenges and supports in stage two: Net Stress Engagement Level.

identity. If intervention, including maximizing supports, can be made prior to risks

becoming challenges, African American males can be better positioned for more

productive coping outcomes. Furthermore, if we can identify those who experience

productive coping outcomes in the face of risks/challenges, schools can then be a place

that more effectively cultivates resilient individuals.

The items previously described in Table 7 are representative of all revealed

potential risks and protective factors to which the lifers and urban newcomers talked

about through their experiences. Although they didn't formally call these items risks and

protective factors, I identified them as such based on the following definitions described

in greater detail in chapter 2:

> [Risk is viewed as] an exacerbation of normative challenges and
> competencies due to larger sociopolitical processes (i.e. racism, sexism)
> and/or lack of resources. (Spencer, et al., 2004, p. 230).

> [Protective Factors are] those that modify the effects of risk in a positive
> direction. (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 858).

It is important to note that when we don't focus on individuals from a resilience

lens, pertinent protective factors can go unnoticed, resulting in a limited, often

stereotyping view of African American males.

Figure 11. Relationship between Vulnerability Level and Coping Outcomes
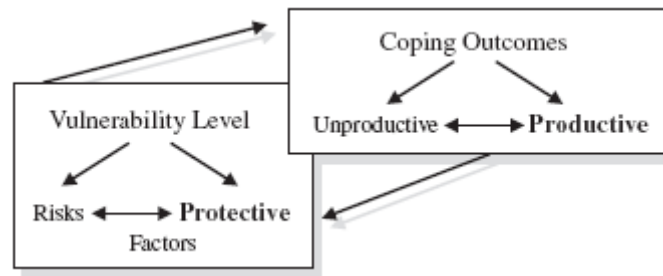
Source: Spencer, M. B. (2006). Phenomenology and Ecological Systems Theory: Development of Diverse Groups. Handbook of Child Psychology. W. Damon and R. Lerner. New York, Wiley Publishers. **1:** 829-893.

Thus, taking a critical look at the factors in Table 7 can serve as important information in helping to maximize the protective factors that lead to productive coping outcomes. For example, the lifers and urban newcomers talked about racist stereotyping (be it from teachers or peers), which can be understood as a risk factor. However, how the lifers and urban newcomers talked about and engaged with this risk was very different.

The lifers, as a group, talked about racist stereotyping as a risk that is constantly in the forefront of their minds when making decisions about defining who they are in their process of identity development. And for those participants who are unable to mitigate this risk with protective factors, they are often on the path to unproductive coping outcomes. Aaron is a participant typical of this scenario. He spoke the most about how the racist stereotypes present in the school setting lead him to make decisions that distance him from African American peer groups. This distancing is in place out of fear of being racially stereotyped in negative ways as a "stereotypical Black male" as seen in the media. This act of distancing from his own racial group has created an unproductive coping outcome for Aaron. As a result of this decision, he finds himself

caught between various different worlds (with White friends, African American peers, and with parents), none of which he feels that he truly belongs to. Ultimately this coping outcome leads to loneliness and racial dissonance. Prior research discussed in chapter 2 (Phinney, et al., 1997; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that this lack of belonging in the school community, particularly having difficulty with navigating peer groups, ultimately leads to a lack of strong self concept. Aaron's experiences are typical of this phenomenon.

Alternatively, the urban newcomers also talked about racist stereotyping at Sunnyside; however, the ways in which they coped with the racist stereotypes based on various protective factors to which they are exposed, ultimately led to productive coping outcomes.

Devin's experiences are typical of this scenario regarding the ways in which he navigates the risk of racist stereotyping. Devin explained how he understands teachers who racially stereotype him. He talked about how it didn't really matter; the ways that they think are a result of how they were brought up or how they see some African American males acting in stereotypical ways at Sunnyside. Devin didn't see this as something that he could change. Therefore, instead of expending energy trying to change how they think, he focuses on his own behavior and "doing what he needs to do" to graduate and move on from Sunnyside. A protective factor/support who influenced Devin's thinking was his mother's boyfriend who always told him that he can't control what teachers think, just his own behavior.

