Intersections: The Schooling Experiences of African-American Females Involved in Long-Term Foster Care and Their Transition into Womanhood

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INTERSECTIONS: THE SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENT AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALES INVOLVED IN LONG-TERM FOSTER CARE AND THEIR TRANSITION INTO WOMANHOOD

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by

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ABSTRACT

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African-American girls are entering foster care and experiencing longer stays in a system that was not intended to facilitate adolescents transitioning into adulthood. For African American adolescent girls many remain in care indefinitely and move from one temporary foster home, group home and institution to another, with little stability or preparation for the future.

Although the Adoption and Safe Families Act (AFSA) of 1994 and other policy reforms were designed to guide the temporary placement of children in foster care, this has not been the case, particularly for African American females. Upon entrance into foster care, African American adolescent females face many challenges. These include poor performance in school, multiple placements, social-emotional/mental health issues-separation from their families, loss/abandonment, and other related traumas.

The purpose of this study is to enhance knowledge of the experiences of African-American adolescent females simultaneously involved in the educational and foster care system and the meaning of their experiences as they transition into womanhood. The aim of this study is to understand the complexities faced by a vulnerable population—African-American adolescent females and how they make meaning of their experience while participating in both institutions of care.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Perspectives

“They [school] think they can do whatever they want to-to me because I don’t have anybody to speak up for me. They know I live in a group home and they treat me like nobody’s going to come up to the school for me or say anything to them about me. They treat me differently because I am in foster care. They threatened me with not graduating because I had a lot of absences. A boy in my class missed more days of school than I did and they didn’t say anything to him. They told all of my personal background to a parent, violating me, and Lisa [staff director of group home] said she would go up to the school and say something to them, but she didn’t. In order for me to get out of here [group home] I have to graduate this year or else I will have to wait to move into an ILP [independent living program]. I will be glad when I finish school because I don’t want to be 20 years old and still here [group home]...I want to be gone from here [group home] by the time I’m 20.”

—Lisa, 18

“When I initially decided to use the word “sassy” to describe Black adolescent girls behavior...when I was a child “sassy” was a term elders often used rather jokingly to describe “fast” and “womanish” behavior of young females...sassy became associated with a Black woman who commanded above all intelligence and competency.”

—West Stevens, Smart and Sassy: The strengths of inner city Black girls (p. xi)
Situating myself: Reflections of an African-American Woman and my understanding of systemic functions and institutions

As an educator and social worker with several years of teaching and clinical experience working with African-American girls in public institutions, I have often encountered situations which required me to reflect on my position in society as an African-American female. My dual occupations have regularly found me employed in organizations whose missions revolve around assisting individuals, families and communities. My work has also included placements in high schools, community colleges/universities, and child/family welfare settings. Ensconced in bureaucratic rules, regulations and paperwork, the atmospheres of these environments are generally in direct contradiction with the image of civic service and community care that has been projected to the public.

As an employee of these establishments, I would find myself in locations where issues of race, class and gender were ever-present. Although hidden, these situations required me to obtain and display skills that supported young African-American women in maneuvering through political, cultural, and social forces that function within academia and the helping professions. In my opinion, obtaining and displaying these skills was necessary due to the design of these specific professions which often exacerbated typecasts of young African-American women, and minimized problems or issues specific to this population. This translated into rendering young African-American women as shadowy figures in both social science disciplines. As a African-American woman, I recognized that I too could be regulated to a shadowy figure given the overt and covert guidelines of both settings.
In discussions with White colleagues regarding school issues or social work concerns that they encounter when assisting African-American girls, I am routinely asked, “Who inspired you to succeed” and “How did you avoid getting into trouble?” These conversations revealed moments of awe and wonder shown on the faces of my associates make me acutely aware of the depictions of Black females in American society and how I need to challenge such categorizations, particularly when I am in these mainstream settings.

The questions posed by colleagues, as well as my responses, forced me to then become the poster child and spokesperson for the “Black girl who made it.” I have never welcomed this level of tokenistic recognition and in no way wanted to contribute to the “Black role model syndrome.” What could I possibly say regarding all Black girls? These troubling assumptions are made by my White co-workers because I am an African-American female and they believe that I can relate to and address the experiences of all Black women. Thus, as a woman, I am left questioning how the larger society views Black girls. The notion that a single person could represent and speak for their entire race and gender is one that is perpetuated in multiple settings—for example, within the media. However, I find it more evident in institutions of care where the intersection and regulation of gender, class, and race exist profoundly.

I challenge the stereotypical query posed by my colleagues by explaining to them that my status as an African-American female is not guided by patriarchal ideology consisting of sexist, classist, or racist beliefs within dominant society. Rather it is the recognition that I am in and of a society, not willing to be framed, stereotyped, or stigmatized. Who I am as an African-American female then could not be solely restricted...
to the dominant cultures’ classifications. My identity must be expanded to include my multiple experiences as an evolving Black woman.

My way of thinking, feeling, and knowing are deeply rooted in my experiences. This helps me to resist and challenge a dominant culture that attempts to regulate African-American women. While I am dutifully aware of the competing perspectives that occur among those who do not have the lived and rich experiences of being a woman of color, I also realize that as an African-American female, traditional European notions of femininity, womanhood, and beauty do not apply to me. As U.S. society works to exclude and pigeonhole me, questions and reflections of how I see myself are paramount. Questions of who am I, what am I, how I see the world, and how I make sense of my experiences as an African-American female, are essential to my own development. This is necessary as I come to understand my reality and my social standpoint.

“White people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked White men first, White women second, though sometimes equal to Black men, who are ranked third, and Black women last…” (hooks, 1982, p. 152).

Unfortunately, American society supports hierarchical thinking when viewing Black women in general. The privileges and benefits accorded to White females, in terms of womanhood, differ when compared to African-American females. This systemic means of oppression works to maintain and place Black women in unequal status within society. Existent stereotypes, along with the stigma of being African-American and female, depict Black women as promiscuous, on welfare, or on drugs. In contrast, White females are seen as innocent, chaste, and wholesome. Therefore, in my role as Black, female, educator, and researcher, I am obligated to constantly working against the portrayals of Black women as a monolithic group.
Answering the above inquiry posed by my colleagues, required some reflection. I didn’t consider myself special or different from any other Black woman because of my accomplishments. Nor did I want to be the “poster child” for African-American women’s achievements amongst my White colleagues. While my achievements demonstrated my intellectual and personal abilities, I also had to acknowledge that there were obstacles that I encountered on my professional and personal journey. Initially I had not given much thought about the challenges that I had encountered or how I conquered them. Homage must be paid to how I overcame the obstructions and roadblocks that allowed me to move beyond the odds stacked against many African-American females. Whether I had to walk, run, jump, low crawl, or high crawl, I was determined not to allow any stumbling blocks to prevent me from surpassing the common negative stereotypes of African-American women. I was determined to defy the typecasts of African-American woman.

Education was an important part in this process. I knew this early on and plotted my path. I would graduate high school, attend college, and attain a good job. Looking back on my goals, I am able to view education from a different angle now. Education opened doors and opportunities for me that I otherwise would not have had access to, but educational institutions also discriminated against other African-American girls like me.

School itself was never a difficult for me; therefore I never gave much thought to my educational outcomes while attending school. As an educator and African-American woman, I now can see the difficulty of “doing” school specifically for African-American girls. Doing school for African-American girls today means speaking up in class, but knowing when to be quiet. I think about the red check marks, minuses, or unsatisfactory markings I used to get on my report card in the box marked “very talkative”. I remember
reading the comments on the back of my report card that said how smart I was yet; I talked too much in class. How else was I to let the teacher know that I knew the answers! My confusion surrounding the contradiction is not unlike the confusion that African-American girls in today’s classroom experience. Speaking up gets you in trouble; if you don’t speak up then you don’t understand the material. If you are noisy, you are considered disruptive. If you dress a certain way, it signifies something negative. These and many other conflictual messages that African-American girls in school face as well as the huge amount of social and personal barriers impede their ability to transcend the deep rooted stereotypes of African-American women.

While I had excelled above the societal boundaries by completing high school, attending and graduating college, not having any children out of wedlock, and was a non-recipient of public assistance, I recognized from my colleagues’ question that the above stigmas were operating on a larger academic scale.

In spite of my personal successes, I am still a woman of color, and thereby subjected to the societal branding of demeaning intentional labels. While I resist White patriarchal ideology, I do recognize that as an African-American female I live my life constantly negotiating and mediating those spaces that make up my professional and personal life. My constant exposure to institutionalized classifications that operate to marginalize African-American females is a constant reminder of my status as a woman and as a racial minority.

Portrayals of being vocal and opinionated are often associated with being Black and female. In Rebecca Carroll’s (1997), *Sugar in the Raw: Voices of Young Black Girls*
in America, 14-year-old Jaminica explains the anguish that African-American girls experience in terms of labeling:

I will never have the luxury of knowing what it’s like to not be branded in society…you accept the stereotypes given to you and just try and reshape them along the way, in a way this gives me a lot of freedom…I can’t be looked at as any worse in society than I already am-Black and female is pretty high on the list of things not to be. (p. 95.)

In her recognition of being Black and female, Jaminica also understands that there is value in this identity. Jaminica’s freedom lies in her belief that she can be more than what society sees her capable of. I relate to Jaminica’s grasp of the circumstances. Being African-American and female has created several opportunities for me to move beyond the compartmentalized categories of American society. The firm belief that I could be many other things beyond public ascriptions assisted me in my identity formation. Through this process, I was able to negate the socially derogatory classifications attached to being Black and female.

By reflecting on the diverse experiences, lives, and stories of African-American women, and the telling of my occurrences, I am provided with ammunition to rebut and challenge the characterizations of African-American females as “loud,” “angry,” “aggressive,” and “delinquent.” In doing so I challenge the racialized tagging that works to limit both the access and privileges of African-American females (Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007).
Service as an Entry Point

In August 2005, I began my journey as a therapist in the Bright House Transitional Living Facility (a pseudonym)—a residential establishment for girls in long-term foster care. The Bright House Transitional Living Program was created in 1994 “to assist young women involved in the child welfare system, transitioning from dependency on social services to self-sufficient living” (Jane Addams Hull House, 2009). The facility houses 14 girls at any given time. The girls inhabit the establishment while awaiting placement into their own independent living arrangements, which include an apartment if they attend college or housing on a college campus.

At the time of my research, the facility housed African-American girls (ages 17-21), who were in the care of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Service (IDCFS). The facility is located in the Gotham area—a mixed-income community filled with churches, restaurants, beauty and nail salons, and local bars on Chicago’s South Side.

As a part of their care, Bright House provides its residents with tools that concentrate on their physical, social, educational, emotional, and personal well-being. The main goal of the facility is to assist the residents in developing positive independent living skills through the services provided.

My involvement with these young women initially started with my role as a therapist, but later deepened when I was awarded a fellowship through the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship Foundation. As a recipient of the fellowship, I was required to complete 200 hours of direct service within a community-based organization. I was also responsible for developing and implementing a year-long community health service
project that addressed unmet needs of an undeserved population. Having developed a relationship as a therapist at Bright House, I believed that this site would be ideal for a community based project because it was home to a number of girls who were identified as a “high risk” population. The “high risk” categorization assigned to these girls was the result of various life circumstances that resulted in loss or abandonment, substance abuse, mental health issues and, subsequently, their placement within the foster care system.

I decided to conduct my project on the mental health and developmental needs of participants for the reason that this was an essential part of the services provided by Bright House. With a background in clinical interventions, I was able to develop a goal-centered project that placed the girls’ needs at the center of my inquiry. The project had three primary goals:

- To identify barriers to independence of young women who are DCFS wards who reside in a transitional living facility;
- To assist young women in accessing needed supports that will assist in a successful transition into independent living;
- Identify, discuss, and develop a plan for understanding how young women navigate their transition and roles as DCFS ward, student, and woman.

I created this project occurred because I wanted to develop an understanding of the phenomena of African-American girls in long-term foster care and their developmental needs as they transition into independent living. Specifically, the project would address their social-emotional needs and supports in the developmental process of adolescence into adulthood.

The explanation of the project was not only for the staff but for my clarification, as well. The need for clarification came at the same time the girls were experiencing the trials and tribulations of their transition into “womanhood” (Walker, 1983). As the issues
of the girls were disclosed, the lens which I saw and understood them also shifted. What one would label as acts of oppositional behaviors of an adolescent girl entering adulthood, unfolded through my understanding of the girls themselves. That is, acts of resistance against the social structure that they found themselves in.

**Snapshots**

In my foster care work, I was introduced to a group of young women who, during our time together, revealed to me their inner, unexpressed, and often silenced perspectives on being an African-American within the child welfare system.

I recall my first day at the facility—the peeling green paint on the wall, the poorly lit foyer, and the therapist’s office, which also doubled as the staff lounge and pantry area with toiletries and dry goods for residences. I remember wondering if the girls would like me. Would they want to talk to me? How would I engage them in therapy? I was able to overcome these feelings by reminding myself that I was there as facilitator and that their development was not about me. In essence, I needed to meet the girls where they were emotionally and allow a therapeutic relationship to develop.

Discussion groups were held with the girls with two main objectives: (1) providing the girls with a way to address their mental health issues which acted as barriers to their transition and (2) providing a social support as a means of assistance while they encountered barriers as African-American females within the child welfare system. The focus of the groups was to help the girls express the personal meaning of the foster care experience in their own words.

The first issue expressed by the girls was schooling. For the residents of Bright House, receiving and obtaining an education was integral in their transition to
independent living. As a policy requirement of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS), youth could not transition into their own independent living situations without a high school diploma or the completion of the General Equivalency Diploma (GED). For the majority of the girls within the facility, attempting to meet this mandate posed challenges which included lack of interest, low attendance, school suspensions, and being below grade level.

The second issue revealed through these discussions was the limited attention to their particular identity as African-American females. The girls talked about how they did not like being labeled as “DCFS wards” or “foster children.” During a group session on self-image, one of the girls made sure that her explanation of her entrance into foster care was distinguishable through a reference she made to her situation being different than the other girls, “my situation is different than the other girls so I don’t have the same problems that the other girls do…I chose to enter myself into DCFS care.” It was apparent that she wanted to stand apart from the other girls in the facility. This young woman’s adamancy about being different conveyed the reality that the girls in the facility had been unfairly associated and grouped together due to the tag of “DCFS ward,” the commonalities of their life, and the circumstances surrounding them.

This was a true reality check for me as it led me back to my own notions of being labeled. I realized that it was easy for me utilize the same ideology of grouping to put these girls into categories—the very thing that I struggled to overcome in my academic and professional life.

From her expressed need of individuality, I realized that, in trying to learn about a specific aspect of this population, I needed to rethink and redefine what “help” meant and
what kind of help was needed. My original assumptions about what these girls desired lead me to focus only on the goals of my project. Had the young woman in the group discussion not made a stand about being different, I would have overlooked the most important aspect of these girls: her individuality and identity.

I recognize that my intent should have been to understand what the girls needed—what was important to them individually rather than what I believed their issues were. The only way to do this was to listen and to hear their voices. I heard the issues of education and what it poses for them in long-term foster care. I also heard their lived experiences living in institutional settings, and the cry for recognition as African-American, females, and as individuals.

The irony of working with this population was that their issues and struggles in and against larger society were no different than my own. Listening to their stories and telling my own brought about a larger perspective that is noteworthy. The labels that I found being placed on me were no different than the labels that I was placing on the girls. How then could I expect the girls to navigate their present circumstances when I was one of the individuals subjecting them to the same treatment that I had experienced?

I stated earlier that the labeling did not affect me. However, could there be the slight chance that unconsciously through my own thoughts about the girls and their needs I had subjected them to the same ideology that society used to classify them? Had I then become what Paulo Freire (1972) refers to as the oppressor of the oppressed? I did not want to be in the position of power in which I stripped the girls of their power to “analyze their own existence in the world” (Freire, p. 89). My attentiveness in this situation brought about a level of consciousness that required me to redirect my focus on the girls’
experiences and needs from their point of reference, rather than from what I thought their needs and experiences were. Although the girls and I were racially and culturally similar, their behavior and responses constantly reminded me that I had been provided access into their world and that I was an outsider. This meant that I had to acknowledge their experiences as being unique to them. By doing this I was able to challenge the criticism that researchers of color who are culturally in synch with their research participants cannot be objective “in their analyses of those problems which are so close to their life experiences” (Reyes & Halcón, 1996, p. 34).

As I came to know the girls of Bright House, I realized that I was intimately connected to them. Learning about African-American females is extremely personal given that I am a daughter of an African-American female, a role model and mentor to other young women. I hope to someday raise an African-American child. My contribution to the study of Black girlhood and the function of institutionalized settings in the lives of young African-American females as a daughter, mentor, educator, researcher, and potential mother is necessary because I want to teach my daughter or son how to resist the negative societal messages and images that are pervasive. I want to be an excellent role model for African-American girls based on the terms and images set forth by Black womanhood so that they will understand that beauty, intellect, success, and their status is not built upon “the beauty myth” (Wolf, 2002), that White society determines as the essence of femininity. As a would-be parent, I must possess the ability to teach my children the messages of love, respect, and values, as well as the power to oppose, defend, and navigate against damaging depictions of African-Americans in society. For
these reasons I must be passionate about my research and what it reveals about the lives of young Black females.

As an African-American researcher, I find myself reflecting continuously on the ways I exist as an individual in relation to the dualism of being Black and female. The recognition of the added responsibility that I have is heightened. The intersections of race, class, and gender and the influence that is associated with these categories invite inquiry about the experiences of African-American females in institutional settings.

How the girls shape their reality, how I shape my understanding and how we make sense of our lived experiences, position us to analyze and make connections to each others experiences and struggles as African-American women. This is important in expanding the current models that misconstrue, malign, and ignore the African-American female experience.

**Really Listening to Voices**

Borrowing Dewey’s metaphor “life is education,” Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. xxii) espouse the belief that educators are interested in life, learning, teaching and how it takes place. The interest in the drawing out of different lives, the values, attitudes, beliefs, social systems, institutions and structures are all linked to learning and teaching. For Clandinin and Connelly narrative inquiry becomes a way of understanding human experiences.

Understanding how the girls participated in institutions of care and the discovery of those needs was provided through examining the girls’ experiences. The often invisible and suppressed expressions of this population are revealed through their stories and in their own voices. Telling their stories, and sharing their memories, reflects the
pieces of their history as a means of educating larger society so that all institutions of care can understand the complexities that this vulnerable population faces (as a client, an African-American, and as a girl).

In *Personal Experience Methods*, Clandinin and Connelly (1994) posit that people live out their personal stories and in the telling of these stories, they reaffirm, modify, and create new ones. In support of educating society, the authors’ emphasize that “stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the young and those such as researchers who are new to their communities” (p. 413).

The usage of voice in narrative research is critically assessed. The argument is that either voices are heard, stolen, and published as the researcher’s own or that the researcher’s voice drowns out the participants’ voices, so that when participants do appear to speak it is nothing more than the researcher’s voice code (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I was especially attentive to these matters in my research because I wanted to ensure that the authenticity of the girls’ voices remained the focal point.

During my research at Bright House finding my place within the facility was equally important to authenticating the girls’ stories. Nonetheless, the task of working with the girls in the position of researcher was not easy. I was in an endless state of questioning myself and revisiting conversations with the girls. Coming into a new understanding—a releasing of sorts—was occurring with these interactions. The assumptions that were debunked and the myths that were unveiled by and about this particular population of girls compelled me to continue in my important exploration of “voice.”
Author, feminist scholar, and poet, bell hooks (1994), who uses lowercase letters in her name as a means of having the public focus on her work, rather than on her as an individual, writes “hearing each other’s voices, individual thoughts, and sometimes associating these voices with personal experience makes us more acutely aware of each other” (p. 186). It was my duty then to be attentive to their voices, to really listen to them. The emphasis was on connecting with the girls, “starting where they were,” accepting and understanding them, and developing a partnership. My efforts were an attempt to reveal to the girls that they and only them had the power to bring to light their stories, to narrate the events in their lives, and to construct their own realities. Who else, but them, could legitimize their experiences or create new possibilities? Errante (2000) supports hooks’ position and affirms that voice “whether oral or written, personal or collective, official or subaltern, are ‘narratives of identity’; that is, they are representations of reality in which narrators also communicate how they see themselves and wish others to see them” (p. 16).

In negotiating the construction of my own voice as a researcher and hearing the girl’s voices, its emotional connections created in me personal conflicts. While I didn’t feel voiceless in my writing, because of my passion, I realize that I may have silenced myself in my field research in attempting to make certain that the girls’ voices were presented with integrity. This was more evident in the interactions with the staff—my colleagues—at Bright House and how they responded to the girls. Although I did not feel like an uninvited guest in the facility, the staff did little to support the project with the girls. I involved the staff in conversations about my project, the aims, what I wanted to learn, and how I wanted to help the girls in their transition. The girls in turn had mixed
feelings regarding the staff indicating their chief complaint was that “staff didn’t care about them.” These feelings were exacerbated by the fact that both the staff and the girls often found themselves at odds, specifically when it came to positions of authority, when the girls tried to advocate for themselves. When the girls tried to speak out against something that they thought was wrong within the facility, their right to be heard was often muted because of the power struggle that occurred between them and staff.

**Realizations**

The lack of validation of and the process of collusion among both the education and foster care system do harm to African-American females in their individual developmental process. Specifically, by silencing their voices and silencing how they represent themselves. An illustration of this occurred at the facility between the girls and the resident staff members. On occasion, the girls would often contest and challenge the rules of the facility. When responding to their complaints regarding the rules with resident staff, the staff person would often shout at the girls or ignore them completely. This behavior operated as an attempt to shut down any acts of resistance from the girls. By silencing the voice of the girls, the communication between them and the resident staff person was cut off. Rather than listening to what they had to say, the staff at the facility shut off any connections or true relationships that could be formed.

In contrast to the staff’s approach, I wanted to know what the girls thought, how they felt, and their perspective on “taboo” subjects such as sex, sexual abuse, and even sexual orientation. In order to do this, I had to remove the educator and social worker hats and the power affiliated with them. I had to walk with them—the same road, the same
passageway. On these avenues our paths would intersect to reveal a means of appreciation and realization of our respective places in the world.

Statement of the Problem

African-American adolescent females in long-term foster care are not receiving the educational and social supports needed to be self-sufficient in the larger society. Without the academic and social supports from both the foster care and educational system, their ability to move into independent living arrangements is threatened and their developmental transition into woman [adult]hood is affected. The impact of both institutions can be seen in the number of former Black females in long-term foster care who experience high rates of educational failure, unemployment, poverty, out of wedlock planning, mental illness, housing instability, and victimization (Courtney & Heuring, 2005).

For most youth involved in long-term foster care, transitioning from long-term foster care into independent living situations can be considered a “rite of passage” into adulthood. Completing high school, living on their own without the supervision of other adults, managing their own finances, and making choices for themselves are all part of this transformation. (Gavazzi, 1996; Alford et al. 1996). However this “rite of passage” poses a dilemma for the African-American adolescent female in long-term foster care, because it forces her to maneuver the social constructs of gender, race, and class while countering messages and stereotypes that stigmatize them. In order for the African-American adolescent female to be successful in her navigation, a comprehensive program which centers on her education and addresses her specific developmental needs is necessary.
Given the patriarchal focus of both the foster care and educational systems, the needs of the African-American female are negated. As institutionalized settings, both systems intersect and act as collaborators to operate as sites of social reproduction of equality (Luttrell, 2003; Collins, 2000; West Stevens, 2002). Thus, the services that are provided typically originate from a male-dominated, universal, Eurocentric perspective based on the view of the African-American female. This framing further marginalizes this population, eliminating their experiences, their truths, and their realities (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1994).

Although there is research that addresses African-American adolescent female experiences in long-term foster care, research specifically examining their experiences with both the foster care and educational system and their developmental transitions is scarce. My research addresses this paucity by bringing the voices of adolescent girls of color to the foreground of the emerging literature on girls and young women. Since schools are “the most salient institutions that shape adolescent and these experiences have a direct impact on the future outcomes of students” (Eccles & Lord, 1996, p. 252) which can be applied to African-American adolescent females in long-term foster care, it is important to examine how African adolescent females negotiate the educational and foster care system while making their developmental transition to adult[woman]hood.
**Background and Significance**

The purpose of this study is to enhance the understanding of the experiences of African-American adolescent females and their simultaneous involvement in the educational and foster care system and the meaning of their experiences while navigating their transition into womanhood. There are several aims of this study: 1) to understand the complexities of challenges faced by a vulnerable population (i.e., African-American adolescent females and their participation within two social institutions of care); 2) to reveal the lived realities and complexities of girls in foster care; 3) to bring African-American girls voices to the foreground of social science research; and 4) to extend the present research literature regarding this vulnerable population.

Studies that address the issues experienced by African-American females who participate in institutions of care (specifically foster care and educational systems) have both theoretical and practical implications for the education and social work fields. By examining the experiences of the girls in these systems, research would expand the knowledge regarding African-American females in long-term foster care and their educational experiences. Likewise by understanding their experiences, the quality of services and the level of intervention that these girls receive can be improved, thus providing a way to meet their unique needs.

Through this study, I plan to contribute to the existent literature by expanding the knowledge-base around African-American females and their experiences in institutionalized settings and the possible outcomes of their participation within these sites. Incorporation of the developmental issues that African-American females encounter
while participating in these settings will be included as it is important to the issues this population faces as they into transition into womanhood.