Lastly, it is important to understand that more African American male students at Sunnyside have moved from outside communities than those who have lived in

Sunnyside their entire lives. I make this point because those participants who have moved from other communities into the Sunnyside community now share an experience. Perhaps this could explain how having moved from a different community can be a protective factor; that is, they have a larger social sphere with more friends from which to choose. While those who have lived in the Sunnyside community their entire lives struggle with finding their social niche, thus impacting their understanding of self, those who have moved to Sunnyside from other communities have not expressed this same struggle, perhaps because they share having lived in a prior context, thus making social relationships easier.

Researchers, administrators, teachers, and staff must take the time to understand the risks and protective factors present in their school setting. A further step must be taken to understand the relationships between how the risks present can turn into unproductive coping outcomes, and perhaps even more importantly, how protective factors can turn into productive coping outcomes based on appropriate supports in place.

Resilience: Productive Coping Outcomes Despite Risks

Perhaps one of the most profound ways that stages 1 and 5 can be utilized by school personnel and researchers is to delve deeper into the experiences of the participants who demonstrated productive coping outcomes in the face of significant risks (i.e. resilience). Many of the participants demonstrated productive coping outcomes, particularly in the face of racist hegemony and racist stereotypes at Sunnyside.

The next question asks how and why participants such as Darryl are able to navigate racist hegemony and racist stereotypes and still cope productively. Darryl's

experiences indicated that the supports present in the advanced placement track with supportive teachers, peers who look up to him, and as a participant on the boy's basketball team, are appropriate supports for him to mitigate the risk of racist hegemony and racist stereotypes. This doesn't mean that these aren't still risk factors; however, they are alleviated by the various supports in his life. Thus, a recommendation for school personnel might be to determine how all teachers can be supportive in the same way that Darryl finds his advanced placement teachers; it may also include determining spaces that other African American males can be active participants in school outside of academics. Darryl, for example, finds this sense of belonging on the basketball team. Beyond playing basketball other avenues to belong in groups, clubs, and activities can be created to generate a sense of belonging and investment in school. These new clubs and activities may have greater buy-in by the African American male community if they were involved in creating them.

Individuals like Darryl should be recognized and understood as resilient. With understandings of resilience in place, schools can focus on more appropriate interventions, leading to positive and potentially systemic changes in schools for African American males. Again, according to Luthar and Cicchetti (2000), one major goal is to, "shift away from maladjustment to consider competence as well (thus implicitly emphasizing prevention)" (p. 861). This will require an astute staff at Sunnyside High to be willing to listen to and understand the stories of their students, while building supportive relationships. This effort toward creating meaningful change where necessary must be purposeful.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The aim of this qualitative inquiry study was to listen to the stories of African American males at Sunnyside to better understand the ways in which they experience school. Of utmost importance in this study was attempting to understand the risks and protective factors the participants face in the school setting that may turn into challenges and supports for them. Future studies should seek to understand the relationships between risks and unproductive coping outcomes, protective factors and productive coping outcomes, and most importantly, risks and productive coping outcomes (i.e. resilience). If researchers, policy makers, administrators, and practitioners can understand these relationships, they can determine appropriate ways to help maximize supports already in place, offsetting the challenges they face in school, and thus leading African American males down the path of productive coping outcomes. Below, I revisit the research questions that guided this study, and finally end with next steps for Sunnyside High School and perhaps schools similar to Sunnyside based on the findings of this study.

Returning to the Research Questions

- *How do African American male students make sense of their schooling experiences at Sunnyside High School?*

All too often, research and practitioners make generalized assumptions about the experiences of all African American males, assuming that the experiences of some participants or students who share the same racial group and gender reflect the experiences of all. This research study demonstrated that these assumptions could be

vastly flawed, inappropriate, and unfair. To be direct, African American male students make sense of their schooling experiences at Sunnyside High School in very different ways depending on a variety of factors. These factors include but are not limited to being a newcomer or a lifer in the school, the appropriate supports they have in place to combat the risks they face, and how they make sense of who they are in the school.

- *What sorts of obstacles are present in the school setting?*

The obstacles, identified as challenges, dealt with three issues: 1) the normative issues that adolescents face in high school, 2) issues specific to African American males, specifically regarding race, and 3) issues specific to how long the participants had lived in the community. It is interesting to note that the normative issues such as pressure to perform well academically were generally felt by all participants. The issues specific to African American males dealt in large part with dealing with racist stereotypes, and navigating peer groups. Lastly, the obstacles faced by lifers were very different from those faced by urban newcomers.

- *What sorts of supports are in place to help overcome those obstacles and challenges?*

The participants voiced various supports present in their experiences. Like the obstacles faced, the supports encountered can be broken down by 1) normative supports encountered by adolescent high school students, and 2) the experiences of the lifers versus the urban newcomers. For example, the normative supports included factors like hopes for the future and positive peer groups. However, the lifers expressed supports of understanding how to navigate the school community, often in terms of academics, having resources or knowing how to obtain resources for high school and beyond, and

their willingness to seek help when needed. Alternatively, the urban newcomers expressed supports around a positive self concept, defining success as their personal best, a general ability to navigate racist stereotyping, particularly from teachers. Their stories also expressed being a part of a larger social group of those who had moved to Sunnyside from other communities, so it was easier to find friends.

- *How do African American males cope (positively or negatively) with these challenges?*

The participants in this study had very different ways of coping with the challenges listed above based on the supports they have in place along with their prior experiences. I found it interesting that the most salient challenge for all African American males in this study was navigating racist stereotypes. However, those who have lived in Sunnyside their entire lives understood and navigated racist stereotypes in a different way than did the newcomers.

The lifers, dealt with this challenge more in terms of their process of defining who they are with a constant struggle with racial identity. Their stories revealed an often lonely and isolating process of internal questioning, including: Who do these racist stereotypes describe? Do they describe me? Are they true? How will others perceive me if I associate with those who the racist stereotypes describe? How will my selected friends be perceived by the larger community? How do my actions ensure that I am not negatively labeled?

Alternatively, the newcomers, who also talked about navigating racist stereotypes, talked in very matter-of-fact terms. They felt that racist stereotyping, particularly from teachers, was inevitable and uncontrollable. Thus, instead of worrying about or

satisfying others' perceptions of them, they were most concerned with meeting their own expectations in terms of who they are and who they aim to be. Their struggle was fought more internally, and based on perspectives that have come from their prior neighborhoods as well as advice from influences they trust.

- *How do the stories told by African American male students reflect their perceptions of success?*

The participants' stories revealed how they define success. They did not talk specifically about stories of success, rather, they talked about what success means and how they are striving to achieve it. They may not have discussed feelings of actualized success because it was very early on in the school year, and they may have been in a time and space where they were still working towards goals of success.

Again, how the lifers described success was different from how the newcomers defined success. Lifers defined success in terms of being accepted into the school community, academic success, future planning, and high motivation. Whereas newcomers defined success as different for each individual, a demonstration of one's personal best, passing classes, and graduating.

Interestingly, the lifers also defined what they thought success looked like for newcomers. They talked about how newcomers feel as though they have to act the racist stereotype in order to be successful. They attributed this to their limited understanding of their potential, thinking that acting the stereotype is their only option. It was notable that both lifers and newcomers talked about how a high grade point average did not equal success. Both focus groups said that a high grade point average could be attributed to cheating.

- *How do African American males transcend adversity in school?*

The participants talked about success they encountered as well as the challenges they face at Sunnyside; however, they did not articulate these experiences as successes in the face of the challenges or in the face of adversity. Instead, they talked about various supports in place that help them to feel like they belong and to experience success. These supports included supportive teachers and coaches as particularly helpful in supporting academic success and emotional support. The newcomers articulated stories about staying true to themselves in the face of challenges. It was most important for them to represent and stay strong to their own ideology when faced with challenges. Also, those who were enrolled in advanced placement and special education classes reported structural supports in place. These supports provided students with extra help that, in the end, help them to navigate difficulties at Sunnyside.

- *How do they demonstrate resilience?*

Resilience, in this study, is defined as good outcomes achieved in the face of significant challenges (Spencer, 2010). It is clear that significant challenges are in place as mentioned above. Further, it is clear from speaking with the participants that good outcomes exist in short and long-term victories every day and each school year. Some of these good outcomes manifested as: a positive sense of self concept, academic achievement, and positive peer relationships in the face of racist hegemonic stereotyping, defining and finding success for oneself in classes where teachers are unsupportive, and fighting the relentless battle (particularly for the lifers) of defining a positive sense of

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oneself as an African American male in a community that largely doesn't understand or support them in positive ways.