For this study, a qualitative research design was chosen because it supports a constructivist epistemology. This approach, I believe, will help in developing a more accurate portrayal of the multiple life worlds of African-American girls and the representation of their complex and ever-changing social reality.

Additionally, using Black feminist theory as a guiding framework will assist in analyzing what West Stevens calls “hostile environments” (2002, p. 145). For this study, environments include school settings as well as foster care placements. Black feminist theory seeks to pose questions about race and gender issues (Smith, 1998); therefore, class will also be interjected as it functions as a part of the social environment in which African-American females interact.

Narrative inquiry will also be employed as a method to gather data and to understand how the girls participated in institutions of care and the discovery of their needs as told through their voices. Narrative inquiry will provide a means by which the telling of the participants’ stories and their lived experiences will inform others in the larger society, as well as all institutions of care, of the complexities that this vulnerable population faces.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The well-being of African-American adolescent girls who age out of the foster care system is a new phenomenon that is slowly grabbing the interest of child welfare practitioners, educators and policymakers. In spite of growing interest, little is known about the experiences of this population and its simultaneous interactions with both the long-term foster care system and education. Furthermore, little research investigates the developmental impact that both systems have on this populations’ transition into womanhood. Currently African-American female adolescents ages twelve and older makeup over 8% of the 500,000 or more children who are a part of the nation’s foster care system.

The expectation of children leaving foster care is that they are able to be self-sufficient in the larger society. Armed with minimal education and life skills training which include budgeting and cooking skills, these youth often fair poorly upon their emancipation (Courtney & Barth, 1996). The difficult transition to adulthood for this population comes with the challenges of education and navigating the maturation and socialization skills expected during this growth period. African-American adolescent females involved in both systems, face an even larger and more daunting challenge because public agencies have not recognized nor incorporated their developmental needs into a solid program that promotes self-sufficiency in African-American females who are exiting the foster care system (Daughtery, 2005). Without the social and psychological
recognition of their adolescent identity development, this population is subject to problems such as early pregnancy, substance abuse, and delinquency issues.

Research indicates that even though long-term foster care placements such as Independent Living Programs, attempt to aid adolescents in the preparation for self-sufficiency, many of these youth are not provided with the necessary resources and support systems needed to succeed in society (Kroner, 1999; Courtney & Barth, 1996). For African-American females who are placed in these programs, identity development encompasses another type of transition into adulthood. This developmental transition, identified by Walker (1983) as “womanhood” is infused with race, gender, and emancipatory issues. Differentiating adulthood from womanhood for this population is essential for African-American adolescent girls who are placed into settings in which their knowledge and cultural encounters are often silenced and devalued due to their race, gender and socioeconomic status.

According to Daughtery (2002), in her study of African-American female adolescents in foster care, an attempt to explain this phenomenon is complicated because it is a recent phenomena. Thus, the presence of African-American adolescent females in long-term foster care and the educational system, and their interrelatedness, poses a number of considerations to include in the developmental needs and empowerment of this group.

Adolescence

Adolescence is defined as the period between childhood and adulthood when personal and physical growth takes place (Hopkins, 1983). Adolescence is also characterized as the period of experimentation, strong identification with peers, active
fantasy lives, and exploring into various philosophies, vocations, and the ways of connecting the self to others (Liebert & Wicks-Nelson, 1981). Cobb (1995) attempts to create a cohesive definition that encompasses the biological, psychological, and sociological: “Adolescence is a period in life that begins with biological maturation, during which individuals accomplish certain developmental tasks, and that ends when they achieve a self-sufficient state of adulthood as defined by society” (p.27).

Psychologist Erik Erikson, (1968) describes the process of adolescence as a period during which young people grapple with the question of who they are as well as who they will become. While definitions of adolescence attempt to describe the process of youth development they are limited in the way they address the constructs of race and gender (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Buckley & Carter, 2005). This is important particularly when examining the lives of adolescent girls while identity and self-concept become the focus during this stage of development (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Taylor, 1994).

The period of adolescence for girls is a dynamic process of negotiating their lives, intuiting circumstances, weighing alternatives, as well as making and revising choices (Pipher, 1994; Paul, 2003; Way, 1996; West Stevens, 2002; Research for Action, 1996). This experience is further complicated for African-American adolescent girls, as they “move toward adulthood in a society that continues to denigrate women, especially women of color” (Research for Action, 1996, p.1).

Adolescence is a tumultuous phase of development for African-American girls because they are exposed to challenging and complex situations (Paul, 2003; Evans-Winters, 2005; West Stevens, 2002). Stereotyping, labeling, self-image, self-esteem, teen pregnancy, and peer pressure are the primary social sites of difficulty. The negotiation of
African-American adolescent girls within these complex locations requires them to be both attentive to and perceptive of their position within society (Tatum, 1999). Sackett et al (1995) asserts that “girls of color face a different set of experiences and issues because of different socialization patterns and their need to deal with the multiple burdens of racism, cultural discrimination, and gender bias in society (p. 15).” An example of the race differential between girls of color and White girls can be found in Brown and Gilligan’s study (1992) that addressed mainly White American, middle-class girls between the ages of 8 and 18, the participants did not have to deal with the intersection of culture, race, and class, as they were privileged because of their race and social status.

The issue of identity competes with issues of socialization and the various problems that Black girls face during adolescence. Goodman (1972) states that in addition to establishing her identity as a woman, a Black [African-American] girl becomes even more aware of her status as Black [African-American]. West Stevens (2002) maintains that this is as a double jeopardy status that can be both empowering and problematic as with race, class, and gender intersecting. The consciousness of this dual status constitutes growth as a new identity is formed (Field & Hoffman, 1997). The authors further believe that the identity that is developed from this duality creates a “vulnerable self” (p. 289).

For African-American adolescent girls involved with both the educational and long-term foster care system, the vulnerable self interfaces with conflicting identities—Black, female, adolescent, student, and ward of the state. Thus, the African-American adolescent females’ perception of who she is outwardly (i.e., how society sees her, who she is inwardly, her individuality and how she makes meaning) is important in her
developmental process. Emphasizing this point, Helms et al (1992) posits “women’s healthy gender identity development involves movement from an externally and societal based definition of womanhood to an internal definition in which the woman’s own values, beliefs, and abilities determine the quality of her womanhood (p. 162).”

Examining the experiences of African-American adolescent girls and their participation in two social institutions—their conflicting and often contradictory goals of equality, care, democracy, and access, and how this population navigates these systems—provides insight into understanding the meaning of their encounters as they transition into womanhood. This is significant for two reasons: (1) understanding the issues that impede their academic experiences and minimizes their level of self-sufficiency and participation in larger society and (2) providing ideas to establish new public policies for themselves as well as their peers who have similar needs.

### Social Perception, Status, and Challenges of Women in Society

The gender relations between men and women in any particular group are not shaped only by the men and women in that group, for those relations two are always shaped by how men and women are defined in every other race, class, or culture in the environment. (Harding, 1993, p. 18.)

Women in society have long been subjected to gender stereotyping and limited roles. Fairy tales feature a young, pretty, and slender White woman who spends a great deal of time making or keeping herself attractive for the man or “prince” in her life (Amundsen, 1977; Wolf, 1991). Another set of myths focus on being a wife, homemaker, or mother whose life is devoted to ensuring that her home and loved ones are comfortable without any thought to her own well-being (Chodorow, 1978). A third and more widely promoted notion that contradicted the sexist vision of women as feminine, docile and in need of protection emerged in the 1960’s and 1970’s. During this period of the Women’s
Liberation Movement the view of women as manipulators, schemers, or “having it made” became a rationale that was used to discredit women’s efforts at achieving equality (Caraballo et al. 1993).

In current research literature the notion of “power” (Crow, 2000) is emphasized. The continued presence of the feminist movement in the United States during the past decades has had major influences on today’s society. Women currently hold electoral public offices, are represented in fields that previously excluded women, and are creating spaces of their own in the entertainment and science related fields (Kinser, 2004). The extensive individual and social changes that have resulted from these new views about the roles of women and men are evidence of the feminist influence on private lives and public structures. However for all of their accomplishments and assets, women remain unequal to men in terms of access to executive and leadership positions, salaries, and employment (Kinser, p. 15). The constant struggle for power and equality affects the quality of life that a woman has both at home and in society and further fuels desire for more social and political change.

In The Feminine Mystique author Betty Friedan (1963), believes that superficial and one-dimensional depictions of women reflect the patriarchal notions about women prevalent in society that continues to portray women as “sex kittens,” “helpers,” and “providers of care” (Epp & Watkinson, p. xii). Friedan, also known as the mother of feminist revolution, believes the continual portrayal of women dehumanizes and limits the liberation of women. Friedan argues that the stark reality of these ideas works to uphold and promote the oppression of women in an effort to maintain the power within male-female relationships and society.
Wolf’s (1991) *The Beauty Myth*, extended the dialogue regarding the issues of women while exposing the stereotypes and the unequal power relations within relationships and society. In Wolf’s analysis women’s resistance to these conventional models of female identity is very important.

While Friedan (1963) and Wolf (1991) may have raised important issues regarding the challenges and barriers women face in the quest for equality, the authors have taken for granted and failed to address the experiences of other women: all women of color in particular. As a consequence the representation of women’s issues is only viewed from the perspective of White females and does not take into account women of color and their constant struggle for recognition and equality in White society. hooks (1981) maintains that authors like Friedan and Wolf failed to identify how their own desire for freedom had implications for the continuing perpetuation of African-American women’s oppression. Wilson and Russell (1996) agree with hooks’ account by identifying the lack of solidarity among White and Black women in the modern day feminist movement.

Beginning with the Women’s Suffrage Movement of the 1920’s and continuing on with both the Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity Act of 1972, the increase in the number of citizens, primarily women eligible to vote, doubled (Corder & Wolbrecht, 2006). According to Wolf (1993) although women are in the working-class minority—overlooked and underpaid, women possess the one thing that provides them with power—political citizenship, which continues to be the right to vote.

Recognition then of the power relations regarding women both in the home and in society is best examined through a political lens. An assessment of the ways in which
women’s and men’s issues are represented in political institutions and structures highlights issues of inequality (Taylor & Vintges, 2004).

Friedan (1992) in her observation of the Democratic convention and the attention paid to women’s issues agrees: “this time we did not have to fight for more priority to be accorded women's rights, abortion, child care, parental leave--all the "women's issues" that party leaders had shunned before… it was clear that "women's issues" are now primary political issues.” This analysis is necessary because the socio-political condition of women in its current state constitutes a group that is exploited and unfairly treated (Cobble, 2004). This includes the wage earnings gap between men and women. Currently women earn on average 73% of men's earnings. According to Womenwork.org, the average homemaker would make $30,000 a year if she were paid (womenwork.org, 2005.) Thus women’s work is devalued in the home and underpaid in the workforce.

The life experiences of women extend the conversation that is consistent with Friedan’s argument. Agreeing with Friedan, Mandy Grunwald, the Democratic counterpart to Republican public relations guru Roger Ailes and presidential candidate, Hilary Clinton’s media advisor, produces television spots that rely heavily on her experience as a woman. According to Grundwald (2007): “we're the ones who bring to the table a real sense of everyday life…people sense that women know what's really happening, day by day” Grundwald’s statement debunks the myth of women as mere sex objects and gives power to women beyond their homelife (p. 18).

Historically for African-American women, the gender stereotypes and roles assigned to them are different than those afforded White women. Harding (1993) notes: “the femininity prescribed for the plantation owner’s wife was exactly what was
forbidden for the Black slave woman” (p. 18). The stereotype of White women as the epitome of femininity and docility who needed and required protection continue as common practice today as it did during slavery. The notion of African-American women as objects instead of subjects worthy of respect pervaded the period of slavery. According to Vaz (1995), African-American women were never seen as victims or sexual commodities (p.5). Instead African-American women were viewed as lustful objects or “mammies.” Mammy was seen as patient, caring, passive, with no needs of her own (Jewell, 1993; McElya, 2007). This unsafe role assignment however, does little to move the stereotype of African-American women beyond that of caretaker and asexualized and functions to maintain the African-American female in a subordinate role.

Another role assigned to African-American women can be found in Mitchell’s (1936/1964) Gone with the Wind. In her book, the character Prissy, Scarlett O’Hara’s house servant, is portrayed as childlike, lazy, lying, and incompetent. This depiction is utilized largely today to describe African-American females particularly when it comes to the usage of social services, hence the title “welfare queens” (Collins, 2000, p. 77). This characterization contradicts the image of the African-American female as intelligent, hard-working, and trustworthy.

Lastly African-American women are often portrayed as “strong Black women.” Within the African-American community this categorization is seen as a way to create a person who was nurturing and to diminish the sexual images previously ascribed (Walker, 1983). Scott’s (1991) description of the strong Black woman is one in which she uses her sassiness to defend her family, accepts her role as secondary to men, and one who pledges herself to a life of service to others. This is all accomplished, according to Scott,
with the expectation of conformity to European notions of femininity. This means that African-American women are then challenged to negotiate contradictory expectations of her culture and the expectations of a White dominant society. Unfortunately this stereotype that operates in the minds of larger society perpetuate the silencing and victimization of Black women.

Even with the ending of slavery, African-American women have not been free from racism, sexism, or economic exploitation (Davis, 1983). As a result, African-American women have often and continue to be stereotyped and regulated to positions of powerlessness within larger society (hooks, 1983; Evans-Winters, 2005; West Stevens, 2002). This is based on the biased notions and depictions identified earlier of African-American women and their role and status in society. Collins (2000) affirms this in her statement: “portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression” (p. 67-68).

Today, negative and dismissive attitudes about African-American women are represented and reproduced in mass media. These representations of African-American women in various media such as movies, books, and videos works to influence current governmental policies (Jewell, 1993). Geiger (1995) addresses the racial, gender, and class factors and its influence on public policy that renders African-American women powerless. As an example, Geiger identifies policies such as The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 also known as the Personal Responsibility & Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Geiger states that policies such as these work to control the behavior of
African-American women through restrictions and penalties rather than deal with the poverty and racism that these women encounter (Geiger, 1995, p. 250).

**Historical and Contemporary Examination of Education of Girls**

Touted as a gateway to a better life, education has been the focal point of debates over the process of Americanization, the role of women in U.S. society, and the place of people of color in the United States throughout its history (Ware, 1997; Wright, 2007). During the early part of the 17th century most school doors were closed to girls seeking knowledge, and the home was considered the learning place for young women. The home, serving as the girls' classroom, was where young girls learned the practical domestic skills for their inevitable role as wife and mother (Owens et al. 2003). These practices and other forms of controlled learning are currently practiced today, serving to reinforce the imagery, social perception, and gender roles of girls in society in which schools and curriculum operate in perpetuating class and gender structures (Ware, 1997, p.50).

In 1767 a school in Providence, Rhode Island, began advertising that it would teach reading and writing to girls. At the bottom of the advertisement, in small print, was noted the inconvenient hours of instruction. The girls were being taught either before or after the boys' regular instructional time. At this time the teachers of the boys needed additional income and opted to teach girls before and after school. Thus, the idea of educating girls was formulated (Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

In the 1870’s, during the time of the Industrial Revolution, schooling became compulsory and state-run. With an influx of immigrants, compulsory education was a means to integrate and assimilate this huge arrival by teaching immigrants to be proper
U.S. citizens and have skills necessary for factory work (Langhout, 2005). Although allowed to attend school with men, women were still discriminated against as a result of the traditionally defined gender roles that were reinforced. In response, colleges for women were created a bold alternative: colleges for women created by women. The colleges, following the lead of prominent women educators of the early nineteenth century, saw many cities establish separate high schools for girls. Thus the creation of single-sex schools for girls and young women began.

Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of World War II, fewer options for girls to pursue their educational goals begin to exist. Some researchers believe that it may have been easier to be a girl during this period than it is in today’s society (O’Reilly et al. 2001). This idea is supported by the notion of mothers and female teachers as strong role models for adolescent girls as they acquired feminine behaviors defined by society during this period (p. 13). Even though school and curriculum were beginning to focus on girls, domesticity was emphasized and girls were taught how to manage a household, plan, sew clothing, and prepare meals. Preparation for entrance into the public sphere was not focused upon, rather the modification of young women as wives and mothers. An example of girls’ education during this time is the Normal school. Normal school was a 2-year training program where young women were taught to teach other young women domestic skills. Hence, education became a place that reinforced the dominant society’s gender, race, and class hierarchy and roles.

During World War II women in the U.S. were called on, by necessity, to do work and to take on roles that were outside traditional gender norms. With this expanded horizon of opportunity and with the extended skill base that many women could now give
to paid and voluntary employment, women's roles in World War II were even more extensive than in the First World War. By 1945, more than 2.2 million women were working in the war industries in the U.S., building ships, aircraft, vehicles, and weaponry (Campbell, 1984). Women also worked in factories, munitions plants and farms, and also drove trucks, provided logistic support for soldiers and entered professional areas of work that were previously the preserve of men (Campbell, 1984, p. 45). During this time, Black women worked alongside White women in factories as well. However the demand for Black women to work in the factories only came after the work pool of White women was exhausted (Hughes, 1994).

After World War II, most women returned to their roles in the home which included cooking, cleaning, maintaining daily household chores, attending to her husband’s needs, and rearing children. The appearance of domestic bliss belied a larger revolution waiting to happen. During the 1960’s the emergence of the women’s rights movement which focused on sexual inequality and the Civil Rights movement which centered on racial inequality, Black women’s particular issues were substantially ignored and marginalized in both. Based on both movements and the neglect of the Black woman the call for liberation among Black women was strong (Radford-Hill, 2000). Within the women’s movement the focus was on sexual inequality. In the Civil Rights Movement the focus was on racial inequality. Unfortunately, inside both movements, Black women’s particular issues were ignored and marginalized. In their desire to overcome the caste system that kept Black women subordinate to White men, Black men, and White women, Black women began to seek out a vehicle that represented them. Unnoticed and out of sight within the feminist movement, Black women made it clear that they would
reject any system that dominated, exploited, and oppressed Black women (hooks, 1989). Hence the Black feminist movement of the 1970’s began. Called a “revolution within a revolution” (Collins, 1991) infers that this movement evolved within the larger social movement of Civil Rights and continues to assist Black women in maintaining their self-concept. All Black women are then Black feminists according to Collins “as Black feminism centers specifically around the lived experiences of Black women” (Collins, 1991, p. 35). Contained within the Black feminist movement were a good number of Black women who identified themselves as “womanists” as a means of integrating their needs and representation.

Although the Black feminist movement advocated for the rights of Black women to be recognized in various facets of society, the boost to end sexual discrimination on behalf of all women was provided through a federal act. With the creation of Title IX of the 1972 federal Educational Amendment which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in educational institutions, women were promised equal education and equal access, i.e., equal pay to that of mean (Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

With equality also came reform. In 1983, the U.S. Department of Education published *A Nation at Risk*, which called for school reform efforts across the country. The report identified the weakening of American education-lowered standards, minimal curriculum qualifications, and the minimization of a challenging learning environment which would lead to the United States falling from first place in the world—politically, economically, and culturally. Although the report argued for needed changes in the system, it failed to address educational issues in terms of sex or gender (United States National Commission on Excellence, 1983).
In *Failing at Fairness: How America’s Schools Cheat Girls* (1994), the Sadkers’ conducted a study in which they observed girls participation in the classroom. The analysis examined classroom instruction, looking at both racially integrated and racially segregated classrooms (Frazier-Kouassi, 2003). The results of the study suggested that girls were systemically denied opportunities in areas where boys were encouraged to excel and that sexist attitudes were pervasive among teachers. Although this study discusses the sexist attitudes of teachers in the classroom, the study failed to include girls of color as a part of its research. Hopkins (1997) in his critique of the Sadkers’ study, argues that the authors were not explicit about which girls were being cheated and that their study focused primarily on White girls as a representation of all girls and excluded girls of color.

In the AAUW report (1995) *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, traditional assumptions about the egalitarian nature of American schools are challenged. The comprehensive report was based on a review of all of the available research on the subject of girls and their experiences in education at that time. Additionally the report included the existing research on the differences found among girls of various racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups. There were limitations to this research as well. Because of the overall lack of research that had been actually conducted on groups of girls that were other than White and middle-class, the literature did not address experiences of girls of color. The comparisons of unequal educational environments thus positioned girls of color as lower achieving than girls who were White. Critics would argue that even with all of the measures which include the Equal Opportunity Act and the passage of Title IX, girls still do not get an equal education. Black girls are further
disadvantaged (American Association of University Women, p. 56). How educators understand sex and gender issues becomes important if the quality of public education for all, inclusive of girls of color, is to be addressed in the United States.

Education for African-American Girls

Historically, education has long been embraced by many African-Americans as the most viable means by which to mitigate the forces of oppression and to improve the individual and collective quality of life for African-Americans (Ladner, 1971; Scanzoni, 1971). Likewise within the African-American community is the belief that each generation should do better than the previous, both educationally and economically (Coker, 2003).

Beginning with the framing of the United States Constitution, the exclusion of Black people (African-Americans) and women in obtaining equal rights, which includes access to education, discriminated against them in terms of race and gender as human beings (Smith, 1999; Ruth, 1990; Vaz, 1995). By limiting access to knowledge and education, social equality for African-American women was denied. This is continually reinforced within educational settings because they are impacted by multiple oppressions, i.e., race, class, and gender (Paul, 2003, p. 79).

Because of the economic need within African-American families, which was promoted in part by the low and unstable wages garnered by African-American men, messages within their kinship care system were sent to African-American girls about the value of education. Evans-Winters in *Teaching Black Girls: Resiliency in Urban Classroom* (2005, p. 3) recalls what she was told as a child: “with a good education you won’t have to depend on no man” and “White folks can’t deny you anything…”
Compelling in nature, these messages did not take into account the hegemonic forces of racism, sexism, and classism that operate within academic settings, in opposition to African-American girls (hooks, p. 4; Evans-Winters, p. 8). Thus African-American females who traverse these territories often do so through the vehicle of education.

Notwithstanding positive encouragement from family and larger community support in their pursuit of education, African-American girls do not reach their full potential in education (Paul, 2003; Lei, 2003). In *Talking Back: Raising and educating resilient Black girls*, Paul (p.23) believes that African-American girls are not addressed in educational research in ways that highlight their educational needs and barriers to their achievement. She believes that the questions and treatment of issues that have guided educational research on adolescent girls is primarily derived from studies on White middle class girls (Lightfoot, 1976; Henry, 1998; Gilligan, 1993). The neglect of research to include a diverse representation of the experiences of all girls, specifically African-American girls, perpetuates in minimizing the issues that African-American girls encounter in their educational pursuits. This inattention maintains the hegemonic structures that operate in education and is a direct contrast to the achievement ideology that is believed and promoted among the larger African-American community.

Although education is upheld as a means to open doors and to battle the inequalities existent in society, for African-American females they are regulated to navigating the triple oppression of race, gender, and class at school, in their homes, and communities, and in larger society (Evans-Winters, 2005, p. 3). This is a paradox for an institution that is seen as a means of liberation: the great equalizer.
Robinson & Ward (1991) draw attention to this inconsistency by highlighting the distinction between education as practice of freedom and education as a practice of domination. The authors believe that young African-American women could be consciously prepared for a sociopolitical environment of racial, gender, and economic oppression by fostering the development of a kind of resistance that would provide the necessary tools to think critically about oneself, about the world, and about one’s place in it. The authors found that the invisibility and silencing of the true self lead to the acceptance of stereotypes and internalization of negative images. What resulted was the defining of self by others such as the media and educational system, in a manner that oppresses and devalues Black girls.

When viewed in this context, schooling as a process does not accord African-American women access to the socioeconomic opportunities and upward mobility that privilege White women, unless they are educated in counterstrategies that foster a strong sense of self and self-efficacy (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002).

In 2006, 88% of young adults ages 18–24 nationwide had completed high school with a diploma or an alternative credential such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. In 2006, for Black, non-Hispanic youth the completion rate of high school was 85% (Childstats, 2008). Sixty-six percent of high school completers enrolled immediately in a 2-year or 4-year college. The percentage of Black, non-Hispanics, was 55%. When measuring the number of African-American females who earned degrees, Black females earned a majority of the degrees conferred to Blacks in 12 out of the 14 specific major fields compared to 7 out of 14 for White females. In 2000-01, White females received 57% of the bachelor’s degrees conferred to White students while Black
women received 66%. The completion rate of Hispanic women for a bachelor’s degree was 52%. This is lower than those of other minority women, Although Black female representation among bachelor’s degree recipients was higher than that of White and Hispanic women, the number of African-American girls receiving their high school diploma was nearly half of White girls receiving their high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Eleven percent of African-American girls between the ages of 25-29 had less than a high school diploma compared with 6.2% of White females. 24% of African-American girls completed high school compared with 34.3% of White females. For Hispanic females, the number of high school completers was 23%. The percentages of African-American women obtaining a Master’s degree or higher was 3.4% compared with White women of 6.6%. Based on the national statistics, it appears that African-American girls are in need of buffers to support them in their educational attainment, specifically in educational environments where practices may not be designed for their uplift personally, professionally or culturally.

In the AAUW study, Girls in the Middle Working to Succeed in School, (Cohen et al. 1996), the authors identified strategies that middle-school girls used as part of the process of forming identities and negotiating school challenges. The strategies included speaking out and being heard, doing well without hiding competence, and moving beyond cliques. How well the girls did depended in part on how well their identities and approaches matched the mainstream culture of the school, especially in terms of race, ethnicity, and class. This is a contrast for African-American girls who find themselves in the struggle to confront their identities. School settings for African-American girls then become sites of conflict with the issues of race, ethnicity, and class converging on their
learning experiences. This is significant because girls are bombarded with messages about their worth, intelligence, and beauty daily in sites that are presumably enforcing their self-development.

Orenstein (1994) supports the overall findings of the AAUW study, but she differs regarding issues of self-esteem. She believes that African-American [girls] students are often stigmatized at school and that their worth is determined by low expectations. In turn this leads to a rejection of academic achievement, a source of self esteem for African-American students. The final outcome is a high dropout rate among this population. Therefore, knowledge of the impact of self-esteem and its relation to education is important for African-American girls, specifically those involved with systems of care.

Since the late 1980’s stories about African-American males have dominated the popular media regarding their issues with education and the criminal justice system (Gordon, 1999; Kunjufu, 1994). Their focus on what Henry (1998) and Taylor-Gibbs (1988) calls “the endangered Black male” reflects inattention to significance of the needs and issues of the African-American female. While studies indicate that Black male recidivism rates are greater than those for White men, White women, and Black women (Pryor, 2001) the concerns of the African-American female is equally important. The issue of the African-American female cannot be defined solely as a Black problem, but must be researched taking into account race and gender. Erkut (1996) supports the separateness as a means of providing reliable information about African-American girls and extending gender related research.
While there is research on African-American girls and their experiences with education, the literature is still limited. Because of her joint status and membership as African-American and female, Black girls and women are not immune to the reproduction of inequality inherent in the educational system (Smith, 2000). Lei (2003) sheds light on an area of inequality in a high school setting where African-American girls are viewed as loud and tough in contrast to other students. In the study, this characterization of Black girls served to limit the teacher-student interaction, particularly when the interaction occurred with White teachers. By distinguishing the African-American girls from other students, the practice of hegemony-Black female marginalization and stigmatization was allowed to exist where all African-American girls were stereotyped negatively and they received less attention to their skill areas. Thus African-American girls were treated negatively based on their form of resistance or acting out. Fordham (1993) states “those loud Black girls are doomed not necessarily because they cannot handle the academy’s subject matter, but because they resist active participation in their own exclusion” (p. 10). In essence, African-American girls’ resistance is conducted on their own terms.

Consequently, an understanding of how African-American adolescent females negotiate the social institutions that are designed to prepare and assist them in larger society is an important part of developing comprehensive academic and social supports to increase their success in life, education, and work. Moreover, exploring the intersections of race, class and gender within the lives of AA girls in foster care is paramount in comprehending both their personal achievement and cultural liberation.
Historical Examination of Foster Care and Children

Although various forms of foster care have existed in the U.S. since the beginning of history, documented systems of foster care can be traced back to the early 1500 and 1600’s. Poor and orphaned children from England and other European countries were transported to colonial America where they were cared for in almshouses or placed in apprenticeship programs (Bremmer, 1970; Kadushin, 1980). Within the colonial communities the care of poor and orphaned children were regulated to the Christian community. Governed by the Christian doctrine that each individual should “become a productive citizen,” dependent children were placed with families where they would work as indentured servants until adulthood (Cox & Cox, 1985).

During the mid-1800’s cities experienced a period of rapid growth and urbanization. Immigrants arrived from Europe and city streets were flooded with homeless children. To keep children off the streets, orphanages were established. With the founding of the first orphanages by Charles Loring Brace and the Urseline Convent, indentured servitude was dismantled and children began being placed with families (Cox & Cox, 1985, p. 32).

Well into the 20th century the placing of children with families sparked a debate regarding the care of children. Arguments centered on whether or not institutions or family foster care could provide the best care environment for children. In 1909, the White House held its first conference on the Care of Dependent Children to address this issue. The conference stressed the importance of a family environment as an essential part of the growth and development of the child (Bremmer, 1971). This debate is still an
issue today with more and more children of color are entering care and are being adopted by non-Black foster parents.

Federal involvement in the care of children assisted in the creation of public policy and legislation. Programs such as the Social Security Act of 1947 provided federal funding through the Aid to Families to Dependent Children Foster Care Programs. The emphasis moved the focus from deinstitutionalization and the prevention of family dissolution (Dore & Kennedy, 1981). Initially there was no legal right to receive public assistance for children. Thus, the act supplied families who lacked essential resources with a legal right to receive a minimum standard of living. In essence the act worked to provide financial support in maintaining children and families together.

**Contemporary Foster Care**

Today there are more than a half million foster care placements in the U.S. Over a period of time as the foster care system grew, the supportive services required to maintain them were minimal and overextended; thus many children began to languish in care. Inappropriate and numerous placement settings and the lack of stability were cited as the main culprits of these “forgotten children” (Knitzer, 1985). For a variety of reasons children were often removed from their families and placed in foster care. Once a temporary solution, over the years foster care has become a permanent placement for children. Addressing this problem required new federal legislation.

The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 attempted to eradicate public neglect by providing state funding for child welfare services. By this time research had shown that foster children were experiencing difficulty in performing many normal developmental tasks which included establishing and maintaining interpersonal
relationships, sense of well-being, and identity development (Maluccio et al. 1980). An additional amendment added in 1997, called the Adoption and Safe Families Act (AFSA), included goals of safety, permanency, and well-being for children in the child welfare system. One of the main guiding principles states “foster care is a temporary setting and not a place for children to grow up” (Administration for Children, Youth and Families, 1998, p. 2). An additional aim of AFSA is to encourage child welfare systems to respect a child’s developmental needs. The premise was that if a child was to develop normally within [his] placement with either [his] family or substitute caregivers, the goal of permanency needed to be developed at the onset. Overall foster care has long been viewed as a temporary service pending a more desirable, permanent arrangement for the child (Pardeck, 1982; Smireman, 2003; Golden, 1997; Krebbs & Pitcoff, 2006).

According to the federal government in 2006, there were presently about a half million children in foster care (Vacca, 2007). Out of those who left the foster care system, 12% were either emancipated or had other outcomes which included incarceration. Over 46% percent of the children in foster care were identified as Black/Non-Hispanic; 17% were Hispanic, and 37% were White/Non-Hispanic. Out of these numbers 42,000 were identified as adolescent African-American females age twelve and older (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). For those children who cannot return home or be adopted or who have no other viable or alternative placements, long-term foster care becomes a permanent plan. Placements in long-term foster care include group homes, residential facilities, transitional living facilities, and independent living (United States Department of Health & Human Services, 2003).
As youth are prepared for eventual emancipation, the final care for adolescents is provided in the form of placement in independent or transitional living facilities. These long-term facilities act as surrogate parents, providing adolescents with the basic skills needed to transition as adults into larger society. Such skills include managing finances, locating housing, obtaining employment, and attending to health care needs. This care is part of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 that states that the “nations state and local governments, with financial support from the federal government, should offer an extensive program of education, training, employment, and financial support for young adults leaving foster care” (HR 3443, 1999).

African-Americans and Foster Care

Historically, family foster care has been in existence in the African culture for centuries (Kadushin & Martin 1988; Pecora et al. 1992; Everett, 1995). Different families, clans and tribes were organized around the belief of extended family (Sudarkasa, 1996). During American slavery, informal substitute care was often provided by other slaves to children whose parents were either sold to other plantations or who had died. After emancipation, the rescue of thousands of related and non-related orphaned Black children who had no means of support were rescued by the extended Black family (Logan et al. 1990). To address the issue of care for the newly freed slaves and orphaned children, the Freedman’s Bureau was created.

Although a formal child welfare system was being constructed during the twentieth century, African-American families and their children were initially excluded. Social welfare services, including child welfare services, were provided by the establishment of mutual aid groups and the self help efforts of churches, women’s clubs,
benevolent societies, and fraternal organizations (Ross, 1978; Giddings 1984; Wesley, 1984; Leashore et al. 1991). This included the Freedmen’s Bureau which distributed food, built schools, orphanages and hospitals during this period of transition. This assistance was often provided in the form of mediation and advocacy given that both adults and children were forced to operate in indentured apprenticeships (Daughtery, 1995). In addition to the indentured apprenticeship, slave auctions were also conducted well into the middle of the twentieth century which continued to assist in the separation of African-American families (Billingsley, 1968; Everett et al. 1997).

Governmental involvement in the social welfare of African-Americans was needed as the nearly four million newly freed slaves were in need of food, work, and housing. The passage of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen’s Bureau and Abandoned Lands Act of 1865, which was designed to assist with these resources, did little in the form of aid and support for the provision of African-Americans. An illustration of the limitations included the taking of land from freed slaves that was promised by President Johnson, which was then returned back to Confederate landowners. As a result the failure of the Freedman’s Bureau was a consequence of the White backlash to the Emancipation Proclamation Act and the Civil War.

Limited access to social services, however, has persisted through both racism and segregation in the form of differential treatment (Close, 1983; Stehno, 1982; Albers et al. 1983). Foster care was not generally considered a viable option for African-Americans because children were often provided for by what foster care practitioners call “kinship care.” Kinship care refers to the act of non-biological children being taken in by relatives. The first national study of the child welfare system conducted in 1963 indicated that
children of color comprised just fewer than 17% of the children in care. Today, children of color make up over 60% of those in foster care nationwide (Pecora et al. 1992). However, there is a distinction in permanency regarding Black children and White children. Barth (1996) and Berrick, Needell, Barth, & Reid (1998) documented that Black children have a much lower likelihood of adoption than White or other children. As a consequence African-American children continue to reside in foster care for longer periods of time (Pecora, 1992, p. 271)

The Child Welfare League of America in their 2003 report entitled, *Children of Color in Child Welfare*, states that children of color are over-represented in the child welfare system relative to their representation in the general population. 40% of the children in foster care are black non-Hispanic, 38% are white non-Hispanic, 15% are Hispanic, and 2% are Native American. More than 40% of the children waiting to be adopted are black non-Hispanic, 34% are white non-Hispanic, 13% are Hispanic, and 2% are Native American. The league also reported to the United States Congress that the rate of entry of African-American children was higher than the rate for Caucasian children and in 30 states it was more than 3 times higher (Child Welfare League of America, 2003). This is important in understanding the level of involvement of African-American families with the child welfare system.

**Foster Care and African-American Girls**

Although the Adoption and Safe Families Act (AFSA) of 1994 and other policy reforms were designed to provide the temporary placement of children in foster care, this has not been the case, particularly for African-American females. Upon entrance into foster care, African-American adolescent females face many challenges. These include
poor performance in school, multiple placements, social-emotional/mental health issues—
separation from their families, loss/abandonment, and other related traumas. In 2004, the
number of children of color involved in foster care was 59% compared to 39% of White
children. What is notable is that each year, 20,000 young people transition out of the U.S.
foster care system. Many are only 18 years old and still in need of supportive services. As
a result, many youth involved in foster care do not transition successfully. Of those youth
who do transition, 54% of youth earned a high school diploma, 2% obtained a bachelors
degree or higher, 84% became parents, 54% were unemployed, 30% had no mental health
or medical services, and 30% received public assistance (Child Welfare League of
America, 2005). The overall number of girls involved in foster care is 48%. Although
statistics were not available specifically for African-American girls in foster care and
their high school completion or employment rates, there is an indication that there are
issues within the current practice of foster care that do not adequately address the
particular developmental needs of African-American adolescent females (Daugherty,
2005; Kools, 1997).

African-American girls are entering foster care and experiencing longer stays in a
system that was not intended to support adolescents into adulthood. For African-
American adolescent girls many remain in care indefinitely and move from one
temporary foster home, group home and institution to another, with little stability or
preparation for the future (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006).

In Kools’s (1997) study of predominantly African-American adolescents in foster
care between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, she notes that “most theoretical and
empirical literature on normative child development places the developing child within
the context of the family system” (Kools, 1997, p. 89). Research of African-American adolescent females in long-term foster care is important because little is known about their experiences and the impact foster care has on their perceptions on their life successes and chances.

**Identity Development and Education for African-American Girls**

Research indicates that even though long-term foster care placements such as Independent Living Programs attempt to aid adolescents in the preparation for self-sufficiency, many of these youth placed in these programs are not provided with the necessary resources and support systems needed to succeed in society (Kroner, 1999; Courtney & Barth, 1996). For African-American females who are placed in these programs, identity development encompasses another type of transition into adulthood. This developmental transition, identified by Walker (1983) as “womanhood” is infused with race, gender, and emancipatory issues. Differentiating adulthood from womanhood for this population is essential because African-American adolescent girls are placed in settings in which their knowledge and encounters as they mature into adulthood are often silenced and devalued as truthful experiences based on their race and gender. A discussion of Black womanhood, its origins and meanings will be extended in the section entitled “Definitions of Black feminist theory.”

Womanhood as a developmental transition is infused with the issues of race, gender, class and power which position African-American adolescent females’ educational needs at the center. This includes the development of a positive sense of self (Clark, 1992), duality of identities (Paul, 2003) poor peer relationships, and negative gender, race, class, and sex stereotypes. Class as an additional category, is important
because the labeling of African-American girls in foster care as “wards of the state” or “foster children” indicates a level of classism and stereotyping associated with foster care: poverty, lower income, single parent home, substance abuse, etc. This is distinctive from a White, non-hispanic girl, who is not involved in the foster care system.

Sinclair (2005) states that beginning with an inadequate educational plan, females, are less likely to achieve educational goals while in foster care placement. Specifically for African-American females a large majority often face multiple placements and moves, which causes them to change schools often, usually in midyear. Placements in alternative school settings or special educational settings are common. Emotional problems such as behavioral or mental health issues are also prevalent (Altshuler, 1997; Krebbs & Pitcoff, 2006, p. 34).

The responsibility of the educational needs of African-American females in long-term foster care is often unequally distributed between both the foster care and educational system. As a result of the complicated bureaucratic nature and functions of both systems, the educational and developmental needs of the African-American female are often overlooked and unaddressed. The relationship among these systems as institutionalized settings, means that both systems operate as sites of social reproduction, intersecting and acting as collaborators, and finally, minimizing the acquisition of educational and social supports needed for this population to successfully transition into adult[woman]hood and function in their daily lives (Luttrell, 2003; Collins, 2000; West Stevens, 2002).

Psychologist Erik Erikson (1968) writes that his psychosocial theory of development is universal (p. 27). Therefore it should be applicable to African-American
adolescent females in long-term foster care. Feminist human development theories argue that this is not the case because the theory does not support development in African-Americans or females in general (Figueria-McDonough, 1998; Pipher, 1994).

Erickson (1977) further states: “identity formation depends upon the interplay of what young persons at the end of childhood have come to mean to themselves and what they now appear to mean to those who become significant to them” (p. 106). Black feminist theorists such as Collins (2000) argue that Erickson’s theory does not take “into account the knowledge gained by African-American women at intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender” (p. 18). This further illustrates the differences in the developmental needs and experiences of African-American females.

West Stevens (1997, 2002) supports debunking the myth of universality and argues that it is important in the preparation of African-American females as their socialization in the dominant culture is devalued. As a result a theoretical framework developed in which to view African-American adolescent females in long-term foster care and to the development of service provision for this population in an effort to assist them in maneuvering the challenges that will face them in larger society. The education and foster care experiences of this population thus calls for a model that provides knowledge about the experience and the meaning of both systems and the developmental needs of African-American females.

Viewing the environment of long-term foster care and the impact that it has on the development of identity for African-American adolescent females can have serious implications regarding the level of functioning, particularly social functioning, among this population (Kirven, 2000). Kirven further theorizes that the mixed emotions and
negative behavior surface as a result of the adolescents’ removal from friends, schools, their neighborhood and their community of origin (p.249). Therefore, the healthy and positive identity development that should occur is impeded as this population is forced to navigate their development without the aid and support of their familial environment.

For these reasons, the preparation of African-American adolescent females in foster care for the challenges that they will face in larger society is an overwhelming task. The issues faced by this population are maximized because they are exposed to a variety of systemic forces that impact their social development. Like schools and other sectors of society, foster care is most likely experienced by African-American adolescent females in a way that is different from other populations due to their specific issues.

**Definitions of Feminism**

In this section, I will provide a brief overview of the continuum of feminist theory, as well as extensions and critiques of, in addition to highlighting Black feminist theory (BFT) and its origins, which will also be used as my theoretical framework. This will be further discussed in the Methodology chapter of my thesis.

BFT has its origins in feminist theory (Freedman, 2003). Before discussing BFT and its legitimacy as a mechanism for differentiating Black women’s lives from others, its connections to feminist theory must first be discussed. Feminist theory has it starting point in the late 1800’s (Freedman, p.3). The word *feminism* combines the word from woman, “femme” and “ism,” referring to a social movement or political ideology (Siegel, 2007; Freedman, p. 3). Many feminist theorists would agree that there are a myriad of definitions of feminism (Belenky, 1986; Pipher, 1994; Siegel, 2007). However, at its core
it is regarded as a discourse about the right of women to have social, political and economic equality with men.

Siegel (2007) uses the term feminism in a general sense to refer to the philosophy powering a movement to eradicate sexism and better women’s lives. Freedman (2003) uses a four-part definition that focuses on equal worth, male privilege, social movements, and intersecting hierarchies: “Feminism is a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth…most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary…gender always intersects with other social hierarchies” (p. 15).

Undeniably, theories and philosophies of feminism vary. Different “waves” or occurrences have been used to mark the movement’s history which have been subsequently labeled first, second, third, and a newly created fourth wave. Multiple branches have also been developed to describe the range of viewpoints within feminism—e.g., Marxist feminism, radical feminism, post-structural feminism, materialist feminism, ecofeminism, multiracial feminism, and of course, Black feminism which will be unpacked later. (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997; James & Sharpley-Whiting, 2000; Warren 2000). Let us first turn to a cursory review of the four waves of feminism.

**First Wave Feminism without African-American Women**

Feminist activity during the 19th to early 20th century in both the U.S. and the U.K. involved the activities of White women championing for their equal rights and representation (Staples, 1973). The lack of status, respect, and power experienced by White women during this time culminated with the women’s suffrage movement in the 1920’s both in the U.S. and abroad (Siegel, 2007). Unfortunately, the call for equal rights
for women during the early part of the movement only served to strengthen and benefit
White women and White society (Hamer & Neville, 1998; Mansbridge & Smith, 2000).

Although the rights of women were being argued and supported, the recognition
of equal rights for Black women was virtually nonexistent during the first wave of
feminism, notably at the end of the 19th century (Marbley, 2005). Commenting on the
exclusion of Black women during the suffrage movement, African-American women,
such as Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells, spoke up for Black women and the duality they
faced being Black and a woman. What could not be contested was that the primary
objective during the first wave of feminism was the obtaining of rights for White women,
which included property rights, full participation in public and civic life, reproductive
health, marriage rights, property rights, as well as higher education.

There were however some feminists during this time like Susan B. Anthony (the
first woman to vote in an election before women were granted voting rights), Margaret
Sanger (campaigned for women to have control over their health and reproductive
functions), and Elizabeth Stanton (promoted the uplift of all women) who fought for the
abolishment of slavery (Galvin, 2002; Baker, 2005).

Black Women’s Organizations & First Wave Feminism

With women in the U.S. winning the right to vote in 1920, many did not claim the
label feminist. Even today, both nationally and trans-nationally, few politically engaged
women call themselves feminists (Freedman, 2003, p. 4).

As Black women suffragists organized and their concerns regarding racial hatred,
inclusion, and the lynching of Black people went unaddressed, Black women began to
develop their own women’s club movement as a vehicle for change (Terborg-Penn,
1995). During this time and well into the late 1930’s, Black women advocated and had unsuccessfully tried to gain White women’s support for their efforts. Cooper (1892) reported that even though Black women were barred from participating in larger society activities, they were not without political influence. As a consequence, The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) emerged in 1896 to combat racial discrimination and to express a sense of solidarity among Black women on a national level address these needs (Jones, 1982).

The NACW was originally comprised of two organizations of Black women: The National Federation of Afro-American Women and the Colored Women’s League. Jones (1982) notes that nine years prior to the establishment of NACW, White women had organized the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC) in 1887. While both the NACW and the GFWC were similar in function, the differences between them in expression and goals reflected the divergent experiences of women of various middle-class, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. Mary Church Terrell, the first president of NACW sought to provide a vehicle of self-help and to advance the Black race. Notable Black women activists during this time include Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Sojourner Truth and Maria Stewart who advocated publicly for Black women’s rights.

Through its origins NACW and other Black women’s organizations sought to address a broad spectrum of Black women’s issues (Collins, 2000, p. 214). This aspect of Black women’s activism operated to empower Black women and remove them from the shadows of White women (Collins, 2000, p. 218). This provided an alternate lens through which Black women could view themselves outside of the confines of both White male and female ideology.
Second Wave Feminism

In the western women’s movement of the 1960’s emerged the “second wave” a term coined by Marsha Lear (1968). This phrase implied that the “first wave” of feminism or first movement of feminism was over (Siegel, p. 15). The goal of feminism during this period was equality with men and focused on individual rights rather than justice rights in the form of social change (Thompson, 2002). The second wave engendered wider appeal in terms of feminist usage and labeling emerged through its analysis of equality and difference among men and women. Even with the wider appeal to White women audiences, there existed an aversion among the White middle-class woman to being called a feminist (p. 245).

During this wave and into the 1970’s, Black feminism was articulated in response to the exclusion from the feminist movement (Radford-Hill, 2000). Notable is that it coincided with Shirley Chisolm’s run for the presidency in 1972. Black men labeled Chisolm as a “sellout” to the Black race while White feminist groups refused to support her because of her backing of Angela Davis (Taylor, 1998). On the cusp were Black women who unfortunately were not politically organized. Although active in the community, the liberation of Black women was long missing from the feminist mainstream agenda. Radford-Hill states that the politics of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960’s that focused on gender failed to address racism. In her statement Radford-Hill (2002) explains her view: “I took the position that racism was still the most dominant aspect of the Black experience. This experience was buttressed by direct exposure to White feminist racism...” (p. x). The problem Radford-Hill points out is that
White feminists’ only focused on patriarchal dominance which hid their compliance in Black women’s oppression as well as their own.

A solution to the problem of representation among Black women within the feminist movement came with the establishment of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in 1973. The group worked to address the unique issues affecting Black women in America. The NBFO reflected the goals put forth in the Combahee River Collective Statement, which was being developed at around the same time by some of the same women. While the group stopped operating on a national level in 1977, its goals and energies were focused on the interconnectedness of many oppressions that faced African-American women: racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and “lesbophobia.” According to historian and author, E. France White, the National Black Feminist Organization's demise came about as a result of its “inability to reach any workable consensus around what constituted a Black feminist politic.” (National Black Feminist Organization, 2008).

By the early 1980’s a new emergence of women’s liberation and a more unified agenda for the feminist movement emerged. Although feminist work itself seemed to have faded, feminist themes continued on into the mid to late 1980’s with two historical events. The first was the 1981 congressional declaration of a week in March as “Women’s History Week.” This event traces its origins back to the first International Women’s Day in 1911 (Snodgrass, 1996). Later in 1987, Women’s History Week was legally expanded by Congress to become Women’s History Month. The purpose of Women’s History Month is designed to focus attention on the accomplishments and
impact that women have had on history. Since its congressional passing, schools across the nation honor this day with educational events.

The second event was the American Association of University Women (AAUW) 1992 landmark research report “How Schools Shortchange Girls.” In their research, AAUW indicated that girls are silenced in the classroom, suffer a decline in self-esteem at adolescence, and fall far behind boys in such crucial subjects as science and mathematics. The research was conducted by AAUW to provide a spotlight on girls and the gender issues prevalent in the classroom and educational systems at large. By conducting this research, AAUW drew attention to the gender gap in education and encouraged an array of policies and programs designed to boost female performance in the science and mathematics fields (AAUW, 1992).

**Third Wave Feminism**

The third wave of feminism often referred to as radical feminism appeared in the early 1990’s. Thriving in a more politically charged climate, third wave feminism provided a fourfold advantage of introducing ideas befitting the current political, economic, global, and technological climate (Kinser, 2004, p. 131). It also assisted in grounding feminism as a powerful force and clarifying its unique contributions to both politics and social movements. Female bravado as opposed to sisterhood characterizes this wave of feminism. During this time, author Naomi Wolf (1993) appealed to women to embrace “power feminism” a term coined by Wolf, which was based on women being in control. Wolf explained that the term meant identifying with other women through shared pleasures and strengths rather than through “victim feminism”--shared vulnerability (Siegel, p. 116).
With the first and second wave of feminism providing little or no attention to the special interests of women of color, opportunities for inclusion were created during the third wave, primarily through the writing of Black women writers. Radford-Hill (2000) discusses Black feminist theorizing by early Black feminist writers and activists during the 1970’s as a means of exploring the social reality that both she and other Black women were experiencing in relationship to the social order. According to Radford-Hill, this was a direct challenge and contrast to the radical state of liberalism and male hegemony that existed (p. 10).

Included in Radford-Hill’s (2000) commentary on liberalism and feminist theory is the work of activist and scholar, Angela Davis. Davis’ resonant critique of hegemony is articulated in her book, Angela Davis: An Autobiography. Davis (1974) examines the issues of race and gender and discusses critical race scholarship and the politics involved in liberation for Black women. During the 1970’s Davis and other Black women writers such as Nikki Giovanni and Ntozake Shange added their critical voices to feminism and created a space for other Black women writers to emerge.