However, it is clear to me that further research must be conducted to deeply examine the "how" and "why" questions, investigating more carefully the linkages between risks/challenges and protective factors/supports in terms of how they translate into productive coping outcomes. These productive coping outcomes in the face of significant challenges, I believe, can best demonstrate the resilient nature of African American males. Furthermore, the first step of identifying potential risk factors can enable schools to put appropriate supports in place to increase the likelihood of productive coping outcomes.

Next Steps

I hope that all stakeholders will take this new contribution as a piece of a larger puzzle. Next steps should include asking the "how" and "why" questions; that is, how and why do some African American males at Sunnyside demonstrate high levels of self concept while others do not when exposed to the same risks? Furthermore, how and why do some individuals productively cope in the face of significant risk factors, thus creating resilient behavior? Answers to these "how" and "why" questions have the potential of vastly changing the quality of experiences that African American males face in affluent, predominantly White, suburban schools.

It is with a hopeful heart that I conclude this study. Conducting a study that truly seeks to understand the voices of the African American male students from an understanding of risks/challenges and protective factors/supports has opened my mind,

questioned my assumptions, and challenged me to find ways to make suburban, affluent, and predominantly White schools a place where African American males can experience success on a level playing field. This includes thinking about how to support them in their process of identity development; that is, we must find ways to support their current selves while determining ways to be supportive of their future selves.

I found it bittersweet to listen to the participants speak about their positive and negative experiences at Sunnyside. As a long-time teacher in this community, it is heartbreaking to hear the negative student experiences, particularly those around racist stereotyping and the ways they are forced to navigate school with these hegemonic processes in place. It is my belief that all students should feel a sense of belonging, support, and safety in school. Shame on us as educators for not supporting all of our students in equal, equitable, and anti-racist ways.

In contrast, it was heart-warming to listen to the positive experiences, expressing feelings of belonging and feeling understood and supported. And although I found it sad that the frequency of negative experiences exceeded the positive ones, it nonetheless gave me hope that positive change was possible. The amount of power a teacher possesses in increasing life-changes and supports for our youngsters was clear through participant voices. In the most difficult time of high school adolescence, teachers have the ability to positively impact and support our African American males in their process of identity development. Further, special attention should be paid to our African American male students in predominantly White, affluent settings, with special attention to the supports that are working. An effort to maximize the appropriate supports for African American

males, while minimizing the risks they face, would greatly affect the quality of their schooling experiences.

Next steps will include sharing this research with the stakeholders at Sunnyside High School. My hope is that the stories of the participants, being real voices from their own school, will help them to understand the challenges and supports as well as the hardships and successes they encounter at school. And to return to the words of Lisa Delpit, I hope that stakeholders in the school and community can "learn to be vulnerable enough to allow [their] world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into [their] consciousness" (Delpit, 2006, p. 297). Only then can we as researchers, practitioners, and administrators create equal, equitable, supportive, and anti-racist schools for all of our students to learn and be successful.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

Research Involving Human Subjects
NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

To: Ravi Hansra Matrenec, Graduate Student, School of Education
Karen Monkman, PhD., Faculty Sponsor, School of Education

Date: August 25, 2009

Re: Research Protocol #RH071509EDU
"Understanding African American Male Perceptions of High School in a Predominantly White, Affluent Suburb of a Major Metropolitan City"

Please review the following important information about the review of your proposed research activity.

Review Details

☐ Full Committee Review

☒ Expedited Review, under 45 CFR 46.110

☒ Original Review
☐ Continuing Review (Renewal)
☐ Amendment
☐ Incident Report/Adverse Event

Your research meets the criteria for expedited review under the following categories:

Category of Review: 5, 7

"(5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for nonresearch purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis)."

"(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies."

Approval Details

☐ Approved   ☒ Approved (Previous contingencies have been resolved.)