During the mid-1980’s, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, and Toni Cade Bambara wrote and demanded richer and more diverse forms of feminist theorizing. These and other women of color writers discussed intersections of feminism and racism. These discussions set the stage for the grounding of a new Black feminist voice that was overlooked in the second wave, introduced in the third wave, and continues to challenge White patriarchal culture through fourth wave feminism (Radford-Hill, 2000; Heywood & Drake, 1997; Siegel, 2007).
Fourth Wave Feminism

A newly charted branch of feminism which links spirituality and social justice has also emerged within the past decade (Peay, 2005). At the heart of this movement is a brand of political activism involving the civil rights and non-violent change movement. This new wave is most visible in the popular conferences organized by women spiritual and religious leaders. The women involved in this movement focus on the social action issues of women both local and trans-nationally and provides a space to embrace other women across ethnic and religious boundaries. Empowerment of women is still a central tenet as it is in other feminisms; however the mechanisms in achieving equality and power are different. Tolerance, mutuality, and reverence are the core values that the women of this wave identify with. These values are seen as a crucial aspect to addressing the societal issues of poverty and war that endanger all individuals.

Critiques of Feminism

While there are recurrent themes within different feminisms and various waves examining the lives of all women, within the definitions there also exists contradictions. hooks (1984) ascertains that the definition of feminism is a one-dimensional perspective that is patriarchal in nature and that focuses on White women’s experiences and constitutes this as every woman’s reality. hooks further states that most attempts at defining feminism reflect the class nature of the movement while romanticizing personal freedom as the main objective.

Historian Elsa Barkley Brown (1989) repeats hooks’ commentary. Brown reaffirms that the exclusion of Black women has meant that the concepts, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies of women’s history and women’s studies have been developed
without consideration of the experiences and interests of Black women. As a result
“Black women have been placed inside feminist perspectives which by design have
omitted their experiences” (p.47).

Reinharz (1992) in her initial definition of feminism, further acknowledges that
variation does exist among people of different classes, races, generations, sexual
orientations, specific issues, academics, and activist. Patricia Sexton (1982) in her
definition of feminism states: “women have not one but many voices…generalizations
can be misleading, inadequate, and lacking in any flesh and blood reality…both
individual and collective voices need to be heard (p. 11).”

Patricia Hill-Collins is a staunch theorist in bringing Black woman’s experiences
and ideas at the center of analysis. In writing her book, *Black Feminist Thought:*
deliberately chose to write explicitly from a Black woman feminist standpoint. The
rationale provided by Hill-Collins is that there is no comparison of White western women
with the experiences of African-American women. Hill-Collins argues against the
homogenous ideology that operates to categorize all women’s experiences as one in the
same. Particularly since African-American women’s experiences have been marginalized.
Therefore the ability of Black women to create a place to express their own priorities.
According to Hill-Collins, for women who have not experienced both racial and gender
oppression, difference and dominance continues to be the central critique of feminism (p.
vii).
Definitions of Black feminist theory

While there are differences of opinion on the definitions of feminism there is also differences regarding the definition of Black Feminist Theory and its goals. In this regard, Paul (2003) states that she ascribes to a “womanist” brand of research that privileges the Black female experience and embraces Black female epistemology.

Smith (2001) argues for a viable, autonomous Black feminist movement that would open up the space needed for the exploration of Black women’s lives and the creation of Black woman-identified art (p.8). Smith asserts that there is not a developed body of Black feminist political theory or the usage of a consistent feminist analysis. The impact can be seen in the huge amount of research literature that either minimizes the lives or inaccurately produces a body of knowledge of African-American women lives based on dominant views. She further maintains that the Black feminist movement has been much slower in evolving as a parallel to feminism, thrusting Black literature and works by Black women in subcategories (p. 9). The analysis that is produced is equally damaging for African-American girls involved in social settings and institutions as their lives are regulated to the fringes of society, their developmental and educational needs are unmet, and they continue to be compared to those of their White counterparts or African-American boys (Henry, 1998).

Black men can also be included within the realm of Black feminist theory as well as within the general discourses of feminism. Guy-Sheftall (1986) contends that both men and women can be “Black feminists.” She provides Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois as examples. Guy-Sheftall further identifies features of Black feminist ideas that focus on Black women’s experiences considering both racial and gender oppression to
include equality that are distinct from White women and Black men. Thus, experiences gained from living as African-American women shape a Black feminist sensibility. The problem according to Hill-Collins (1990) with this version of Black feminist theory is its connection to a biology orientation which means that you must be Black in order to understand Black issues or experiences.

There is a range of assumptions concerning the relationship between ideas and the person who ascribes to Black feminist theory. The tensions in defining Black feminist theory, according to Hill-Collins (1990), is the labeling attached to individuals who may embrace a specific political perspective. Hill-Collins advocates for a definition of Black feminist thought that avoids a materialist position which implies that being Black and/or female generates certain experiences that automatically determine alternate of a Black and/or feminist consciousness. She also advocates for a definition that avoids an idealist position that ideas can be evaluated in isolation from the groups that create them.

To deal with the complexities of defining Black feminist theory Hill-Collins proposes specifying the relationship between a Black woman’s standpoint—those experiences and ideas shared by African-American women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, society, and theories that interpret these experiences. She suggests that Black feminist theory consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women which emanates from a standpoint of and for Black women. This definition according to Hill-Collins encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women’s reality by those who live it.

Collins (2000) argues that sexism, class oppression, and racism are intersecting systems of oppression. Collins further argues that BFT allows Black women to create
alternative worldviews for self-definition and self-determination. The tenets of Black feminist theory which include (1) lived experience as criterion for meaning, (2) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (3) the ethic of caring, and (4) the ethic of personal responsibility, reflects Collins’ main objectives. First, is to limit the ways in which Black women have often internalized imposed restricting definitions of who they are. Second, is to limit the construction of how Black women and girls are identified in society. Finally, Collins aim is to shape specific political contexts confronting African-American women as a group (Rhodes, 2009).

**Black Womanhood**

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mudpuddles, or gives me any best place! Ain’t I a woman? (Truth, 1851, (p. 1.)

A concept important to this research and one that is incorporated into BFT is the definition of Black womanhood. Decades before Walker’s (1982) infamous groundbreaking *Combahee River Collective document* which identified a “womanist” definition as responsible; in charge; traditionally universalist, and traditionally capable, Anna Julia Cooper (1892) identified community building as a source of self-definition for Black women, which she identified as essential to Black female identity and Black womanhood. Radford-Hill (2000) provides an example of Black womanhood by referencing traditional womanly duties that were assumed by Black women through their support of community values, raising children and supporting the causes in defense of the Black male.

Important in the identity development of Black females is the framing of Black womanhood. Often seen through the lens of stereotypes, Black women are depicted in a variety of ways, both negative and positive. This includes “matriarch”, “whore”
“mammy,” and “jezebel.” These stereotypes of Black women differ in relation to the notion of “woman” when compared to its meaning for White women. The most common difference is the traditional housewife model of womanhood which has never been applicable to most African-American women (King, 1977; Roberts, 1997; Collins, 1996, 2000). Because of the mainstream women’s movement which focuses on White, middle class women, positioning Black womanhood as a model for African-American women and African-American girls becomes increasingly essential in acknowledging Black women as women.

Edwards (2008) in her study of how Black girls become Black women, indicates that Black girls navigate the intersection of race, gender, and class while maturing into Black women. She further advocates for a more humanistic view of Black women other than the prevailing social media images of “baby’s momma,” “welfare recipient” “sassy,” “mammy,” or “hoochie momma.” Creation of a new medium to eradicate the long held societal views of Black women is then necessary. Collins (2000) indicates that this new discourse can be accomplished by using Black womanhood as an instrument to fight the power of elite groups who manipulate ideas about Black women through the exploitation of existing symbols.

**Authenticating Lives**

The shared racial and gender background of the Black female researcher and Black female study participant also increase the researcher’s ability to engage the participant in authentic ways and to better understand the sociocultural, individual, and other nuance factors that influence the behaviors observed. (Thomas, 2004, p. 301.)

I recognize my role and responsibility as an African-American and as a female in the academy in documenting the experiences of African-American females in
institutionalized settings. How I situate their stories is significant in providing counternarratives to the already negative images of African-American women.

Secondly, documenting the experiences of African-American girls in systems of care—education and foster care is important because this provides a vehicle in which to understand the complexities that this population faces. I acknowledge that the only way to do this is to allow the girls to be co-collaborators rather than mere participants. Given the lack of knowledge of their experiences and simultaneous involvement in the educational and foster care system and their transition into womanhood, assigning the participants a position of co-collaborator in the research can provide an alternate vehicle of voice and empowerment that is otherwise unacknowledged in social structures that are traditionally male-dominated, Euro-centric, and oppressive towards African-American women. The social construction of African-American women’s [girls] identity should be explored with an intent to bring their encounters, meaning-making, and knowledge from the “margins to the center” (hooks, 1984, p. 5).

What is known about this population is that they are navigating through institutions of care without adequate supports to assist them with transitioning into larger society. How well this population does beyond the arms of these institutions is often indicated and demonstrated after the individual has emancipated from the system of care, thus providing little information about the needs of the population while involved in care (Courtney et al. 2004; Child Welfare League, 2003).

To address and make an accurate assessment of the needs of African-American females involved in these systems, researchers should know what the experiences of foster care and education is like for this population. Furthermore, researchers need to
know if the current models of care are appropriately functioning and genuinely assisting the adolescent development of African-American females.

Central to this issue is whether or not the identified institutions of care adequately prepare African-American females for the challenges that they will encounter in adulthood (e.g., career employment, marriage, family life, etc.). Therefore the question of “What is recognized and supported as independence and of womanhood?” is interrelated to how adolescent African-American females pilot and promote their self-sufficiency within these institutions and larger society. Without a doubt, their perspectives can help inform practice, policy, and further research studies.

With the above issues in mind, it is essential to utilize BFT, as advanced by Collins (2000) and other Black feminist theorists, to evoke a dialogue around ways of advocating for and representing African-American girls’ involvement in systems of care. As it stands, the issues surrounding this population are not fully explored in current social science literature. Although there are quantitative studies that exist that discuss certain aspects of African-American girls’ lives, they are general and limited in addressing the lives of Black girls from a personal, cultural, and social viewpoint (Davis & Rhodes, 1994; Milkie, 1999; Rickford & Knox, 1994).
Chapter 3
Methodology and Research Design

My main inquiry is based on a quantitative design to address the research questions, because the usage of tools such as standardized tests and other scientific measures will not yield the richly textured information about to populations who are involved in caring institutions or vulnerable (i.e., African-American girls). There are researchers who would argue that a quantitative design would yield stronger outcomes in terms of reliability. However, for the purposes of this research, I argue that a qualitative design is necessary to investigate the experiences of the participants and situate them in a position of power since traditionally social science research operates from a deficit-based approach often targeting African-American women and girls as victims, leaving them unable to move beyond the myths and false claims which marginalizes Black women and Black girls (Rhodes, 2009, p. 13).

Since my research is centered on inquiry about phenomenon—understanding meaning and developing ideology surrounding a cultural and social phenomenon exclusive to African-American females—it is only appropriate that I utilize a qualitative approach in my research. According to Maxwell (1996) qualitative research is best suited for five specific purposes, which are (a) understanding meaning (in the broad sense); (b) understanding the context where participants act and how the context affects their actions; (c) identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences and generating new grounded theories about the latter; (d) understanding the process by which events and actions take place; and (e) developing causal explanations.
Thus, using a qualitative design leads to a richer understanding of the phenomenon being studied and it provides a means of countering the dominant hierarchal structure that currently operates to maintain a position of authority and control. Lastly my usage of a qualitative research design allows the girls to function as co-collaborators in this study. Co-collaborators are full participants in the development of the study and in the analysis and interpretation of the data (Mishler, 1986, p. 25). I will use co-collaborators in place of the subjective word participant(s) where pertinent in the study.

The usage of a qualitative research design for this study makes use of Black feminist theory and narrative inquiry (NI) as approaches that are responsive to the specific experiences of the individual girls while depicting the multiplicity of meanings ascribed to their experiences made by them as co-collaborators. Additionally, in Chapter 4 of the results and discussion session, I will utilize a diversity of qualitative research methods to discuss the concept of identity and self-construction generated by the participants within my study. Marshall and Rossman (1999) state that qualitative methods allow the researcher to engage the study from a naturalistic perspective, interpret the lived experiences of study participants, use a combination of inquiry methods to reflect participants’ humanity, recognize and capture emergent data, and consider herself in the research (p. 2). This is particularly important to my study and the findings that it may yield because I use multiple frameworks to discuss this specific phenomenon. Marshall & Rossman (1999) & Geetz (1973) also support this in their advocacy of using multiple frameworks to achieve depth or thick description when conducting qualitative research (p. 60).
The purpose of my study is to enhance knowledge of the experiences of African-American adolescent females simultaneously involved in the educational and foster care system and the meaning of their experiences as they transition into womanhood. The aim of this study is to understand the complexities faced by a vulnerable population--African-American adolescent females and how they make meaning of their experience while participating in both institutions of care.

**Theoretical Framework**

Black feminist theory (BFT)

The purpose of my study is to enhance knowledge of the experiences of African-American adolescent females simultaneously involved in the educational and foster care systems and the meaning of their experiences as they transition into womanhood. The aim of this study is to understand the complexities faced by a vulnerable population--African-American adolescent females and how they make meaning of their experience while participating in both institutions of care.

The social realities of the African-American girls in this inquiry are complex and ever-changing, given the constant intersections of race, class and gender. I will use BFT as my theoretical framework as it critically examines the impact of race, class, and gender on everyday life. The choices of theoretical frameworks to explore my questions were vast. However, for the purposes of my research, BFT is the most salient framework as it considers the multiple aspects, identities, and roles present in the lives of the African-American girls participating in this study. BFT, as a theoretical framework, is the appropriate choice because it removes the “one size fits all” categorization of African-American women [girls] and portrays them as agents of social change and interpreters of
their own needs and concerns (Collins, 2000; Reinharz, 2003; Radford-Hill, 2000). Since BFT positions African-American women as producers of self-knowledge, the identity and empowered self that can be produced by the participants, as well as the task of reclaiming the subjugated knowledge that the African-American girls in this study have suppressed, I am compelled me to write from a Black feminist perspective.

I have also chosen BFT as my guiding framework because this study seeks to explore the following questions: (1) What are the thoughts and feelings of African-American adolescent females involved in a long-term foster care placement; (2) What are their personal experiences within educational institutions; and (3) How does this particular population of young people navigate both the educational and foster care system as they transition into adulthood? I contend that the connections between these questions and the personal issues in the everyday lives of African-American girls involved in institutions that are historically oppressive and male dominated is best addressed through a framework that places experiences and ways of knowing at the center of the human experience rather than at the margins of society (hooks, 1984; Leadbeater & Way, 1996).

The usage of BFT will guide my interpretation and the elements that I will be looking for in my study in the context of education, foster care, and woman [adult] hood. BFT as a theoretical lens will help unpack this phenomenon in terms of race, class, and gender and analyze questions inherent within their experiences such as how does race situate these girls; and how are they viewed and oppressed in patriarchal structures.

Crucial to BFT is the task of honoring and representing the experiences of these girls from a cultural, social, and personal context and recognizing the challenges inherent
in the process. It is important that my writing and research can be read and understood by
the girls who participated in my study, as well as others both in- and outside of academia.
Recognizing this challenge of making their world more accessible, from both a scholarly
and human standpoint, is central to my role as both an African-American woman and
researcher.

The girls represented in this study are more than just participants telling their
stories. Their lives and the lives of other adolescent African-American females involved
in systems of care—schools and foster care are important and will continue long after my
research is concluded. How researchers and larger society then discuss, analyze, and
understand the lives of these girls and other women of color becomes very important.
BFT provides for such a discourse and helps to make meaning of women’s [girls]
experiences and the associated outcomes. (Lorde, 1984; Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989;

**Conceptual Framework**

Narrative inquiry (NI)

To assemble, represent, and understand the individual stories and life experiences
that occur in both institutions, as told by the participants in my study, my methodology
will use Narrative inquiry (NI) to assist the participants with the telling of their stories.
Clandinin and Connelly (1990, 2006) state that although NI has a long intellectual history
both in and out of education, it is increasingly used in studies involving social science
research. One theory in educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms
who, individually and socially, lead storied lives (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Based on
this theory, narrative inquiry is the study of the ways humans experience the world.
The general concept of NI found among social science and educational researchers is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories—learners, teachers, and researchers as storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories. Thus, using NI with the participants in my study allows me as the researcher to inquire, participate in and with the storytellers (participants). NI also allows for the development of an inquirer-participant relationship to avoid the researcher subtracting himself from the participants and research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006, p. 480).

NI also looks at the telling, living, retelling, and reliving of stories by individuals. It recognizes that participants and researchers enter the field in the midst of living their stories on a continuous basis (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 64). The recognition of African-American girls’ lives as both constant and changing in various settings such as school, home, work and community, as well as my life as an African-American female researcher undergirds the usage of NI for this study.

Examining the lives of African-American girls involved in education and foster care systems and their transition into womanhood through BFT and NI will provide an understanding of the educational supports and developmental needs required by this population. As a means of illuminating the larger issues experienced by vulnerable populations, Marshall and Rossman (1999) advocate using a conceptual framework that links the specific research questions to a larger theoretical constructs (p.11). In this case using NI as a conceptual framework is complementary to BFT as a theoretical framework. This is relevant to the research objective as it holds potential significance for generalizing the lived experiences of the research participants to a larger population of African-American girls involved in systems of care. Using NI will further assist in
investigating this phenomenon and the meaning making of the socializing experiences of African-American girls and how they negotiate racial and gender devaluation (West Stevens, 1997, p. 152).

There are also other areas to consider when using NI. This includes experience, time, personal knowledge, reflection, and deliberation (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989). Regarding these issues, NI will be used as part of the data collection process as a primary means of gathering data. Marshall and Rossman (1999) champion NI as a data collection method because of its power to elicit the voices of participants (p. 123). Collins (2000) appears to support the usage of NI in her objective to develop an epistemological framework that validates the usage of stories and storytelling, supports the empowerment of oppressed lives, and views the lives of women as holistic (p. 18). In this manner, the combination of BFT and NI works to cultivate quintessentially a body of work that places the lives of African-American girls at the heart of research and exposes those deep-rooted structural factors that heavily impact their lives.

While Collins (2000) appears to advocate for a conceptual framework such as NI to make-meaning of adolescent African-American females experiences, she acknowledges that the issue of epistemology raises difficult questions especially in the area of truth and viability. However, Collins makes a valid argument that traditional epistemological assumptions concerning how we arrive at “truth” simply are not sufficient to the task of furthering BFT. She further argues that the analysis of truth is important in the study of African-American females and their experiences as their “truth” and meaning-making position them as “situated knowers.” Collins identifies “situated
knowers” as African-American women who gain and contribute knowledge at the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender (p. 19).

As a result, using NI in combination with BFT assists in addressing the questions of whether BFT as a theoretical lens is scientific enough to unpack and reveal a set of knowledge claims based on the participants’ experiences. Thus, in using NI for this study I will be enabled to be an advocate for the African-American females and the materials-thought, knowledge, meaning-making, experiences, that is produced by them. Collins reiterates this in her quote of Walker (1983, p. 8) “she must be her own model as well as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which, is to say, herself.”

Research Questions

The research questions developed aim to reveal and address the particular experiences of this segment of African-American females. The usage of a qualitative research design for this study is related to how my research questions were developed. My research questions were based on three reasons: (1) the lack of research on African-American females involved in institutions of care; (2) the need to describe the phenomena that occurs with vulnerable populations so that new insights may be gained and (3) my research involved phenomena that were not best answered by the use of quantitative measures as little is known about this aspect of life as told through the voices of the participants. The primary research questions are:

1) What are the schooling experiences of African-American adolescent females involved in a long-term foster care placement; 2) What is the meaning of the educational and foster care experiences for these young women; and 3) How
do African-American adolescent females navigate both the education and foster care system as they transition into womanhood?

This study examines the schooling experiences of adolescent African-American females involved in long-term foster care and their transition into womanhood. This study provides an opportunity for me to contribute to what I hope will become emergent literature so that educators, researchers, and society will be in a position to address these issues.

**Participants and Selection Criteria**

The study was conducted in Chicago, Illinois. Through my work experience and collateral contacts, the sample of girls was recruited from a transitional living facility that is situated in a low-to-middle income community. A total of three African-American adolescent females, 18-20, were selected as participants. The participants were selected from a voluntary group of twelve girls who reside within the facility. The small number of participants was beneficial because it allowed the opportunity to seek out the most representative group possible and also maintain the confidentiality of the residents (Williams, 2009; Maxwell, 1996).

The transitional living facility is located in a low-to middle income community on Chicago’s Southside. The community was first settled in the early 1860’s and grew with the development of industrialization. Originally made up of mostly Swedish, Irish, Hungarian, and Jewish occupants, the community experienced a racial transition in the 1950’s when African-American’s made up 1 percent of the population. By the 1960’s the count had risen to 63.7%. Termed as “White flight” the communities’ White residents began to leave the community to reside in the suburban areas. As of the 2010 census, the
population was 99% African-American (Chicago Historical Society, 2005). Middle-class African-Americans were initially drawn to the area precisely because of its property values, high levels of community organization, and good schools. The community also held the distinction of hosting some of the most successful Black owned businesses. This once thriving community has deteriorated socioeconomically; currently the area is plagued by crime, property neglect, and economic instability.

The selection criteria for the participants consisted of the following:

- Between 18-21 years of age
- African-American females
- Participation in social/recreational/therapeutic activities
- Willingness to participate in 1 hour focus group
- Commitment to two (2) 45 minute interviews
- Willingness to be observed in social settings

Participant Portraits

While it may be standard to assume that participants in research will remain anonymous, the issues of confidentiality were discussed with each participant. Confidentiality was also reiterated at each interview and at the beginning of the focus group. Given the highly sensitive nature of the research and the public institutions involved, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. In addition all data collected was stored in a secure location.

“Lisa.” Lisa is a 18 year-old adolescent African-American female. She wears her hair in the latest style of weaves or braids. She prides herself on how she dresses. Lisa has a prescription for glasses, but admits she does not wear them. She is a senior who
attends a therapeutic day school. Lisa was placed in the transitional living facility (TLP) in 2006 after a failed adoption that occurred in 2001 where allegations of physical abuse were indicated. This young woman has experienced multiple traumas including sexual abuse, loss, neglect, and emotional abuse. She was initially adopted in 2001 after her biological parents’ rights were terminated. Upon the failed adoption, Lisa was then placed back in the care of DCFS. Lisa has experienced at least ten foster care placements, including her current placement in the TLP. Prior to her placement in the transitional living facility, Lisa and her siblings came to the attention of DCFS due to an investigation and finding of neglect against her mother regarding substance abuse and mental health issues. She continues to maintain contact with her biological mother and siblings and indicates that she has never met her biological father.

Lisa describes herself as a smart, caring, motivated, and determined person. She admits that she can often be loud and very talkative. She likes school, doing hair, writing poetry, and debating. While Lisa indicates that she enjoys school and that obtaining an education is very important to her, her attendance rate and behavior within the classroom has posed a challenge for her academically. She had attended both a therapeutic day school where she receives special education services and a regular Chicago Public High School (CPS). Lisa was in the process of being mainstreamed into a regular high school, but could not make the adjustment in the regular high school setting, because of her inappropriate behavior and lack of attendance. Although not active in any school activities, Lisa stated that she liked volleyball and softball. Lisa indicates that her favorite subjects are English, Math, Social Studies, Science, Physical Education, and Spanish. Lisa describes her relationships with her current teachers as one of frustration because
they are “lazy and don’t want to teach.” She maintains that the teachers allow her to copy work out of a book and “that the teachers don’t discuss the work with her.”

Lisa has been previously employed before at a local grocery store and a day care facility. She asserts that she is ready to be on her own. She plans to attend college, become a nurse, and move into her own apartment. Lisa sees her boyfriend and biological family as part of her support system. Lisa identifies some of the residents in the TLP as friends, but indicates she is not close to any of them because they “act phony.” She affirms that she is aware of her status as an African-American and as a female because of the statistics that say she will have a child by the age of thirteen, drop out of high school, and prostitute herself. Lisa stated that she would not be “like her mother who never went to college and dropped out of high school, but more like her grandmother who raised 4 children, worked, and attended college.” She indicated that she had previously been prescribed medication for depression, but refused to take the medication. Lisa states that she believes in God and goes to church infrequently.

“Sabine.” Sabine is an 18 year old African-American female. She is short with a stocky build. She has medium brown skin and is well groomed. Sabine is a senior who attends an alternative CPS high school. She was placed in the TLP facility in 2008 due as a result of a failed DCFS adoption. Prior to her current placement, Sabine had resided in two residential facilities and three foster homes for a total of six foster care placements. Sabine became involved with DCFS in 1990 when she was born with cocaine in her system and her mother was placed in a mental health facility. After the termination of her biological parent’s rights, Sabine was adopted in 1995. Sabine came to the attention of DCFS for the second time, when her adoptive mother was indicated by a DCFS child
abuse investigation, following allegations of sexual and physical abuse. She has experienced various ordeals including loss, physical and sexual abuse, and neglect. Sabine maintains a relationship with both her mother and grandmother. Sabine does not have a relationship with her father. She indicates that she has not seen or had contact with her siblings in a long time.

Sabine describes herself as smart, goal-oriented, hardworking, independent, and a helper. She enjoys writing, working, making money, and shopping. Sabine previously attended a CPS high school where she was enrolled in regular classes. She had previously been involved in special education classes, before being mainstreamed into regular education courses. Sabine was originally placed in special education courses because of a learning disability. Sabine’s schooling was disrupted due to her attendance issues and as a result she was transferred to the alternative school setting. Her favorite subjects are history and math although she is currently struggling in math, where she requires a tutor. She is not currently involved in any extracurricular activities at school, but she enjoys sports, especially basketball. Sabine indicates that she struggles in her classes because she doesn’t understand a lot of what reads. She expresses that “it is hard to learn when a teacher doesn’t explain the work.” Sabine describes her relationship with teachers as “good.” She expects to graduate from the alternative school and plans to attend college and become an attorney or work with computers. Sabine stated that she had been prescribed medication and was diagnosed with ADHD, but did not believe that she has ADHD. Sabine states that she does not take any medication at this time. Sabine also indicates that she is religious and believes in God, but she does not currently attend church.
Sabine is currently employed part-time with a security company. She indicated that she liked working and making her own money so that she wouldn’t have to wait on DCFS to provide her with her allowance. Sabine has recently started driving and has obtained her driver’s license. She is currently dating and identifies her boyfriend and grandmother as a part of her support network. Sabine indicated that she is looking forward to moving into her own apartment and out of the TLP because “the girls do stupid stuff.” Sabine indicated that she got along with the other girls in the facility and identified three girls that she talked to frequently. Sabine believes that as an African-American female “you don’t become a woman until you move out on your own and nobody has to take care of you.”

“Leilani.” Leilani is a 20 year-old African-American female resident at the TLP. She is of average height with a dark complexion. She has a prescription for glasses, but refuses to wear them. While she has attended high school, she dropped out of school in the 10th grade. Leilani has made several attempts to take the General Equivalency Diploma Exam (GED). She is currently enrolled in a GED course at a local community college.

Leilani came to the TLP in 2007. Prior to her placement in the TLP and DCFS involvement, Leilani had resided in multiple placements including residing with relatives and friends. Leilani came to the attention of DCFS in 2005 when she walked into a police station and reported that she had no where to go and had been away from home for two weeks. Leilani reported that her mother had left her home alone with two men and that she did not know of her mother’s whereabouts. A search for her biological mother was conducted; however she could not be located and DCFS was granted custody with an
allegation of inadequate supervision against Leilani’s mother. It was later found that her mother also had a substance abuse problem. Leilani was then placed in a DCFS temporary shelter from which she ran away. Leilani was then placed with a relative where she also ran away. Subsequently she was placed in a foster home setting. Leilani has maintained contact with her mother via phone, but has no desire to see her. Leilani reports that there is no contact with her biological father.

Leilani describes herself as independent, nice, and states that she values family. She admits that she doesn’t socialize with the other girls in the facility because they “keep up a lot of mess.” Leilani says that she is different from the other girls because she contacted DCFS and asked them to remove her from her home. She reports that she communicates with staff in the facility better than she does with girls. Leilani likes to shop and admires fashions like “Dereon” and entertainers like Jessica Alba. She does not participate in any social or recreational activities outside of the facility; however she identifies that she has a friend that she communicates with who is not involved with IDCFS. Leilani also identifies her boyfriend as a part of her support system and indicates that she has been in a relationship with him for two years.

Leilani’s goals include acquiring a job, finishing her GED, and moving into her own apartment. At this time, she is currently unemployed, although she was referred to two employment programs for youth. Upon completion of her GED, Leilani plans to attend college and become a nurse. She is aware that if she doesn’t complete her goals, her movement into independent living will be impacted as she has turned 21—the cutoff age in which she can received financial support from IDCFS. Leilani is conscious of her
status as an African-American female in her statement: “because I am a dark-skinned girl people tend to look at me differently.”

**Qualitative Data Collection**

For this study, I used semi-structured interviews, a focus-group, documents, and observations. Since narratives are a way of making sense of the world around us and our role in it (Bruner, 1990; Erasmus, 1989) it was necessary that I use these methods because they are in alignment with the principles of BFT. These methods allow for the incorporation of new material from research participants (Danko et al. 2006). Furthermore these methods assist the researcher at arriving at the social meanings of foster care and schooling through the eyes of these students.

**Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were utilized in this study because they allow for active involvement of the participants in the construction of data about their lives (Reinharz, 2003, p. 18). Utilizing semi-structured interviews supports the theme of finding and expressing the voices of Black girls and women (Collins, 2000, p. 99). Semi-structured interviews also served to uncover and describe participants’ subjective view of their experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 110). Suitable for this study, semi-structured interviewing further allowed for flexibility to include the developmental experiences related to the participants education and foster care experiences (Marshall & Rossman, p. 108). This included stories regarding identity issues and developmental transitions while involved with both schooling and foster care. Interviewing of this kind supported maintaining free interaction between the researcher and the interviewee, as
well as providing access to the ideas, thoughts, and memories of the participants in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher (Reinharz, 2003, p. 19).

Interviews were conducted with three African-American adolescent girls, ages 18-20, who resided in a transitional living facility, who were involved in long-term foster care, in the State of Illinois. Taking into account the participants’ age and ability to focus, two, 45 minute interviews were selected as the timeframe. To understand how participants’ thoughts are situated in particular circumstances within both institutions and to discuss any themes that may emerge, multiple interviews were conducted with the participants. Multiple interviewing allows for the asking of additional questions to get corrective feedback on previously obtained information (Reinharz, 1992, p. 37). This process also assisted in the member-checking process to confirm validity and the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). This was done via follow-up phone calls and in person. Mishler (1986) writes that “researchers have to be attentive to the fit between their interpretations and their subjects understanding, which serves as a validity check on their findings” (p. 25). A further discussion of validity and credibility will be discussed in the Qualitative Data Analysis section under Validity and Credibility (see page 93).

An interview protocol containing key research questions, transition questions, and probes was developed to guide the interview process (Creswell, 2003, p. 190). The protocol format assisted in the structuring of the participants lived experiences, categorization of information, and capturing the participant responses (Appendix B). The protocol format was submitted to an outside research reviewer who is both a clinician and an academic to help assure face validity and remove bias that may be present as a
The reviewer was chosen based on her educational background, clinical expertise with adolescent girls of color involved in foster care, and her experience as a female adolescent of color. Language and the construction of the questions were the primary focus of the reviewer.

The interviews addressed both BFT and NI frameworks, allowing participants to tell their stories. The interviews uncovered the placement histories, experiences as a foster child, family interaction, educational experiences and identity development. The interview questions consisted of open-ended questions to allow for reflection by the participant and further probing as needed by the researcher. The interviews occurred on-site at the transitional living facility in a private interview room which was used formerly used as an office. Interview times were scheduled with the participants in advance. Each interview was audio taped and then transcribed for analysis.

A consent form (Appendix C) was developed by the researcher and completed by the participants. The consent form outlined the purpose of the interviews, length of time for the interviews, general structure of the interviews, and the purpose of the focus group. A confidentiality statement was included in the consent. The confidentiality statement identified ethical issues such as duty to warn and worked to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

Focus Groups

The use of a focus group in my study provided for the participants to share in a space in which they are all trying to understand their experiences and their lives. Excerpts from the focus group were blended into the participants’ narratives to maintain the richness of the data. Even though the focus group was small, this was of benefit to gain a
clear sense of each participant’s reaction to the subject matter in addition to allowing them time to say what they felt. Morgan (1997) believes that small groups are useful because they give each participant more time to talk. An additional benefit of a small group is that it validates the participants as “experts” (Reinharz, p.220) in establishing a grounding point specific in discussions of race, gender, and identity. Krueger (1988) supports the practice of focus groups to provide the researcher with a method of identifying trends in the perceptions and opinions expressed by the participants. A focus group information sheet (Appendix D) and interview guide (Appendix E) was used. One focus group occurred with the participants lasting approximately one hour. Notes were taken during the focus group to capture the details of the interactions, participants’ comments and quotes, as well as the researcher’s thoughts and observations throughout the process of analysis.

Employment of the focus group is in alignment with BFT and NI frameworks because it provides an instrument to develop group cohesion, as well as raising the level of consciousness of its participants to challenge the labels and stereotypes associated with their involvement in the education and foster care system (Collins, 2000, p. 98). Using Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional approach to NI, along with the focus group provides a reflective inquiry space for the participants that entail their past, present, and future experiences. This process starts participants in the present, proceeds in moving them back and forth between present and past, and finally repositions them in the future space as they retell their stories. This method assisted in moving my data from field text to actual research text. The focus group occurred upon conclusion and transcription of the
individual interviews. By conducting the focus group at the end of the interviews I ensured data saturation.

**Observations**

Observations were conducted of the participants within the facility. The participants were observed in the facility since this is where most of their social interactions occurred with peers and staff. Field notes were maintained that included the co-collaborators and their activities within their environments (Delamont, 2000). An observation protocol was utilized to record the observations and document both descriptive notes (i.e., portraits of the participants, dialogue, and physical settings/activities) and reflective notes (i.e., the researcher’s personal thoughts which include feelings, idea, impressions, and prejudices) Creswell, 2003, p. 189).

The observations assisted in developing a comprehensive picture of the participants’ social and academic life as an African-American female in both institutions. Observations are important to BFT and NI frameworks in this study because the girls are the central characters and narrators of their own stories. Therefore it was important to observe them in their respective environments in order to understand their lives, the complexities and construction of their stories, as well as substantiating participant uniqueness (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 178). Observations of the participants also addressed my personal involvement as a researcher in narrative inquiry while gathering and interpreting information provided by them.

The observations consisted of two, 30 minute observations that occurred within the transitional living facility. Unfortunately observations were not able to occur within the school setting, because one of the participants did not attend an actual school
structure, and I was unable to obtain permission from CPS for the other two participants. However the observations within the facility coupled with the interviews and documents from school provided a general picture of their academic life.

**Documents**

Documents (e.g. report cards, poems, art work, and short stories) were used as supplements to the interviews and observations (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 116). Participants in the study compiled their own documents. Documents were important to the BFT framework to assist in establishing the participants’ identity and existence making them visible to the public sphere (Collins, 2000, p. 99). Documents were also important to the NI framework because they wove the stories of the participants together and provided accurate historical records that will authenticate the experiences of the participants and their contact with the education and foster care system (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). Reading and interpreting the documents selected assisted in understanding the problem and the research questions (Creswell, 2003, p. 185).

Report cards are relevant to the study as it provides a means of documenting the participants level of functioning within a school environment. Items such as poetry and artwork be were utilized as alternate vehicles to represent how the participants situate or position themselves “in the midst” of their stories both inside and outside of the facility and school (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 100). This was also used to understand the girls’ self and identify-making process (Luttrell, 2003, p. 150). Participants were asked to utilize various teen magazines to make self-portraits or collages as a means of self-representation. Participants were also asked to submit short stories or poetry related to pieces as a means of understanding self-mages. The design of these specific research
activities assisted me in integrating knowledge and action in my research as well as facilitating personal growth for the girls, as identified in my research aims. Participants were asked to bring the documents to the focus group and to discuss how they re-envision themselves in society.

**Categorization of Data**

Although interviews serve as one source of data for this research, there must be other sources of data to collaborate the interview information. Padgett (2004) writes “interviewing alone lacks the density and texture that comes from incorporating observational data and/or use of documents” (p. 10). Therefore, interpretation of the additional data collection tools is necessary. For the purposes of my study, interviews served as primary sources of data as it is information received directly from the participants in the study and it provides a means of gathering large amounts of data quickly (Creswell, 2003, p. 190). Observations were used in conjunction with the interviews as an additional source of data. This included the field notes compiled during the study. Participant poetry and artwork served as secondary sources of data. This included being used as a form of language and written evidence. This is useful in understanding how the narrator constructs meaning (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p. 123). Report cards served as a tertiary form of data collection to support the educational progress of the participants.

**Considerations within the Study**

Important to my analysis are links to the evolving research questions, my theoretical and conceptual framework, and my own personal story (Riessman, 1993). Although some researchers may be uncomfortable with the usage of self or personal
stories, Riessman supports the usage of personal stories. In describing her perspective of studying narratives, Riessman identifies that it is a matter of interpretive inquiry and that the researcher must begin with the personal or primary experience (p. 8). Riessman argues that in order to identify whose voice is represented in the final product as well as how researchers are situated in the personal narratives that are collected and analyzed, there must be a starting point (p. 61).

Given that one of the goals of my study is to learn about the experiences of adolescent African-American girls in long-term foster care and educational systems, I began by analyzing the responses from the interviews to the research questions for thematic content. The interviews were transcribed and coded along with the field notes from the observations. Coding of the data was important in the development of the themes. Coding is the process of organizing the material into “chunks” before researcher and participant interpretation (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 171). Coding the data assisted in the clustering of emerging themes. Riessman (p. 58) calls transcribing and coding the “unpacking” structure that is essential to interpretation. Riessman states that by transcribing, interpretative categories emerge, ambiguities in language are heard, and the oral story is told which can provide clues about meaning. The transcripts were then read for similar quotes and comments. I looked for similarities and differences which formed categories of like data.

The focus group served as a descriptive narrative which was also coded. According to Morgan (1997) the most common ways of coding focus group transcripts are to note (a) all mentions of a given code, (b) whether each individual participant mentioned a given code, and (c) whether the group’s discussion contained a given code.
Coding of the focus groups in this manner is significant as this gets at the meaning and social significance of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). Through this process the lives of the co-collaborators will be revealed through their own expressions and voices.

Documents were used as written evidence to authenticate the co-collaborators’ experiences. Since participants were asked to compile the documents, the documents were analyzed regarding the meanings that the participants attached to them.

**Validity and Credibility**

Qualitative research as a goal requires the researcher to ensure credibility of the study (Maxwell, 1996). This is best accomplished through establishing validity. Most common to qualitative procedures is member checking, thick description or saturation, and peer reviews (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In order to address saturation within the data collection process, I continuously revisited the data throughout the analysis for repetitive information as well as confirmation of existing categories. Glaser and Strauss (1967) discuss saturation as a means of exhausting all of the relationships and concepts within the data. This consisted of analyzing and collecting the data until no new evidence appeared. Peer review was conducted by an outside qualitative researcher who was well versed in the subject matter and who could provide critical commentary.
Role of the Researcher, Reflexivity, and Researching your own

“The construction of any work always bears the mark of the person who created it...I begin by locating myself and the contexts that shaped the volume and authorize its point of view.” (Riessman, 1993, p. v).

The location of self in research is critical to qualitative inquiry. It is equally important to be mindful of this dynamic in Black feminist discourse. My location within this research, as an African-American, a female, and researcher cannot be then limited to viewing the participants from the outside. I must define who I am and how I am as my identity relates to the participants within my study as well as recognizing my impact and influence on the study. This process of reflexivity, according to Maynard (2004) involves the researcher locating herself on the same critical plane as the researched. Maynard explains that it does not mean that the researcher can put herself in their place. Rather it means that the researcher must attend to the overall context of their [participants] lives while continually reflecting on its significance both for what they have to say and the sense the researcher wishes to make of it (p. 139).

I am an African-American woman researcher who was raised on the Southside of Chicago. I am also a daughter born to a single head of household, mother. Additionally, I am a granddaughter who had the privilege of obtaining my grandmother’s 100 years of wisdom regarding womanhood. While pursuing my educational and professional career, I have lived in various parts of the city and as a result of my occupation I returned to the community that I grew up in. This community is plagued by drugs, absentee parents, fledgling schools, foreclosed homes, and young African-American women and men who
encounter more negative than positive images regarding their possibilities as healthy and successful adults in society.

In addition to sharing an identity as an African-American woman, I share a comparable experience with the co-collaborators in that we all grew up in impoverished or low-income communities. While the influences of media and social structures weren’t as strong in my upbringing, our experiences in the community and the environment may have been similar. I recognize that during my youth I wasn’t aware of the constructs of race, class, and gender or what womanhood meant, however, I anticipate that the co-collaborators will be able to discuss these issues in a way that is identifiable for them.

In this vein, Skeggs (1997) has written of how, at the beginning of her research, she saw a strong similarity between the women participants and the positions she had previously occupied herself. She reflects on the connections and disconnections which she felt and describes how deeply disturbing was the realization of her position as a privileged researcher. All of this affected her analysis and representation of the women, and it was important for this to be included in her account of it as part of the basis upon which readers’ critical evaluation might be made. For this reason, bias and subjectivity are understood as inevitable in qualitative research (Mehra, 2002). The challenge rests in where and how the researcher chooses to place him/herself within the process. The issues of what Black females encounter in social institutions and the impact on their development is closely linked both to my life experiences and personal history.

The reality of study is that, because we are African-American and female, my co-collaborators and I experience discrimination because of our racial heritage and gender.
How they respond to their experiences reflects their own ways of knowing in terms of how they approach scenarios involving race, class, and gender.

Representation of the participants is critical in understanding the experiences of this population. The findings of the analysis will be represented by using narrative passages generated from the participant which will include a detailed discussion of several themes and multiple perspectives from individuals (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 194).

There are some possible limitations to using a qualitative research design. Patton (1990) notes “there are no perfect research designs…there are always trade-offs” (p. 162). In qualitative studies, because of the relatively small sample size, generalizability may be minimized. In order to counter this, thick descriptions generated by the participants provided a larger understanding of the personal experiences rather than relying on statistical information which lessens the explanation of the phenomena. Given these kinds of descriptions it is also reasonable to consider that other African-American girls in institutionalized settings, beyond this study, may also share participants’ experiences and thoughts.

Since the research issues and questions are multifaceted and complex, it can be difficult to address each subject area in a broader context. It follows that the choice in methodological design of the research study was important given that choosing a method that was best suited for the topic allowed the participants to express themselves. Issues of dependability may have been present, although this was achieved through the processing of the research questions to determine the best ways in which to derive the answers.
Another concern is regarding the time and labor intensiveness of the study as well as participants’ selective recall, reinterpretation of past events, and memory gaps (Ross & Conway, 1986). Using NI as a data collection tool can yield meaning and bring deeper understanding particularly when used with an advocacy or participatory knowledge. While there are positive attributes of using NI there are some criticisms. Since NI requires collaboration of both the interviewer and interviewee so that both voices are heard, it is criticized for its focus on the individual rather than on the social context (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 123). For the purposes of my study, this is a non-issue because the voice of the researcher and the participant is distinguishable throughout the study.

While all of the data collection methods chosen for this study are specific to both the theoretical framework of BFT and the conceptual framework of NI, this inquiry will not address causes or correlations, but will focus on understanding the experiences of adolescent African-American females in education and the foster care system through recording, observing, explaining, and analyzing the stories of participants. This research study is then limited to this population because they are the only ones who can tell the experiences and stories that I wish to obtain. However, the findings that emerge may be relevant to other African-American girls, their experiences in education and the foster care system.
Chapter 4

Results and Discussion

Woman power is
Black power is
Human power is always feeling
my heart beats as my eyes open as my hands move as my mouth speak
I am are you ready

-Audre Lorde “Now”(1984)

Three adolescent African-American females collaborated with the researcher regarding inquiry about their schooling experiences and their involvement in long-term foster care and how they make meaning of those experiences as they transition into womanhood. Given this study’s exploration of the intersections of race, class, and gender that influence the lived experiences of African-American adolescent females, Black feminist theory (Collins, 1990; 2000) was chosen as the lens through which to analyze these constructs. These constructs which are deeply rooted, operate in historical, political, social, and economic institutions. Black feminist theory aims to examine the marginalization of Black women at the intersection of multiple oppressions as well as issues of agency. Collins (1990; 2000) posits that Black feminist theory “encompass bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices” (p. 9) that consider Black women as a collective body. Examining the lived experiences of adolescent African-American
females involved in institutions of care through this form of analysis will contribute to the research on Black girls.

In addition to using Black feminist theory as a theoretical framework, the usage of Narrative Inquiry is used in this study as a conceptual framework. In this study, Narrative Inquiry assists the participants in this research in acquiring voice and assembling and understanding their life stories. The blending of both frameworks to provide voice and make meaning of experiences is vital because it provides an avenue to empower the co-collaborators through their participation in the research process (Cook-Sather, 2006; Williams, 2009). Because the co-collaborators lived experiences are not linear, a blended methodology assists also in addressing the richness of the stories that are socially and culturally shared by the co-collaborators.

Data collection consisted of individual semi-structured interviews, a focus group, observations, the collection of documents, i.e. poetry, short stories, art work, and report cards, which were provided by the participants. Data analysis consisted of generating codes, then creating categories, and finally generating themes from the data.

In discussion of the findings, first the themes are listed. Next, each theme is discussed and analyzed, intertwining data from both the interviews and the focus groups. Coding for the focus included all mentions of a given code, reviewing whether each individual participant mentioned a given code, and whether the group’s discussion contained a given code. The field notes collected during the observations were also coded in the same manner as the interviews. The documents were analyzed according to the meanings that the participants attached to them. Data was then triangulated using all of the data collection processes. To maintain anonymity, the co-collaborators are referenced
by their pseudonyms throughout the chapters. Basic demographic information about the
collaborators is provided. See (Table 1).

Table 1

Co-Collaborator Reference Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>Involvement with Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Therapeutic School (private)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabine</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Alternative School (public)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leilani</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Not in school</td>
<td>Pursuing GED</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The co-collaborators in the study represent a range of adolescent African-American identities. Lisa is a motivated and determined person who enjoys school, although her attendance rate and behavior within the classroom has posed a challenge for her academically. She is currently a grade year behind. Sabine, is a goal-oriented person who is currently working a part-time job and attending an alternative school so that she can graduate and get her own apartment. Sabine is currently a grade year behind. Leilani is not currently enrolled in school; she dropped out in the 10th grade. She has made several attempts to take the General Equivalency Diploma Exam (GED). Leilani is currently enrolled in a GED course at a local community college. Leilani primarily stays to herself within the facility but has been able to maintain a workable relationship with staff.

Analysis

What is it like to be an adolescent African-American female involved in long-term foster care? How does the adolescent African-American female define herself? How
does the adolescent African-American female make meaning of her schooling experiences? To sort out the answers to these questions and its connections to the research questions, a review of the purpose of the study is required.

The purpose of this study is to enhance the understanding of the experiences of African-American adolescent females and their simultaneous involvement in the educational and foster care system and the meaning of their experiences while navigating their transition into womanhood. There are several aims of this study: (1) to understand the complexities of challenges faced by a vulnerable population-African-American adolescent females and their participation within two social institutions of care, (2) to reveal the lived realities and complexities of girls in foster care, (3) to bring African-American girls voices to the foreground of social science research, and (4) to extend the present research literature. The focus on African-American girls is important because previous studies on adolescent African-American girls have a propensity to situate their lives in comparison to other girls, primarily White, and rarely have placed them at the center of the research (Rhodes, p. 4).

This chapter is divided into four subchapters based on the focal themes of school experiences, self-construction, foster care, and relationships. The subchapters will discuss the results of the study and how race, class, and gender are influential in the lives and development of adolescent African-American females who operate simultaneously in institutions of care-schooling and foster care and how they navigate these systems as they transition into womanhood.
Themes

“The Black female adolescent has been underrepresented in education, psychological, and career literature. Consequently, much of what we know about young Black females consists of bits and pieces of fragmented knowledge.” (Smith, 1982, p. 150).

The analysis of the interviews, focus group, observations, and documents yielded four major themes: (a) school experiences (b) self-construction, (c) foster care and (d) relationships with staff, parents, peers, and significant others. All of these themes are interrelated based on their influences in the lives of the girls. The primary data source for the themes is the individual interviews and the focus group. The secondary source of data includes observations and documents by the participants. The interview data served to uncover and describe the co-collaborators subjective view of their experiences which eliminates the one-dimensional social view of adolescent African-American girls. The interviews also allow the co-collaborators to understand how they come to know themselves and removes them from being “objects” to being “subjects”.

The focus group data provided an opportunity for the co-collaborators to share their experiences, perceptions, and opinions, and positioned them as “experts” in establishing a standpoint in the discussion of race, gender, class, and identity. The observations assisted in providing a picture of the participants’ social and academic lives as they participated in both institutions. The field notes were compiled and used to provide a humanistic view of the co-collaborators. The observations occurred within the facility. Unfortunately because of restrictions regarding Chicago Public Schools and the confidentiality of other students, the observations were not able to occur within the school setting. In addition, one of the participants was not involved in an actual academic setting at the time of the research, having recently reenrolled in a GED program at the
end of the research study. The participant however completed in-home study tasks related to the preparation for her GED. Documents provided by the co-collaborators include report cards, poetry, short stories, and artwork. These documents were used as supplements to the interviews and observations to authenticate their experiences and to provide the research with a historical context.
Chapter 1: School: Getting it done—Experiences with Schooling and Learning

“I Chose Schooling”

“I chose schooling over socializing, I chose to study for tests instead of gossiping over someone’s baby’s momma, I selected education over ignorance. I thought to myself, maybe I am not “ghetto”…I preferred work over play, homework instead of fitting into a crowd where I don’t belong. I chose schooling.” (Jacob, 2002, p. 35).

The successful, achieving, and independent African-American female student is seldom the image that flashes across the popular and scholarly landscape of America and becomes part of the collective consciousness (Frasier-Kouassi, 2003; Paul, 2003).