Review Date: August 25, 2009
Approval Period: August 25, 2009 – August 24, 2010
Consent Documents: #09-207, Version 8/18/2009, Parental Permission (enclosed)
                        #09-208, Version 8/18/09, Consent (enclosed)
                        #09-209, Version 8/18/2009, Assent (enclosed)

☒ Alteration(s) of Consent (parental permission sent home, no verbal discussion), applicable to #09-207

Other approved documents: 1) recruitment flyer, "Let your voice be Heard" (enclosed); 2) Verbal recruitment script, version 8/12/2009 (enclosed)
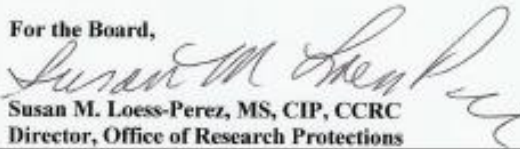
The Board determined that the research satisfies 45 CFR 46.404; it is not involving greater than minimal risk, therefore children may participate in this research project. The Board determined that according to 45 CFR 46.408 one parent must sign the permission document, as one parent's signature is sufficient, and age appropriate assent will be obtained from each child.

Reminders

- Only the most recent IRB-approved versions of assent/consent forms may be used in association with this project.

- Prior to implementing revisions to project materials or procedures, you must submit an amendment application detailing the changes to the IRB for review and receive notification of approval.

- You must promptly report any problems that have occurred involving research participants to the IRB in writing.

- If your project will continue beyond the approval period, you are responsible for submitting a request for renewal to the IRB at least 3 weeks prior to the expiration date. The renewal form can be downloaded from the IRB web page at http://research.depaul.edu.

- **Once the research is completed, you must send a final report closing the research to the IRB.**

The Board would like to thank you for your efforts and cooperation and wishes you the best of luck on your research. If you have any questions, please contact me by telephone at (312) 362-7593 or by email at sloesspe@depaul.edu.

For the Board,

Susan M. Loess-Perez, MS, CIP, CCRC
Director, Office of Research Protections

Appendix B: Questionnaire

General/Contact Information for **Students**	
Name (Last, First)	Phone Number ( ) -
Address	Age
Year in School (09-10 School Year)-check one ☐ Sophomore ☐ Junior ☐ Senior	How long have you lived in this community? If you have not lived in this community your entire life, from where did you move?
Class Schedule 1- 2- 3- 4- 5- 6- 7- 8-	

Appendix C: Focus Group Questions

Talk to me about your experience here at school…
1. What does it feel like to be Black and male here at this school?
2. How have your experiences at school been the same or different from other African American males?
    a. What matters?
        i. For example, does skin color matter?
        ii. How does age in school matter?
        iii. How does academic success matter?
        iv. Does it matter if you've lived in this town your whole life or just moved here?
        v. Does it matter if you moved from the city or another suburb?
        vi. Does it matter if you have all or mostly White friends?
        vii. Does it matter if you have all or mostly African American friends?
3. How do you think the wider student body perceives Black males?
4. How do you think teachers perceive Black male students?
5. How do you think African American males perceive academics and schooling?
    a. How do you value academics and schooling?
    b. What are some signs that indicate success?
        i. Does a high GPA mean that the student is successful in school? Why or why not?
        ii. How about 'not getting into trouble'?
6. What are some of the challenges that Black males face academically?
7. What are some of the challenges that Black males face socially?
8. Do you feel a sense of belonging in the school community?
    a. What or who helps to make you feel like you belong?
    b. What or who stops or hinders you from feeling like you belong?

Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. Overall, how would you describe your high school experience thus far at this school?
    a. How do other students—the larger student body—understand you? Why do you think they understand you this way?
    b. How do you feel you are understood by your teachers? Why?
    c. Who or what helps to make it a positive or negative experience?
2. Describe an African American male, in your eyes, who is successful at this school?
    a. What makes him successful?
    b. What sorts of obstacles or challenges might that person have to overcome in order to be successful?
        i. What do you do when you have academic, emotional, or social obstacles in school?
        ii. Are any supports available at school to help you? What/who are they?
3. How do you define success for yourself?
    a. Would or does a high GPA make you successful?
    b. What role do your teachers play in your success?
    c. What role do your peers play in your success?
4. Can you tell me about a positive academic experience that you have had here at school?
5. What things in your life help or hold you back?

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