Adolescent youth in foster care including African-American females in long-term foster care, they are at risk for school failure on the basis of low socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity, and special education (Altshuler, 1997; Altshuler, 2003; Smithgall et al. 2004). Altshuler (2003) identified that children in out-of-home care were more likely than other children in their classes to struggle academically and socially in school. Youths in foster care also performed significantly lower on standardized achievement tests in reading and mathematics and earned lower grades in these subjects than non-foster youths (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003).

According to 2003 statistics compiled by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 3,211 DCFS wards were enrolled in CPS elementary schools and 1,255 DCFS wards were enrolled in CPS high schools. 87.6% of the students were African-American. Of this number 46.5% were female; 22.8% of these students were in non-relative foster care placements; and 17.1% were in independent living placements or transitional living facilities. 72% of these students had been in care for two or more years.
While gender is mentioned in the above statistics, the educational literature regarding adolescent African-American females and their experiences with schooling disaggregates the three constructs—race, class, and gender. According to Rhodes (2009), studies on adolescent African-American females and schooling are based on a deficit model of research which governs policy, practice, and curriculum. Rhodes argues that the utilization of a deficit model creates unique obstacles for African-American girls which include stereotyping. Since schools and foster care are institutions of care, they are interconnected in their functioning in the daily lives of vulnerable populations. Because race, class, and gender are interrelated, an exploration is essential in order to fully understand their impact on adolescent Black girls, within both the education and foster care system.

**School Experiences: Aspirations, Motivations, and Expectations**

*Aspirations, Motivations, and Expectations.* For this theme, the three co-collaborators recognized the importance of completing school and academic achievement. Their reasons varied: achieving material goals; creating a financial future for themselves; working against the odds and stereotypes; getting a good job; and the continuance of supportive services. In their educational pursuits, all three of the girls related how they envisioned themselves and their future outcomes which consisted of pursuing material goods, being successful, and developing a sense of belonging.
LISA

Lisa describes her motivation for wanting to defeat the odds and its connection to the completion of school:

“Looking at other peoples lives, looking at other girls in the house and how they dropped out of high school, and how they don’t have anything going for themselves, how the girls are struggling without a high school diploma, me wanting the best for myself, me achieving my goals, especially proving people wrong. People always saying I am going to be on drugs, I am not going to graduate. I like to prove people wrong.”

Lisa’s motivation to prove people wrong is based on the comparisons made of her in relation to the other girls inside and outside the transitional living facility. Lisa’s objective of graduating and obtaining a high school diploma relates to her achieving goals and proving people wrong. Her task of proving people wrong consists of her overcoming the odds and resisting disparaging stereotypical messages (both overt and covert) that she receives based on her status as an IDCFS ward, both by her peers within the facility and by individuals outside of the facility.

McRobbie (2005) calls Lisa’s location “habitus” (p. 99). Habitus refers to the individual’s environment and smaller social circle in which people live. McRobbie argues that a person’s habitus can be empowering or impeding, based on class, race, and gender, and that a person rarely moves beyond the habitus into which he or she is born. Lisa’s location within the transitional living facility places her in an underprivileged habitus where race, class, and gender are intersecting barriers. Nevertheless, Lisa’s aspirations to become successful and be seen as an individual outside of her current location, acts as an agent to empower her to change her habitus and create her own self-definition. Collins
(2000) maintains that Black women develop individuality and self-definitions that foster action as they are in the process of focusing on self. Therefore, Lisa’s goal of completing school and being successful, works to prove people (society) wrong because they are actions that represent her desire to redefine herself, despite her habitus.

**SABINE**

“In order for me to get a good job, I need skills like being a good worker. I need to follow directions and ask for help and make sure I do what I am supposed to do like I do in school.”

Sabine’s comments speaks to the American achievement ideology (Carter, 2008) that suggests people who demonstrate high performance through hard work and individual effort in education can achieve positive future outcomes. Her belief in the achievement ideology allows her to view herself as a part of larger White society-working, living on her own, and possessing material items. This also assists Sabine in the normalizing of her location within IDCFS.

However, for students like Sabine, achievement ideology does not account for her current location within the foster care system that places Sabine in a subjective and vulnerable position for failure in both her academic and personal life. Although education is upheld as an opportunity to open doors and to battle inequalities existent in society, for African-American girls, they are regulated to navigating the triple oppression of race, gender, and class at school, in their homes, communities, and in the larger society (Evans-Winters, 2005, p. 3).

Collins (2000) advances Evans-Winters theory in her (p. 284) assertion that institutions and organizations, like schools, use methods to disingenuously include
African-American women while disempowering them at the same time. This is how such institutions maintain dominance and simultaneously appear neutral or egalitarian. Sabine’s inclusion as an African-American girl in the dominant educational process operates as camouflage, hiding the real motive of power and control. This is representative of the institutionalized schooling that Collins references.

In other words, institutionalized schooling works to negatively influence Sabine’s academic performance and minimize a successful life outcome. If Sabine fails in school, her future chances of living on her own outside of foster care are impacted, thereby negating her attempts to defy and overcome the negative images associated with being an African-American female and her involvement in foster care. Collins (p. 285) further maintains that this hegemonic control weakens Black women’s resistance. This is applicable to Sabine as she embarks on her transition to womanhood. As an outcome of her participation in the achievement ideology, she is inadvertently placed at the center of racist, classist, and sexist practices in both education and foster care. Yet, as Sabine constructs a positive alternate identity of being a Black girl in both institutions, she is in a better position of opposing this form of domination.

There is a connection between Sabine’s future outlook and school achievement (Honora, 2002). Future outlook refers to individuals’ attitudes and expectations about the construction of future events. Included in this process is the belief that an individual’s hopes for and expectations of a successful future influence present behavior connect current educational outcomes to future goals and ambitions (Nurmi, 1991).

This is similar to Lisa’s desire to create a new identity beyond her location. Through the lens of habitus, Sabine’s goals of achieving material items, creating a
financial future and getting a good job is seen as positive because she is taking action to
create a new social identity and expand her individual environment beyond the confines
of school and foster care. Sabine’s future outlook is at risk however because of the
instability of long-term foster care. Sabine’s identity construction is further undermined
because her academic and social pathway to independence is marginalized by the various
problems she faces as struggling African-American female.

Since race, class, and gender are larger components of the social context of
achievement, they influence school outcomes (Mickelson, 1990). Associated with
identity construction is Sabine’s academic outcomes are also hampered by her level of
self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief that a person is capable of performing in a certain
manner to attain certain goals (Ormrod, 2006; Bandura, 1977). Although this may be true
for most adolescent girls, race and class must be factored in when analyzing performance
and goal related areas, specifically with vulnerable, disenfranchised, minority
populations. Sabine’s capability of achieving goals is an area that requires such analysis
as she is challenged both in the classroom and in her social environment because of her
exposure to images, evaluations and treatment of African-American females with her
social status (West Stevens, p. 18). Without question, empowerment and social mobility
for Sabine can be achieved through her own motivations and aspirations of being
independent and future prospects of achieving material wealth.

As an adolescent African-American female, Sabine is a part of a disadvantaged
cultural group whose orientation toward the future is often marked by economic and
social forms that disrupt and restrict her future outlook. Sabine demonstrates her ability to
create a financially stable future through employment, despite the fact that she will lose
financial support from IDCFS and that she will solely be responsible for maintaining her own apartment.

“I want to buy a car and nice furniture for my apartment and I don’t want to depend on DCFS to do it.”

During her interview, Sabine was adamant about not relying on DCFS for her fiscal survival. She expressed a strong need to be independent and self-reliant by obtaining employment as one of her goals. Attainment of financial independence is considered to be one of the key markers of the transition to adulthood (Lee and Mortimer, 2009). Research further indicates the importance of young people to feel autonomous, especially in a capitalist society, where financial independence and economic success is highly valued (Arnett, 2007). To gain her independence Sabine must demonstrate her ability to be self-sufficient. Valuation of financial independence and economic success translates into Sabine taking care of herself and being an adult.

Sabine’s desire to be financially independent of DCFS is important to her because of the security, stability, and increased status that being an adult promises. Being able to stand on her own, manage her own life, and make decisions especially appeals to her because of the instability and regulation present in her life as a DCFS ward. Self-construction of a new identity for Sabine means overcoming the odds by working hard and achieving individualism. Individualism for Sabine represents freedom from the stigmas attached to her involvement in long-term foster care and defying the odds. Impacting Sabine’s transition into independence is the harsh reality of race, class, and gender. These constructions pose barriers for Sabine as she transitions into adulthood because of skin color and socioeconomic status are part and parcel to the mistreatment of
African-American youth in educational structures and in the labor force (Fine, 1993). Gender further complicates race and class influences in this aspect. Obscurity can occur within the lives of African-American girls in long-term foster care as a result of the intersectionality of these constructions. Potential and possibilities for this population can be unclear and unpredictable when one is construed through these frameworks.

For Sabine, her occupancy in foster care places her at a disadvantage compared to the social living standards of White middle-class youth. Included in this disadvantage is the focus on the acceptance of norms regarding femininity, family relationships, autonomy, and adulthood transitions of White middle class girls. Sabine’s conformity is expected based on these norms. Her performance of the societal expectations of gendered, raced, and classed roles of girl leave her vulnerable to failing at achieving independence because she is not provided with a cultural frame of reference to affirm her sense of self worth (Brown, 1998). A lack of the same options or opportunities that are bestowed upon affluent White girls limit successful outcomes in Sabine’s education and personal life. This leads her to embrace the values of White dominant society and the achievement ideology as a fool-proof way of developing a new identity. The deficit model exercised in both institutions of care function to convince Sabine that it is her fault if she fails. Rather than placing accountability on education and foster care institutions to provide Sabine with the necessary care and life skills, her failure will be seen as her individual inability to succeed and not the system’s and society’s liability.
LEILANI

“But its like we got to go to school, we gotta do the high school part, if you want your apartment, you gotta do this. I’m taking my time because I don’t think I’m ready. Staff keeps pressuring me to go take the GED even if I fail it. If I don’t pass it [GED] soon then I can’t get my own apartment and then I won’t have anywhere to live.”

Leilani’s reasons for completing school are similar to her other co-collaborators. Leilani is motivated to obtain her GED in order to continue receiving IDCFS supportive services. There is a difference in her reasons that poses dire consequences for her transition into independence. Since Leilani is nearing 21 years of age, she is in a precarious position to have services discontinued if she doesn’t obtain a GED or employment—a requirement by IDCFS in order to receive independent living services provided by IDCFS. Leilani has made attempts to meet both the educational and employment mandate by taking the GED and has also enrolled in a GED preparation course. She has failed the GED on two occasions, but has yet to re-test for the portions that she did not pass. She has also participated in an employment training class, but did not complete it. Leilani indicated that she did not complete the employment course because it focused on interviewing and completing resumes—skills that she maintains she already possesses.

Leilani’s opening narrative expresses her frustration at failing the GED multiple times and being worried about her future living arrangements. Jones (1989) indicates that failure and disappointment in themselves (i.e., for adolescent African-American females) affects their self-determination, confidence, and willingness to explore alternative
possibilities. In Leilani’s case, schooling or obtaining an education is then seen as a
reoccurring site of oppression which includes race, class, and gender as a locus of control (i.e., the extent to which individuals believe that they can control their life or events that affect them). This theory posits that a person can possess either an internal (meaning the person believes that they control their life) or external (meaning they believe that their environment, some higher power, or other people control their decisions and their life) locus of control (Rotter, 1954; Berry 1992; Shiraev & Levy, 2004). External locus of control is applicable to Sabine’s current situation within education and foster care. Sabine believes that that she has no control over her life. Her participation in the oppressive operations of foster care, and the power that it wields, leads her to believe that as an adolescent African-American female and ward of the state, the transitional living facility and IDCFS are in a position to control her progression in education and decisions that will be made about her life. However, Leilani’s opting to take the GED exam at a later time, when she feels she is ready, might be viewed as Leilani attempting to defy this type of control and exercise her independence beyond DCFS control.

The exercise of control that Leilani applies regarding her education appears counterproductive to her goal of independence. She risks not getting an apartment and aging out of the system if she does not obtain her GED. Even though this may be true, Leilani’s response is demonstrative of her resistance to being rendered “invisible” by the foster care system. Brown (2009) indicates that girls respond and resist when they come to realize that their observations and experiences are rendered unrecognizable in patriarchal institutions particularly school and foster care.
Consciousness of the regulation by both systems forces Leilani to be oppositional to the control exerted by staff within the facility. Collins (2000) explains that domination operates by seducing, pressuring, or forcing African-American women to conform to dominant thought-hegemonic ideologies that justify practices of power. This further marginalizes African-American women in socially constructed systems of race, class, and gender.

Placed in a difficult position to complete her education because of the contingencies attached to her success or failure, hampers Leilani’s ability to self-construct an identity that is defined by her alone. Her act of resistance is a means of exercising her right to self-determination and negotiating the constructs of race, class, and gender through her vocalness. Leilani’s approach defies the oppressive operations of both systems is paradoxical because she shares both the victim and participant role within both systems. Collins (2000) identifies this as a contradictory nature of oppression because it fails to recognize that a matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors. Moving into independence and becoming a woman yields consequences and benefits for Leilani in the form of identity and opportunity. The consequences result in the loss of a supportive system, while the benefits result in Leilani’s freedom to define her own identity.

**School Experiences: Performance**

*Performance.* The three collaborators indicated different things that influenced their performance in school. Obtaining good grades, falling behind, and placement disruptions were key areas. Race, class, and gender were experienced differently by each co-collaborator in both school and foster care institutions.
LISA

“I know that I am a challenging student. I have my days where I am off the chain. I have my days where I can cuss you out and not even think about what I have said and then walk out. Other days I am well mannered, very articulate, very polite, very understanding. I mean overall I would say that I am a good student because in spite of that [behavior] I still make the honor roll and have good grades.”

To validate Lisa’s claims of earning good grades, Lisa provided a copy of her report card (Appendix C). Lisa received all A’s in each subject. In the comments section, her teacher indicated that she had good class participation, was cooperative and on task, and that she required frequent redirection. According to the teacher’s comments, Lisa also corroborated her claims of being both disruptive and compliant within the classroom setting.

Lisa further explains her statement “off the chain” in an example of an argument with a teacher:

“I show up late to class because he isn’t going to teach me anyway…I am always cussing him out about how he teach. I tell him he don’t teach, he need to stop playing chess with the other kids. It turns into a big argument. I just do my work. I copy it out the book and then I grade it myself. I get the teacher’s copy off the shelf. He doesn’t even explain the work or grade it. He has his favorites that he takes time with. After I finish my work, I put my head down and go to sleep.”

Lisa’s “off the chain” response to her teacher is her way of asserting herself regarding what she felt was an injustice. Her disruptive behavior can be viewed as a tactic
Lisa’s need to be recognized for the completion of her work and the non-responsiveness of her teacher resulted in Lisa becoming loud. Being “loud” and combative garnered Lisa negative attention from her teacher and invalidated her participation as a student.

Research shows that African-American females are more likely to be ignored by their teachers and receive less positive feedback than other students. In the above situation Lisa, as an adolescent Black female, has learned to be assertive [loud] because she does not benefit from the same attention or systemic protection (social class or skin color) as other students. This way of learning to stand up for themselves shows that Black girls have learned one way to survive in academia, as well as in other social settings (Glenn, 2002; Collins, 1990; Fordham, 1993).

Surviving in Lisa’s case was used as a strategy. This meant negotiating the stereotype of being “loud”, so that she could be heard and recognized. Being “loud” is also an act of identity preservation that Lisa uses to protect herself. Freedom to self-construct their identity within school settings for African-American girls is important because they receive less teacher and peer attention. The result is the lack of social power among Black girls in school settings. Thompson and Keith (2001) indicate that their lack of social power is influenced by race, class, and gender. As a result, perceptions of White middle class educators of Black girls as “loud” allows schools hegemonic control over their behavior and the curriculum provided. Morris (2007) identifies a hidden curriculum for adolescent White girls where they can question and speak out without being viewed as aggressive. In the same light, adolescent African-American girls are regarded as challenging authority. Lisa’s “loudness” is not recognized in the hidden curriculum
though it speaks to her anger, at being regulated and constrained. Loudness, because of its assignment to African-American girls and women, is invalidated as a cultural act by White mainstream society. Fordham (1993) states “those loud Black girls are doomed not necessarily because they cannot handle the academy’s subject matter, but because they resist active participation in their own exclusion” (p. 10). In essence, African-American girls’ resistance is conducted on their own terms in the form of “talking back” or being “loud”.

Collins (2000, p. 250) also asserts that the negative perception of Black girls as being aggressive opposes White constructions of femininity which is why they are restricted in classrooms. School is viewed as a perplexing site for Lisa because she is participating in the act of resistance within a system that is theoretically supposed to provide her with upward mobility beyond her class status. Dependent on her educational outcomes, Lisa can move beyond her DCFS status and live on her own successfully if she conforms to the educational standards. However, her persistent resistance to educational demands places her at continual risk for undesired participation in DCFS. Conditions associated with her dilemma include Lisa’s speaking out. By doing so, she increases her opportunity to create her identity and be successful beyond DCFS, while remaining silent decreases her ability to self-define and control her independence.
SABINE

Sabine’s performance in school differs from that of Lisa. Sabine’s performance was affected by falling behind and a placement disruption. She explains how she fell behind a grade level:

“When I was in school at Wood Park I was doing okay. I was getting passing grades and I was in my right grade. When they moved me from my last foster home, I was placed on school probation because I was absent a lot. I started cutting school... I wanted to leave the foster home because me and my foster parent did not get along. When they put me in Bright House, I had to stay out of school for a while because Wood Park had kicked me out. I ended up at CTI [acronym for alternative school]. I only had 12 credits when I transferred. I asked for my transfer because I didn’t feel safe at the last program.”

Sinclair (2005) states that without an adequate educational plan, females are less likely to achieve educational goals while in foster care placement. These experiences impact both school and foster care simultaneously. Interrelated to her school experience is Sabine’s foster care experience. The overlap within both settings includes poor performance in school, multiple placements, social-emotional/mental health issues-separation from their families, loss/abandonment, and other related traumas. Although little is known about Black girls in long-term foster care, their educational experiences, and the impact that both systems have on their life successes and chances, there is some evidence that placement disruptions are an influential factor in their school progress.
Placement disruptions for youth in foster care in terms of their educational progress are not conducive to satisfactory school progress (Mech, 1994; Courtney et al. 2001). In the Courtney et al study (2001) the living experiences of the foster youth in their study created some problems for their educational achievements. Most important in their study, almost 50 percent of the sample members reported that they had to change schools at least four times since beginning their formal education.

Sabine’s placement disruption in her previous foster home had a severe impact on her progression in high school. Since Sabine had been placed on academic probation and had not immediately enrolled in school, she had not attained all of the appropriate credits to matriculate to the next grade. While Sabine’s decision to be removed from the foster home impacted her educational process, she felt it was necessary for her to be in a safe living environment. Sabine’s transfer into an alternative school then placed her in an area of low level academics and with mixed age grouping. Sabine’s report card (Appendix D) shows how she is struggling in all of her classes since enrolling in the alternative school. This is typical of students in foster care who are at much greater risk of falling a grade or more behind in school due to their foster care status (Courtney et al. p. 21; Zetlin et al. 2006). A review of Sabine’s IEP (Individualized Education Plan) shows Sabine’s need for supportive and specialized educational services to be a successful student.

Sabine’s status as a DCFS ward and her entrance into care, places her in an unstable position with no one to advocate for her continued educational progress. Sabine’s effort to stabilize her position occurs through her obtaining resources for herself. The relationship between these systems (as institutionalized settings) allows both to operate as sites of social reproduction, intersecting and minimizing the provision of
educational and social supports needed for African-American girls in long-term foster care to successfully transition into adult [woman]hood and healthily function in their daily lives (Luttrell, 2003; Collins, 2000; West Stevens, 2002).

**LEILANI**

Leilani’s performance in school is viewed through her decision to take in a GED course:

“I stopped going to school in the 10th grade. This was around the time my mother started using drugs. I dropped out of school because of the kids, they were bad. I tried to go to another program but I didn’t like it. I only stayed for one week because it was too strict. I don’t want to go to a special school. I would rather just sit for the GED or go to another school so I can get finished. I don’t even know why they keep messing with me about taking the GED again, a lot of the girls in the house have graduated from high school and they are not doing anything with their lives.”

Leilani’s performance in school has been irregular because of the life transitions that she has experienced. Leilani does not feel connected to school or her peers who are attending and succeeding at school. Sklyes et al (2007) indicated that youth who did not have a good attachment to school, generally did not perform well in their coursework or satisfactorily progress with their peers. A common denominator is the relationship of class to her performance at passing the GED exam.

They [group home staff] act like I am dumb. I just don’t want to take the exam until I am ready.”

Studies also indicate that many young people in the foster care system fail to complete high school and that older teens must pass a GED exam before exiting the
system (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2003). Leilani’s treatment by staff, brings about her insecurities regarding her competency to pass the GED exam. This is linked to her perception of the staff thinking that she is “dumb.” While there are claims that Black girls naturally do well in school or that they are naturally successful because their mother’s raise them to be academically aggressive (Kunjufu, 1984; Hale, 1982) this is not typically the case for African-American girls who are in foster care. The low expectations of Leilani to take and successfully pass the exam are based on the staff’s interactions with Leilani which were observed in the living facility. Grant (1992) and Henry (1998) indicate that Black girls are often described as socially but not academically mature in their combined statements, “Black girls are invisible to teachers as serious learners…and are assessed for their social skills rather than their academic achievements” (Grant, 1992, p. 630; Henry, 1998, p. 156). Whether or not she is in a position to academically take the exam did not appear to be a factor in their interactions. Leilani might very well be able to negotiate social relationships. Yet, her academic ability may be overlooked by staff, because more attention is paid to her behavior and conformity to the rules of the facility, rather than her academic outcomes.

School Experiences: Treatment by teachers

Treatment by teachers. Important to adolescent African-American females involved in long-term foster care and their experiences with school is their treatment by teachers. This is also connected to the theme of relationships. How these girls are treated result in either positive or negative experiences that can leave lasting impressions on their transition into womanhood. Lisa and Sabine had different experiences with teachers where race, gender, and class were experienced. Leilani did not participate in this portion
of the interview because of her lack of interaction with teachers in an actual school setting.

LISA

Lisa talks about her treatment from teachers at the therapeutic day school that she attends:

“My teachers make learning boring at my new school…they act like we are too therapeutic to switch classes…they act like we are mentally challenged, they act like we can’t walk down the hallway to switch classes… that is why we always be fighting each other… half of us aren’t in there because we can’t learn, its because we fight too much…I don’t get treated like no normal student, I got to be watched when I go to the bathroom… the teachers are not teaching…it’s a difference rather than just throwing it in your face…telling us here do it. Not telling us how to do it…they treat us like a paycheck…they yell at us…they should be understanding because most kids feel embarrassed to ask for help.”

Schools are primary sites for the construction and reproduction of race, class, gender norms, social identities, and inequalities (Perry, 2002). Lisa’s experience with teachers as an adolescent African-American female student is one in which she feels she is not treated fairly. Schools also serve as a place for assimilation, socialization, and segregation (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Unfortunately in school settings, hegemony is able to be reinforced within the classroom by masquerading as curriculum. The perpetrating of curriculum in turn isolates race which allows for girls of color to be rendered invisible. Therefore, Lisa’s need to be normalized in the eyes of her teacher is a reasonable one. Stereotyping of her as a student, as a girl, and as an African-American situates her as an
invisible student. This is because of the focus that is placed on the behavior that is visible by the teacher (e.g., watching students when they go to the bathroom).

Langhout (2005) and Foucault (1979) argue that this visibility when combined with the institutional nature of schooling facilitates the administration of discipline because groups of children are stereotyped based on social biases about people from particular demographics. The constructs of race, class, and gender are carried out in the classroom and in the larger setting of school. This is demonstrated in the stereotypes that lead to closely monitored behavior wherein any observations of non-compliance are grounds for intervention. Lisa’s acting out behavior in the classroom such as arguing with her teacher in an effort to feel heard is a prime example.

The AAUW study, *Girls in the Middle Working to Succeed in School*, (Cohen et al. 1996) identified strategies that middle-school girls used as part of the process of forming identities and negotiating school challenges. The strategies included speaking out and being heard, doing well without hiding competence, and not joining cliques. How well the girls did in the study depended in part on how well their identities and approaches matched the mainstream culture of the school, especially involving race, ethnicity, and class. This is a contrast for Black girls who find that they are struggling to navigate their ever-changing identity as adolescents. School settings for African-American girls can then become sites of confliction when the issues of race, ethnicity, and class converge within their learning environments. This is significant because girls are bombarded with messages about their worth, intelligence, and beauty daily in sites that are presumably enforcing their self-development. Lisa counters her invisibility and
uses her voice to assert herself. Her loudness regarding her unfair treatment places her in a position to advocate for herself.

In schools African-American girls are seen as problematic; therefore they are subjected to disciplinary actions different than boys. They are often placed on suspension, removed from regular classes, placed in special education courses, or expelled from school altogether. According to the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (1991), a child (student) who is poor and Black is much more likely to be physically disciplined, suspended, expelled, or repeats a grade. Contrasted with White students, Black students and their behavior are characterized by: the types of IQ tests used, the number of referrals to special education, and the number of incarcerated men and women of color (Smith, 2002). The outcomes for African-American students are unequal based on the methods utilized to marginalize them which include tracking and standardized testing which constricts access to more education.

Tyson et al (2003) and McCarthy (1993) indicate that class is a factor in contributing to the unequal outcomes because the restrictions that are applied to African-American youth benefit White middle-class youth who have access and advantages such as smaller class sizes, more instructional opportunities, and resources such as computers and updated textbooks. Focusing on the behavior of African-American students is a part of the hidden curriculum that is established in classrooms. The hidden curriculum requires students to follow rules of quietness, dressing appropriately, and obedience in the classroom. Because Black students—girls specifically—are characterized as loud and disrespectful, they are often marginalized in the classroom. Marginalization of African-American girls is based on the reinforcement of class, teacher bias, different expectations,
and social status (Thompson & Keith, 2001). Notions of femininity, race and classed based perceptions reinforce the hegemonic values of white middle-class structures. This is primarily operationalized in the classroom, and makes African-American girls behavior appear improper to educational settings. In comparison to African-American boys, their issues regarding race and class are more centralized within the criminal justice system and juxtaposed with education (Gordon, 1999; Kunjufu, 1994). Henry (1998) and Taylor-Gibbs (1988) identify the overrepresentation of boys within educational research where they are often identified as “the endangered Black male.” Both researchers argue that the focus on African-American boys places a low level of significance on the needs and issues of the African-American female in education.

Lack of cultural awareness is a related factor regarding the issue of race and class. Class becomes a cultural barrier that prohibits the development of relationships with teachers. Since schools reflect middle-class values, instructional methods, curricular context, and educational outcomes have little meaning for many working-class African-American girls. Kunjufu (2005) argues that class should be relevant and valued as important to minority and low social economic status (SES) students because of their location within school settings. The situation of African-American girls in schools, render their educational outcomes unpredictable because of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender.
Sabine’s experience with teachers has been positive and different from Lisa’s. Sabine feels like she learns more at school than she does in the transitional living facility:

“I don’t learn nothing at the house. I learn more at school. At least I can talk to the teachers at school. Some of the teachers know I am a DCFS ward and they don’t treat me differently. I have been on college tours with the school…I know the teachers want you to graduate…but truthfully sometimes I just don’t understand the work. I like going to school because it gets me out of the house with the crazy girls…I know- I know more than the girls in the house who ain’t even going to school.”

Sabine’s engagement within school is a reflection of the achievement ideology that is pervasive among adolescent Black females. Sabine knows that she needs an education to get ahead in the world. How she gains access to this is dependent on the teachers in her school. She considers school as a site for hard work and indicates that she feels supported by her teachers, although she gets frustrated when she doesn’t understand the work. The literature however paints a different picture of the educational experiences of adolescent African-American girls. Fordham (2001) states that in the classroom context, adolescent African-American females’ connection to a stigmatized racial status, Blackness, and an inappropriate femaleness, jeopardizes their academic achievement goals. In Sabine’s case, race, class, and gender are visible constructs that assist her in a positive perception of how she is treated by teachers and society.

Leilani who has not participated in the role of student since the tenth grade has had negative experiences. Leilani’s lack of exposure and support from an educational
setting resulted in her decision to limit her access to school. Morris (2007) indicates that alienation among African-American girls can develop because of discriminatory treatment, lack of representation, and non-acknowledgment within her immediate surroundings. In contrast to Sabine’s experiences where she felt supported within the school setting, Leilani’s interpretation of being called “dumb” by staff placed her in a negative environment where she perceived that her knowledge was invalidated. Leilani’s insecurities then influenced her decision not to take the GED exam. This in itself will further undermined her achievement of independence.
Chapter 2

Chapter 2: Self-Construction: They act like they can’t see me: Race, Identity & Control

“I’m a survivor, I’m not gonna give up, I’m not gon’ stop, I’m gonna work harder, I’m a survivor, I’m gonna make it, I’m a survivor, keep on surviving...thought that I would self destruct but I’m still here, even in my years to come, I’m still gonna be here.” (Destiny’s Child, 2001).

“I’m not the average girl from your video and I ain’t built like a supermodel but, I learned to love myself unconditionally because I am a queen.” (India Arie, 2001).

Little is known about how African-American girls and women girls construct an identity, comprised of attitudes and feelings about themselves as women, as members of an ethnic group, and as unique individuals. Moreover, since a majority of the reviewed studies are quantitative in approach, not much is known about how African-American females themselves talk about and describe their identity (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996; Way, 1998). Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) looked at the ego-identity of late adolescent African-American women. Study participants were 17 African-American females aged 18-22 who were students at a Southern California community college. Notable that some were members of the Black Student Alliance. The authors investigated the extent of racial and gender identity and the identity domains which included race, gender, sexual orientation, relationships, career, religious, and political beliefs. Important to this study the authors also looked at how late adolescent African-American women characterize and portray their identity.

A majority of the studies regarding African-American girls and identity focus on the notion of academic achievement, their performance, and socioeconomic status compared to African-American boys (Bowser and Perkins, 1991; Maton, 1998).
Although there is validity and benefit in these studies, they often generalize and stigmatize all African-American girls placing them in a one-dimensional category based solely on race.

There is no dispute that race, class, and gender intersect in the lives of African-American girls (Giddings, 2001; Green, 2003; Thomas, 2004; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Omi and Winant (1994) contend that one of the first things people notice when they initially meet someone is the person’s race, along with their gender. If this is the case, how do these constructs influence the social construction of self by adolescent African-American females involved in institutions of care?

If gender is comprised of “constructed identity,” as Butler (1990) asserts, that evolves over time through repetition of assigned acts and race and class are influential factors of those acts, how do the co-collaborators in this study become women in the context of race, class, and gender? All three of the co-collaborators in their interviews and the focus group discussed their views of being African-American, being female, being adolescent, and being an IDCFS ward. These young women were also asked to submit documents: poetry, artwork, and short stories to provide insight into how they come to know themselves as raced, gendered, and classed beings which will be identified as figures throughout the discussion section.

*Being African-American.* The three co-collaborators in this study participated in a discussion on being African-American and the meanings attached to the category of race. In their stories, all three reference themselves as Black when discussing race. Various conversations surrounding identity, resilience, self-reliance, determination, and surviving were also present. All three co-collaborators share similar viewpoints in their narratives.
LISA

“I see the struggles that Black people, especially women being Black. I try not to go through what they went through. I see how my momma is. She let men use her. She wasn’t a strong Black woman. If she would have been strong and left my dad when my granny was begging her to, she would have all three of her beautiful kids at home instead of in the system. Basically I try to keep on living.”

Lisa’s narrative about being Black focuses on her experiences with her mother and men. Lisa equates being African-American with being strong and surviving oppressive circumstances. In understanding Lisa’s position further, we can turn to Harris (1992) who designed a cultural model for assessing the growth and development of African-American females. The three elements of the model included a sense of belonging, defined by interdependence or being connected; a sense of identity, influenced by self-perception as a child, broadened to include knowledge of self as a woman, an African-American, and as a unique individual; and a sense of control, the belief that one can control what happens in one’s own life, resulting in a feeling of success (Harris, 1992, p. 160).

Of the three elements identified by Harris, Lisa’s comment speaks mainly to the third. Lisa’s reference to her mother is an example of Lisa’s construction of identity based on the role model of her mother. The construction of identity is also connected to her mother’s relationship with men and her mother’s role within the relationships. In Lisa’s case her sense of identity according to Harris is influenced by her frame of reference within her familial structure. Lisa’s identity formation as an African-American woman is formed in response to her mother’s behavior and interpersonal relationships.
with men. Lisa views her mother’s lack of control within her relationships as giving up—not fighting to maintain her power in the relationship or maintaining her children in her care. Lisa counters this by learning to be strong, to survive, and to “keep on living.” Based on her study, Harris identifies adversity as a primary area that African-American females pinpoint when constructing their identities. Black female resilience—Lisa’s choice of response to difficult and traumatic situations—allows her to construct a stronger identity where she is proactive, strong and perseveres as an adult in complex.

Another example of resilience and the construction of identity in Lisa’s life in the absence of her mother is Bell and Nkomo’s (1998) work on the life histories of professional African-American women refer to a coping mechanism called “armoring.” The authors refer to this process as a “form of socialization whereby a girl child acquires the cultural attitudes, preferences and socially legitimate behaviors for two cultural contexts” (p. 285). During their study Bell and Nkomo found that the “armoring” process begin to appear in the women's narratives when they talked about their preadolescent experiences and appeared to be an ongoing process until the women reached late adolescence. In the study the women revealed that they were taught by their families and communities to develop a protective shield as a buffer against unsavory elements of the outside world. The authors state that the buffering provides a sense of control that is generated when Black women learn the ethic of “being strong to the point of becoming invincible” (p. 287). Bell and Nkomo found that mothers were the primary agents armoring in the development of their daughters to be strong. While Bell and Nkomo maintain that families should foster within their children sufficient levels of respect, self-reliance, and strength to sustain wholeness before sending them out into society, in Lisa’s
case her mother and the immediate family were not available to provide these valuable tools to navigate society.

Resilience is also involved in sense of control as it represents African-American girls’ preparation for the world. According to Rhodes, “teachings on preparing Black girls comes from the nuclear and extended family that may include the mother, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, or other aunties’ from the community” (p. 71). Rhodes further elaborates that Black females hear stories of ancestors who resisted and persevered or witnessed the daily survival of women in her nuclear family. For Lisa, her successful transition into womanhood will depend on her participation and her beliefs in dominant ideology and her relationship with parents/family, peers, staff, and significant others. Lisa’s early life experiences and her status as DCFS has limited the early guidance of her mother, grandmother, or aunt in providing her with the lesson of learning or exercising a sense of control when encountering oppressive forces. Evans-Winters (2005) discusses Black female resilience as a way to negotiate education in the face of oppression, controlling images, and challenging situations. Lisa’s successful transition into womanhood will depend on her beliefs in dominant ideology and her relationship with parents/family, peers, staff, and significant others. Lisa’s lack of access and lack of strong connection to her family or plays a chief part in her future accomplishments.

Lack of familial or ancestral information also affects Lisa because she has no frame of reference for a different way to be. Despite its absence, Lisa possesses an awareness that she must learn how to be by seeing other women as examples of how not to be, particularly the models that are opposite of the cultural power and presence of Black women—historically and present. Lindsey (1970) indicates that one discovers what
it means to be Black and all that the term implies, usually outside the family. Neal-Barnett (2003) extends Lindsey’s position and suggests that those who are able to hold onto a place of opposition often hold onto the stress of resisting and put their own personal health and well being at risk. Although Lisa contradicts this hypothesis by avoiding behaviors that were familiar to her within her family dynamic, she is faced with the stressful situation of learning how to live outside her family unit. Race, class, and gender intersect in this aspect of Lisa’s life. Based on the socio-economic status of Lisa’s mom, she was not able to leave her father because she depended on him for financial support. Without her father and on her own, as a single, African-American woman, Lisa and her family would have easily found themselves homeless, receiving public assistance, or living in a shelter. Lisa’s assessment of her mother’s situation is directly related to her family’s involvement with DCFS. Lisa’s blame of her mother is because of her mother’s usage of drugs and her mental illness. Lisa explains that her father introduced her mother to drugs and one of her siblings was born substance exposed. This was brought to the attention of DCFS and lead to the separation of her family and the ultimate absence of her father. Hence, Lisa became a DCFS ward.

SABINE

“I have been through a lot. Both my mother and my adoptive mother messed up. It seem funny that you could be in DCFS twice. My adoptive mother got involved with drugs and my mom is crazy. They said my mother couldn’t take care of me, but the lady they gave me to couldn’t take care of me either. I know that I can’t count on anyone but myself. I see know that I have to take care of myself. DCFS ain’t going to do it, they don’t care. Ain’t nobody gone hold me back. I know I’m gone be alright.”
There are presently about a half million children in foster care (Vacca, 2007). Over 46% percent of the children in foster care were identified as Black/Non-Hispanic. Out of these numbers 42,000 were identified as adolescent African-American females age twelve and older (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Sabine’s identification of her involvement in IDCFS and how it relates to her understanding of being Black is connected to resilience, determination, self-reliance, and surviving. This is also related to sense of control. Sabine’s foster care experience has been shaped by race, gender, and class. I call Sabine’s experience “the corner.” This is based on her re-entrance into care which all occurred in a cyclical fashion involving her removal from her biological mother’s care, her placement in foster care, her subsequent adoption, and her re-entry into foster care.

The corner represents Sabine and her mother’s involvement with IDCFS and how she became an IDCFS ward. As Sabine explains her mother’s lack of care, Sabine is then “put in the corner” which represents her foster care placement and adoption. Sabine had no control over this situation in which those in a position of power make decisions about how she should live. As Sabine continues into adolescence she is then forced into another corner. Her failed adoption coupled with her age and termination of her mother’s parental rights placed Sabine back into the foster care system, with IDCFS again controlling her living arrangements.

The Child Welfare League of America in their 2003 report entitled, *Children of Color in Child Welfare*, states that children of color are over-represented in the child welfare system relative to their representation in the general population. The league also reported to the United States Congress that the rate of entry of African-American children
was higher than the rate for White children and in 30 states it was more than 3 times higher (Child Welfare League of American, 2003). Entrance into foster care is due primarily to parental abuse/neglect, substance abuse, or mental health.

Gender is also present in the power dynamics of IDCFS removing Sabine from her mother and the persons responsible for ensuring that she learns the lessons necessary to navigate life. According to Sabine, her mother was a single parent without much family or financial support. Sabine’s removal from her mother severed the connection between mother-daughter, eliminating her mother’s voice in how she would be reared as an African-American girl. Collins (1990) indicates that the bond between mother and daughter is important to the development process of becoming a woman. The mother-daughter relationship is the site where African-American girls receive their womanhood training—how to conduct themselves, dating, etc. Severing of the mother-daughter relationship minimized Sabine’s womanhood training and increased her exposure to the same cycle of oppressive forces that her biological mother experienced—teen pregnancy, limited education opportunities, abandonment and abuse.

Class dynamics compound both race and gender issues in Sabine’s personal and educational trajectory in two ways. First, class operates in Sabine’s placement in DCFS and in her adoption via economics. Sabine’s adoptive mother, also a single parent, but with a substantially higher income was considered to be in a better position to meet Sabine’s basic needs and provide stability. Based on economic status, the adoptive home and parent was considered a viable placement for Sabine. Ultimately the economic status of her adoptive mother changed when she begin using drugs, which then placed Sabine back into DCFS custody.
Secondly, without financial opportunities, Sabine’s access to a quality education is limited. Helms (2007) identifies wealth and social status as major factors in determining who learns in school. Sabine’s financial opportunities are limited based on her current class status. This also limits access to a quality education that could provide her with the necessary schooling and skills to obtain a college degree. Nevertheless, Sabine attempts to regain a position of power in both DCFS and school through the usage of education to become self-reliant and independent of IDCFS.

The responsibility of meeting the educational needs of African-American females in long-term foster care is often unequally distributed between both the foster care and educational system. Stemming from the complicated bureaucratic makeup and functions of both systems, the educational and developmental needs of the African-American female are often overlooked and unaddressed (Luttrell, 2003; Collins, 2000; West Stevens, 2000). Adequate educational and social supports needed by Sabine is placed at risk because of the overlapping relationship of both supports. Thus, the ability for Sabine and other African-American girls to successfully transition into adult [woman] hood is compromised.

**LEILANI**

Leilani’s definition of being African-American differs from her peers:

“I don’t have too much too say about that. I haven’t been in DCFS as long as the other girls. I don’t want to live my life like this and I’m not worried about them [girls] no more. So if you like me you like me, if you don’t, you don’t.”

Leilani’s reluctance to discuss being African-American is shown in her disconnection from the other girls in the facility through her statement: “I haven’t been in
DCFS as long as the other girls.” Scholars (Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Oyserman et al. 1995; Steele, 1996, Harris, 1992) recognize that a sense of connectedness and an awareness of racism have an impact on identity development in African-American youth. Connectedness is a commonality of history and experience, a feeling of belonging to the group. Awareness of racism is promoting the understanding that others will view one in terms of group membership and may have negative opinions of one’s group. Scholars believe that this awareness is necessary if African-American youth are able to conceptualize themselves and operate in structures and institutions of power. Leilani’s lack of self-concept and its connection to power structures is reflected in her statement regarding her life in IDCFS: “I don’t want to live my life like this.” Leilani’s sense of belonging is reduced. This is attributable to her residence in the facility and the associated problems of foster care.

Leilani also associated being African-American with actual skin color:

“Because I am dark-skinned girl people tend to look at me differently.”

Leilani indicates that her skin tone makes her different than the other girls within the facility. Reference to skin tone has class connotations because skin tone during slavery dictated who worked the field and who remained in the slave owner’s house (Russell et al. 1992). The skin color factor caused long-lasting tensions between Blacks and has carried over into ill-feelings among them today regarding looks and attractiveness (Williams, p.110).

Piper (1992) maintains that skin color can be used as a tool of alienation specifically among African-American women. Piper, a fair skinned African-American woman, recounts her interaction with her grandmother who believed herself to be
superior to Whites and dark-skinned Blacks: “when my grandmother visited….she didn’t like my new hairdo of cornrows and berated my mother for making me look like a little nigger pickaninny…when I was young and someone would say something I would be left feeling compromised, different, and cowardly” (p. 27).

Piper argues that distinctions among skin colors is not representative of who the person is and does not designate a person’s racial status. Piper further identifies a Black female colleague who during a conference validated the visible difference in skin tone: “the most famous and highly respected member of the faculty observed me for awhile from a distance…. then came forward and said with a triumphant smirk—“Miss Piper, you’re about as Black as I am.” Piper’s examples illustrates the race and class distinctions that are made on the basis of skin color. Unfortunately differentiation among color complexions among African-Americans has long been an area of contention especially among Black women.

While race factors into Leilani’s experience within the facility, it is the sense of belongingness in both Leilani’s comments about skin color and being a girl that is the larger issue that impacts her self-concept. In foster care, the surrogate caregiver ideally should provide Leilani with security and safety to develop as an African-American girl. Unfortunately, such care has not provided Leilani with a feeling of belonging where she feels validated as an African-American girl.

**Being Female.** The three co-collaborators participated in a discussion about being female and the representations attached. The dialogue between the participants yielded the following associations: *stereotypes, womanhood, independence, and gender*. Poetry, artwork, and short stories, completed by the young women were also used as points of
entry to discuss stereotypes and gender. Collins (1991) states that Blackness and femaleness are connected from an identity standpoint. However, the co-collaborators did not connect these two aspects together. The co-collaborators submitted poetry, artwork, or short stories to represent themselves and how they made meaning of their respective experiences. All of the girls were allowed to choose what they wanted to submit. Leilani chose to submit artwork. Lisa submitted poetry, and Sabine submitted a short story to represent herself and how she constructed meaning about her identity.

LISA

Stereotypes and Images. Lisa describes her philosophy on encountering negative images: Through her viewpoint on beauty;

“Like I always tell people, if you, if you don’t love yourself, never let a man know you don’t love yourself. You could be the ugliest girl in the world, you gotta tell yourself, I’m beautiful. No matter how much people be like aw she’s ugly, you tell them baby I’m a goddess.”

Lisa’s association of beauty, as defined by men and society, demonstrates the negative comments and influences that adolescent African-American females are exposed to. Lisa resists the defining of herself through a mainstream lens of beauty. Collins (2000, p. 89) maintains that although most Black women typically resist being objectified as the Other, the controlling images of beauty remain powerful influences in relationships with Whites, Black men, other racial/ethnic groups, and one another. Lisa resists how she is framed by men, others, and society through the use of voice and self talk, “you gotta tell yourself, I’m beautiful.” Belenky et al (1986) calls this “jumping outside of the frame.” Jumping outside of the frame is a metaphor that means learning to speak in a unique and
authentic voice to disrupt the frames and systems authorities provide and creating your own frame. Belenky et al (1986) found in their study of voice with women that “women repeatedly used the metaphor of voice to express their intellectual and ethical development…development of a sense of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined. Even though Lisa creates her own frames through voice and self talk, thereby resisting societal frames, she is aware that she will face encounters such as these and prepares for them in advance. Lisa’s consciousness of the possibility of being critiqued regarding her beauty enables her to devise a method-creating her own frame of positive self-talk to defend against the attacks.

**SABINE**

Sabine discusses her interactions with beauty:

“I have been called short, too little, half-pint, fat, everything by girls. I talk about them right back. I know I am prettier than a lot of the girls in the house. They don’t even take care of themselves. Some of them stink and don’t take baths. Some of them don’t even comb their hair and wear the same clothes everyday. They should know that a lady should take care of her body.”

Sabine connects the notion of beauty to body image. Noted earlier, Sabine is of a short and stocky build. Kirk and Okazawa-Rey (2003) affirm that the “single most visible signifier of identity is physical appearance; how we look to others affects their perceptions, judgments, and treatments of us.” Sabine associates beauty with “looking good.” According to the adolescent African-American females in Luttrell’s 1992-1997 ethnographic study on the schooling of pregnant teens, looking good means projecting an attitude of self-confidence and control. Luttrell explains that looking good is less about
adhering to an ideal type of beauty, and more about making “what you got work for you” including one’s personality. The girls in Luttrell’s study indicated that how one “carries” oneself seemed more important to being beautiful, than having an ideal body type” (p. 89). Sabine attests to this ideology in her association of being female regarding her height and weight with taking care of her body and being presentable.

Brumberg (1997) notes that girls in today’s society view the shape and appearance of their bodies to be the primary expression of individual identity. Sabine’s expression of individual identity and its connection to beauty is not based on the ideal of what she should look like by the girls in the facility but by how she views herself. Sabine’s awareness of how she is perceived regarding beauty is at odds with how she views herself in the context of body. White Western standards of beauty affect many girls in adolescence, leading them to feel miserable about their bodies (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002).

Often during adolescence, girls of color receive messages based on White beauty norms that their bodies are not acceptable the way that they are (Tatum, 1997). This does not hold true for Sabine. There is conflict between how Sabine sees herself and how the social world sees her. Sabine sees herself as beautiful because she takes care of her grooming and hygiene as opposed to the other girls in the facility. According to Harris and Kuba (1997) “the traditional European American standards of attractiveness may be experienced as oppressive” (p. 342) for young women of color whose own body standards are drawn from other cultural groups. Harris and Kuba contend that for young women of color, an eating disorder could occur as a result of conforming to White social standards. Sabine’s vocalness, wisdom, and her knowledge about how one’s body matters
to oneself, allows Sabine to resist the prevailing attitude of others and society about what
determines beauty. Harris and Kuba support Sabine’s stance in their findings that girls of
color who had a strong sense of ethnic and racial identity utilized their strong sense of
identity as a protective piece in mitigating against an eating disorder, depression, lowered

On another note, Sabine discusses the grooming of girls in her care institution.
She states: “Some of them stink and don’t take baths. Some of them don’t even comb their
hair and wear the same clothes everyday. They should know that a lady should take care
of her body.” In one sense her comment speaks to the condition of her foster care
placement. Foster care, acting in the role of substitute parent, does not hold girls
accountable for their physical health or well-being. Since the girls are of age to manage
their own hygiene and doctors appointments, they are expected to take care of these
things themselves. If the girls are to live on their own, they must be able to demonstrate
their ability to take care of themselves physically and mentally. Sabine’s utilization of the
word “lady” refers back to the notion of femininity. African-American women in society
have long been subjected to gender stereotyping and limited roles. Harding (1993) notes:
“the femininity prescribed for the plantation owner’s wife was exactly what was
forbidden for the Black slave woman” (p. 18). Sabine’s understanding of how girls
should dress and behave is influenced by the views of larger society and her participation
within it.
LEILANI

Leilani discusses her awareness of beauty through her submission of an art collage (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Leilani’s art collage

Though the artwork was self-guided, Leilani was provided with materials and guidelines to assist her in completing the project. Leilani used images from various teen and fashion magazines. She explains her collage and her choices of self-representation:

"I put Jessica [Alba] on here cuz I want to be small and she is small. That is something personal I have within myself. I picked Dior and Gucci labels...I like clothes. I like to dress. I just don’t have a job so I can’t dress like I want. The other one [making reference to the Dereon label] I put cuz it is based on family and I like that. I think that represent me fully, that might be so wrong."

Leilani’s collage speaks to her level of individualism in creating her own image of beauty. Leilani’s views of beauty are influenced by mainstream media and its representation of body image. Leilani’s comments about wanting to be small, not having
a job, to have money to purchase clothing, and her version of family indicates Leilani’s frustration with her placement in IDCFS and her negative self-image of herself, particularly her emotions about her beauty and her body. Chang (2002) suggests that we do not know enough about how “racialized people as complex physical beings deal with the objecthood thrust upon them” (p. 30).

Leilani’s sense of beauty is also connected to family relationships. House of Dereon refers to a family-owned fashion clothing business, owned by both Beyonce Knowles, a world famous African-American female entertainer often known for her beauty and dancing skills, and her mother, Tina Knowles, who is the CEO and a designer. Significance of the mother-daughter relationship is indicated by Leilani’s selection of the Knowles family. Both Beyonce and her mother Tina are partners in creating a business together. In contrast, the lack of partnership between Leilani and her mother is tied to her development as a young woman where mentoring opportunities are not present. This is similar to Lisa’s relationship with her mother and supports Collins’ previous statement about the importance of mother-daughter relationships.

Waters (1990) indicates that when girls face hardships, their claims to uniqueness and creativity as well as their attachment to community and family becomes apparent. Leilani’s desire to be recognized as an individual is an example of how she continuously distances herself from the other girls within the facility. Leilani is attempting to establish herself as a unique individual with problems different than those of the other girls. This is in conflict with her current status as a IDCFS ward within foster care, which chooses to group her with other girls. This places Leilani in a defensive mode when discussing beauty—not being concerned about what others see, think, or say to her. Luttrell (p.58)
indicates that these views of what “others might have to say” might also reflect Leilani’s own negative feelings about herself and her body, which she attributes to others, feelings that are hard for her to recognize as her own.

**Being Woman.** The three co-collaborators discussed becoming adult women, moving out on their own, and the challenges associated with becoming independent. All three of the co-collaborators expressed their frustrations at the various institutions that impacted their pending transition as true adults. Lisa and Sabine connected being a woman with being feminine. Sabine defined being woman as being financially stable. Leilani associated being woman with being sexual. While the co-collaborators were not able to articulate the meaning of womanhood, their behaviors are dramatic representations of it.

**LISA**

Lisa expresses her example of womanhood:

“...I am seen as this sexually active person, as this slut...My reputation being destroyed because I was raped...once a guy knows you aren’t a virgin he thinks that it will be easy to get with you” [have sex].

The images of African-American girls and women portrayed in the media as “whore,” “slut,” “hoochie momma,” or “hoodrat,” are pervasive and overwhelmingly stereotypical. This dominant ideology objectifies, hypersexualizes, and commodifies Black females (Collins, 2000, p.83; Emerson, 2002; hooks, 1992). Thus society has been conditioned to view African-American women and girls in this manner. The license to view African-American women in this manner originated during slavery, where Black women were viewed and treated as objects of lust and desire and considered “jezebels.”
Stephens and Phillips (2005) in their study of sexual scripting processes for African-American girls posits: “The promiscuous Jezebel …reflected the social, political, and economic value American society placed on African-American women” (p. 39). This and other negative pre-existing scripts exists in society’s collective conscious promotes false assumptions about Black women and girls in society.

Lisa’s admission of rape has serious implications for how she views herself as a woman within society and her relationships with men. Lisa understands the stain on her reputation as a woman. She also must deal with having been raped and being sexually active. The scripting of Jezebel and the image Lisa associates with being sexual active is captured in Collins (2000) analysis of images of Black womanhood:

“Jezebel”-the “jezebel,” “whore,” or “hoochie” is central in this nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood. Because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppressions, historical “jezebels” and contemporary “hoochies” represent a deviant Black female sexuality. Jezebel’s function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women”(Collins, 2000. p. 81).

Although the image of Jezebel superseded Lisa’s existence in the world, she was still subjected to the jezebel script based on both a racialized and gendered script for Black women and girls.

When discussing the meanings of being woman, Lisa mentioned being raped. Although Lisa does admit to being sexually active, this discussion seemed painful for her to recount. However, she provided an additional narrative about her traumatic experience:

“But I think, when you talk about like, um, and this has made me think about as like, as a, as a girl, you know like when you first start you know your cycle, already somebody has touched your body, you know felt me, you know what I’m saying, or some
boy has done something to you and you, you know, you’re still, you’re developing as a woman, and then you’ve got this foster parent who is looking at you sideways trying to figure out if, if you, you know, screwing in their house so to speak.”

Lisa’s rape, which she stated was committed by a male who resided in her foster home placement, resulted in her being removed from the foster home and also thrust her into a “grown up” activity and into an environmental circumstance (the foster home) that she had no power or control over (Ladner, 1971). Munns (2000) states “that when a child is sexually abused, she is not only physically violated, but also her emotional well-being is severely compromised” (Munns, 2000, p. 222). The child internalizes feelings of being devalued and no longer feels safe. Lisa’s loss of child status and her being pushed into woman status via the act of rape, challenges how she mentally views herself as a woman and as a sexual being, whether it is having control over life circumstances or being able to say no and physically fighting off unwanted sexual advances on her person. The images of “jezebel,” “slut,” and “hoochie” connotations of “bad girl” or “she asked for it,” are often applied to for rape victims (Tanenbaum, p. 140). Lisa’s removal from the foster home reflected the association of being “bad,” and even implied that something was wrong with her, or that she had done something to cause the rape. Lisa’s feelings of shame are a direct result of the actions of the foster parent, the rapist, and IDCFS.

The cult of true womanhood refers to the ideal woman of the mid-nineteenth century as someone embodying the traditional family ideal (Welter, 1966). This concept also centered on women’s education. “True” women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Perkins, 1983). These were White middle-class values that positioned White women as the ideal woman-wives and good mothers,
while African-American women encountered a different set of controlling images (Collins, 2000, p. 73) that indicated that they were not female and less than equal. Even though there have been advances in the education and mobility of African-American women in American society, the social expectations of girls, influenced by antiquated patriarchal ideals, insist even today that girls be pretty, polite, and feminine (Tanenbaum, 1999, p. 227).

Contrasting the idealized image of White femininity is the notion of African-American girls and women as sexualized beings. Tanenbaum (1999) further posits that femininity is different than sexuality, providing an example of this in the following statement: “Today a teenage girl can explore her sexuality without getting married and most do…yet at the same time, a fifties-era attitude lingers regarding sexuality…teenage girls today continue to be defined by their sexuality…distinguishing this is the division between “good” girls and “bad” or “slutty” ones (p. 20). Tanenbaum maintains that the notions of femininity guide the labeling of a girl as a good or bad one based on her sexual activity. This is especially true for African-American girls in long-term foster care because of the societal conditioning regarding African-American women. Ascribing to the idealized version of femininity doesn’t negate the “bad girl” image connected to African-American girls and women as sexual beings. Collins (2000) states that the image of “jezebel” originated under slavery when Black women were portrayed as “sexually aggressive wet nurses” (p. 81). Because of this label, African-American women are viewed as sexually available all the time. Since Lisa’s purity had been stained by the rape, she is no longer considered a “true” woman because of her identity as an African-American female and the association of promiscuity related to her race and gender. Lisa’s
admittance that she is sexually active further renders her unsuitable and unrecognizable as a woman by mainstream social standards.

Victimization is also associated with Lisa’s status as an African-American female. Rape takes away from a woman’s sense of self-control and undermines her self-worth. Lisa’s rape and the accompanied images of the jezebel, served as a way to victimize her twice. First, by the actual rape, which stripped her of her womanhood and second, through the means of treatment by her foster family and IDCFS. Her removal from the foster home by IDCFS at the request of the foster family served as a punishment for Lisa because she was yet again removed from another parental figure and viewed as the cause of her predicament. In this particular case, Lisa experienced loss and abandonment twice—loss of her womanhood and loss and abandonment by her “surrogate parental family and community.” IDCFS as the public institution of care, charged with the responsibility to ensure Lisa’s safety and protection from any further neglect or abuse, participated in the victimization and maltreatment of Lisa regarding this incident. Activist and author Angela Davis (1998) suggests that “rape bears a direct relationship to all of the existing power structures in a given society because it involves complex structures reflecting the complex interconnectedness of race, class, and gender oppression which characterize that society” (p. 14).

In this circumstance, Lisa becomes a “bad victim” by default. Tanenbaum (1999) identifies that in popular media, sex-crime victims are either judged as good or bad based upon their status in society. Good victims are virginal looking, hold good jobs, are well educated, and articulate. Bad victims are viewed as untrustworthy, unattractive, and “bad,” “slutty,” or “provocateurs.” Tanenbaum identifies eight factors that contribute to
the bad victim image: if she knows her assailant; if no weapon is used; if she is of the same race, class, or ethnic group as the assailant; if she is young; if she is considered pretty; and is she in any way deviates from the traditional housewife-mother role. Lisa’s social status as a DCFS ward, her race as an African-American, and her age locate her in at least three of the eight identified factors. This pigeonholes Lisa as a “bad girl” and not worthy of a loving parental relationship. How social institutions treat and respond to adolescent African-American females like Lisa who experience multiple attacks on their womanhood within their care, is important for understanding how race, class, gender, and power dynamics operate to oppress this group of individuals.

**SABINE**

Sabine associates womanhood with financial responsibility and security:

“You are not grown until you are on your own. You have to be able to buy your own clothes, your own shoes, your own food. I don’t want to keep waiting on someone [IDCFS] to give me an allowance or to tell me when I can eat and where I can go.”

For many Black women, being independent and not relying much on others has always been the rule. This notion of being self-sufficient derives from the Black woman’s status in society. As the person at the bottom of the social hierarchy, African-American women have to work harder to make the same achievements financially that come easier to White women. Sabine’s representation of womanhood as being able to provide for herself on her own appears to be in opposition to the dominant forces of racism and classism in her statement. Sabine’s unwavering resolve not to continue to rely on IDCFS or others for her basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter, enables her to separate from
the racist and classist images of the Black woman relying on a man or governmental assistance to provide for her.

Sabine further elaborates about womanhood and being called a woman:

“You have to be able to take care of yourself before you call yourself a woman.”

Sabine equates the ability to earn an income as being able to take care of oneself as a woman. Sabine demonstrates her determination to be independent of IDCFS by taking steps to secure employment. Her ideal of an African-American woman being financially responsible and independent contradicts the stereotyped representation of African-American femaleness of “lazy” and “welfare queen” (Collins, 2000, p. 79). As a Black woman alone, earning her own income, Sabine is in opposition to the class and gender ideology that suggests that a woman’s true worth and financial security should be based on heterosexual marriage (Collins, 2000). With no male authority figure in her life exerting control, she is a woman alone, subject to societal scrutiny about how she governs her life.

Maria Stewart’s comment: “let our girls possess whatever amicable qualities of soul they may…it is impossible for scarce an individual of them to rise above the conditions of servants” (Richardson, 1987, p. 46) remains true in today’s economic environment, particularly with the urging of social institutions for African-American girls like Sabine to attend 16 week programs to become certified nursing assistants, day care workers, and security guards. These positions are often devalued and underpaid in society (Collins, 2000, p. 46). As a resister, Sabine will still have to face the classist images that work to maintain the status-quo of Black women as low-wage income earners. The subordinate positions identified above act as both race and class agents to solidify
African-American girls and women within a lower socioeconomic status. In this regard consider Sabine’s current employment as an unarmed part-time security officer, a position that pays $8.50 per hour.

Sabine’s desire to be independent can be understood when placed in a historical context. Throughout American history, Black women have had to take on multiple roles that included head of household, provider, and nurturer. Rooted in American slavery, Black women were forced, in many ways to act in the role of both male and female. Contributing to this “role reversal” was the absence of Black males in the home. Even with the ending of slavery African-American women have not been free from racism, sexism, or economic exploitation (Davis, 1983).

Historically, differentiation in the treatment of White and African-American women have existed. Primarily the separation was based on the gender stereotypes and roles. African-American women were assigned roles that denied them access to higher paying positions and regulated them to menial status. White women were allowed access and afforded the opportunity to higher paying jobs and were placed in positions with more pay and status (Harding, 1993, p. 18). The stereotype of White women as the epitome of femininity and docility who needed and required protection continue as common practice today as it did during slavery, even with the advances in the employment opportunities. However, African-American women are consistently viewed as objects and devalued in their contribution of women’s labor (hooks, 1989).
LEILANI

Leilani connects with womanhood differently than her other co-collaborators.

Leilani connects femininity and respect with womanhood:

“The girls in this house is known in the neighborhood. They [boys] treat our house like it is the pick-up spot. Once you tell them where you live at, you give them the address...they automatically come out with this stereotype of what you are. They think you’re just like whoever, whatever, I don’t know. They think you get down like that.”

Assumptions about the sexual behavior of the girls within the facility stigmatizes them in larger society. Their placement in foster care and the associated label of ward leave them vulnerable to presuppositions from males regarding their sexual activity. Surrounded by a high level of crime and drug activity, the girls residency in the facility, further devalues them. Unfortunately the location and their foster care labeling serves to place them in similar situations where the girls are once again confronted with acts of violence, sexual harassment, exposure to drugs, and assaults on their femininity because of their gender, race, and class status. This reproduction of positioning does little to make the girls feel valued or respected in their home or school life.

In a White male dominated patriarchal society, hegemonic forces operate to suppress the high level of self-respect, something that Black women value highly. Because of their devalued status as Black women, no one then is obligated to respect their offspring: Black girls. Leilani’s connection to being a woman is related to femininity and respect. Walker (1983) cautioned “please remember, especially in these times of group-think and the right-on-chorus, that no one person is your friend (or kin) who demands your silence or denies your right to grow and be perceived as fully blossomed as you
were intended, or who belittles in any fashion the gifts you labor so to bring into the world” (p. 36).

Femininity, rather the notion of being feminine is ensconced in White male, patriarchal ideology. Historically, White women have been documented and regarded as being incapable of hard work, submissive, soft, and weak (Collins, 2000, p. 78). In contrast, African-American women are seen as strong, dominant, and masculine. Assignment to these characteristics by the status-quo, place Leilani within the intersection of race, class, and gender. Leilani’s femininity is then diminished by the boys in the neighborhood when they visit the house to “pick up girls” defined as “hoochie” or “hoodrat.” Her femininity is further diminished by society because the labeling serves to reduce her status as a woman. When probed further, Leilani explains “get down like that” refers to having sex. Leilani feels like she is grouped with the other girls who are sexually active.

Unlike her co-collaborator, Lisa, Leilani does not want to be seen as sexually active. The behavior that these images conjure are often labeled by society as deviant (Ladner, 1971, p. xii). Ladner states that placing Black people in the context of the deviant perspective has been possible because Blacks have not had the necessary power to eradicate the labels. Leilani is placed in a compromising position as she is a participant in two social institutions that limits her power to resist labeling and stereotyping. There are situations in which Black girls are able to resist the labeling. Ladner further contends that the power needed can only come from the ability to provide the definitions of one’s past, present, and future. In Leilani’s case, her ability to connect with her past, present,
and future is undermined by IDCFS and other institutions, thus limiting her ability to move beyond the characterizations of “hoochie” and “hoodrat.”

*Being Girl.* The three co-collaborators were asked to share their views on what being a girl meant to them. All of the co-collaborators expressed similar views on being a girl. Double standards, difficulty, and confusion are recurrent themes in the co-collaborators’ responses. Two of the co-collaborators submitted an art imaging/naming project where they identified themselves as a girl and then alternately identified themselves as a woman. While some of the co-collaborators responses share something in common, the way they each conceptualize girlhood is unique.

**LEILANI**

Leilani simply stated that “Girls are backstabbers”. Leilani may have trouble explaining being a girl because of the complex nature in which African-American girls are conceptualized. Traditionally, U.S. Black women’s efforts to construct individual and collective voices have occurred in at least three safe spaces. “Safe spaces” are defined by Collins as locations for resisting objectification as the Other (p. 101). The spaces include Black women’s relationships, music, and Black women’s writings. In these spaces Black women are able to self-define identities that are comfortable for them. Specific to the conceptualization of Black girls is the space of Black women’s relationships with one another. In some cases, such as friendships and family interactions, these relationships are informal, private dealings among individuals (Collins, 2000, p. 102). According to Collins, in the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another’s humanity, specialness, and right to exist.
If Leilani believes that “girls are backstabbers” then her exchanges as an adolescent within the family and friend sphere may not have occurred in a safe space or been of a positive nature. This may be also due in part to the dominant ideologies surrounding Black womanhood in American society (Emerson, 2005). Dominant ideologies that promote division and individualism present conflicting images of Black womanhood. The difficulty for Leilani in explaining being a girl arises then from having to distinguish and filter through the diversity of images that may conflict with one another.

**LISA**

Lisa’s definition of being a girl was described where she was asked to construct both a girl and woman version of herself and to provide different names for each. Brown (p. 114) advocates for the usage of art activities to mediate discussions. Lisa created her image of girl and identified her as “Sarah”. “Sarah” is described as rude, sexually active, snaps easily, loves to fight, not able to listen, speaks her mind in a negative way, and plays on emotions. Lisa’s representation of “Sarah”, defies the notion of White girlhood, where girls are quiet, docile, non-confrontational, good, and celibate. “Sarah” allows Lisa to move beyond Pipher’s (1994) observations in *Reviving Ophelia*, where girls are often forced by society to become female impersonators in denial of their true selves. The impersonation of these characteristics allows Lisa to feel empowered while in a girlhood frame of reference.

Lisa also identified herself with her adult persona of “Sheila” who describes herself as smart, articulate, able to think things out, understanding, and speaks her mind in a good way. “Sheila” allows Lisa to create a vision of womanhood that she has not
seen within her family unit or within her current care placement. The hardships and personal circumstances that Lisa encounters as a Black girl involved in a system of care, allows her to only construct her image of womanhood based on external influences which include connections to school and the surrounding the community. Lisa tends to act in the role of “Sarah” in both institutions. Lisa’s loudness and speaking her mind through “Sarah” is demonstrated as an act of resistance to systems of care where Black girls’ experiences are silenced and excluded. While “Sarah” provides a vehicle to be heard, the image of loudness can act in Lisa’s life as a double-edged sword. From one perspective a negative and deceptive image can be formed based on her behavior. From another perspective the loud image offers the ability to create her identity and voice. Loudness in Lisa’s case appears to provide her with the necessary skills to survive, create her identity, and become resilient (Simmons, 2002).

Lisa’s creation of both a girl and woman personas of her indicates that she is attempting to create and alternative or counternarrative identity (Brown, 2009; Czarniawska, 1997; Delgado & Stefanic, 2000). Creating a counternarrative identity assists Black girls in balancing the power relations of social institutions. Lisa’s counternarrative identity speaks to the contradictions of her lived reality as a girl becoming a woman and the balancing required to negotiate race, class, and gender. Lisa demonstrates the “girl” and “woman” aspects of understanding what girlhood represents. Lisa’s development of an alternate identity demonstrates that girlhood is produced differently by African-American girls given the diverse categories of identity.
Sabine’s description of being girl was described through her art project, similar to Lisa’s art project. Sabine identified herself with her girl name of “Nicole”. “Nicole” is described as angry, a person that “snaps” on people, a loner, and a person that doesn’t like herself. Lipsky’s (1987) internalization theory states “women have been forced to perpetuate and agree to our own oppression” (p. 1). By acting out the roles assigned to adolescent African-American girls by society, Sabine is participating in her own oppression. Sabine’s familial environment is also similar to Lisa’s. Neither Sabine nor Lisa received the message of empowerment from their parents. Sabine was never told “be whoever you want to be” or encouraged to step outside the box. Therefore Sabine’s image of being girl is impacted by messages received from both her home and school environment. Okazawa-Rey et al (2003), concurs that Black people learn to view themselves based on what they are told by society about who they are and what their place is in society (p. 50).

In order for Sabine to both survive and thrive, she must feel safe and valued in both settings. Omolade (1994) writes: “Black females need a space for authentically reproducing themselves as well as a place for learning about the world” (p. 150). Institutionalized environments mostly perpetuate an unconscious or limited critical discussion of what it means to be Black—produced by the history, struggle, or gaining of freedom. The challenging and complex situations found in these environments include stereotyping, labeling, self-image, self-esteem, teen pregnancy, and peer pressure that underrate the value of adolescent African-American girls (Paul, 2003; Evans-Winters,
As a result, adolescent Black girls continue to be stereotyped and relegated to positions of powerlessness within larger society (hooks, 1984; Evans-Winters, 2005; West Stevens, 2002).

Sabine identified herself with the adult persona of “Jenny.” “Jenny” is described as nice, kind, sweet, understanding, loves everyone, and helpful. “Jenny is the woman that Sabine envisions herself becoming. Directly contrasting the image of “angry Black girl” through her alternative image of woman, Sabine demonstrates that despite her current circumstances there is an opportunity for a caring and loving adult to emerge. Because Sabine’s image of womanhood is defined and operates during her involvement within the foster care system, she is implicitly learning that she will have to constantly fight against the societal ideology of race and gender that says Black girls are more than what they have been defined to be. This recognition can be detrimental when Sabine comes to the realization that her girlhood was snatched away from her without permission and that her development as a woman will be compromised if she does not embrace and love the Black girl within.

Forgotten Children: The Label of “Invisible”

Over 20,000 youth emancipate from foster care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). While there are studies that have researched the outcomes for these youth, few studies have actually followed these adolescents as they transition into adulthood. These youth are at high risk for negative outcomes including homelessness, incarceration, and drug use (Johnson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Leathers and Testa, 2006). In the community of social science and educational research, foster children are sometimes referred to as the “forgotten” children. “Forgotten” children refers to the
neglect of foster children within the foster care system. Examples include placement in inappropriate school settings, foster home placements, or lack of clear treatment or long-term planning (Pardeck, 1983; Hornby & Collins, 2002).

Critics of the foster care system believe that foster children and former foster children become of interest to researchers only after they move into other high risk categories or become users of other systems: homeless youth, pregnant and parenting teens, juvenile studies, or individuals who require governmental/public assistance and mental health services (Roberts, 2002). Most of the studies on foster children focus on foster care from either a policy, social work practitioner or foster parent perspective and are often conducted by policy research organizations, social work researchers, or research coalitions (Yamatani et al. 2009; Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs, 2006). Within the last few years, recent surfacing of social, economic, and health related issues of transitioning foster youth has shifted the research terrain to include the voices of foster care youth. Additionally the research focus has also been expanded to incorporate more qualitative and mixed methods approaches whereas studies concentrated on demographic factors and were quantitative in its design. This may be, in part due to the fact that because foster care is such a large political structure, numbers and percentages provide an easier method to describe its complexity.

Restructuring foster care currently spotlights its conflicting practices and policies. The common debate is centered on the best interest of the child and whether or not foster care should be child or family focused (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001, p. vi). Variance arises between the policies that govern services provided to families and the practices used to carry this out using preservation, reunification, or other alternatives for children
such as adoption or long-term foster care. Tension between the two reveals the social values heaped upon the foster care system by law and policymakers. Ambivalence is present in this deliberation regarding practice methods and outcomes that are most appropriate for children and youth. Dependent on the direction that foster care decides to take, the outcomes of children involved in foster care will constantly need to be modified in effort to address their evolving needs as they exit care.

Youth transitioning to adulthood are at high risk for negative outcomes including homelessness, incarceration, and drug use (Johnson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Leathers & Testa, 2006). Addressing the concerns regarding the outcomes, the Independent Living Initiative was created in 1987 and later amended in 1993 to include outreach programs to attract eligible youth, including training in daily living skills, education and employment assistance, counseling, case management, and a written transitional independent living plan (Courtney et al. 2001, pg. 1). This allows states to provide transitional living services to youth who are 16 and older; however the act did not allow for federal funding to be used for room and board. The John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program of 1993 provided states with more funding and greater flexibility to provide support for youth making the transition to independent living. Although this act was passed and implemented by several states, research studies indicate that about half of foster youth continue to be adequately prepared for independent living (Courtney et al. 2005). Determination of a youth’s readiness for independent living is affected by the youth’s ability to acquire viable life skills which include budget management, maintaining employment, maintaining housing and obtaining an education (Nollan et al. 2000).
Whether or not foster care youth are prepared to be self-sufficient in society upon their exit is contingent on the ability of the foster care system to address their needs. These needs include emotional, behavioral, and medical/mental health needs. This includes identifying their needs while in care and providing additional transitional services upon their exit from care. While these services and needs are general to all children involved in foster care, when viewed through the paradigm of race, class, and gender, the needs and services provided to Black and other youth of color are different. Studies have suggested racial and gender differences may exist in the severity of need among foster care youth (Mech et al. 1994; Leathers & Testa, p. 446).

An analysis of foster care youth experiences living in Cook County, Illinois suggested that urban African-American youth were at high risk of unemployment and experienced difficulty with attaining independence as a result of unemployment (Testa & Leathers, p. 477). Distinguished in this study were the specific needs of African-American youth and their involvement with school and employment rates. Without their high school diplomas and work experience, African-American youth are at high risk for the poor economic outcomes well into adulthood (Courtney et al. 2005). Relevant to this study is the racial and gender differences for African-American girls which plays an important role in outcomes upon entrance into independent living and recognition that the experiences of African-American youth are different than those of other races/ethnicities involved in foster care.

As these girls are preparing to be discharged from long-term foster care, otherwise known as “aging out” of foster care, they are being thrust into the world of adulthood with minimal life skills and financial independence. All of the co-collaborators
in this study have experienced multiple foster care placements or had run away from their placements. One of the co-collaborators had resided in a transitional facility but transferred because of the unsafe conditions within the facility. Two of the co-collaborators had been previously adopted, which subsequently failed and placed them back into the foster care system.

Child involvement in the foster care system is also associated with a traumatic experience. Children involved in the foster care system have been removed, usually involuntarily from the care and custody of their parents, extended families, and their communities (Gustavsson, 1992; Sanchez, 2004). Feelings of anger, guilt, blame, helplessness, shame, and worthlessness often occur as a result of this trauma. This results in chronic but often undiagnosed depression, as well as confused identity, and an inability to relate to others (Costin & Rapp, 1984; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). As a result, the well-being and health of this vulnerable population—specifically Black girls—are compromised. Noteworthy in this study, all three of the co-collaborators have been previously diagnosed with a learning or mental health disorder.

LISA

“... They say our parents can’t take care of us so they put us here. Once we are in the system they don’t remember us.”

Lisa’s account refers to her feelings regarding her involvement in foster care. Her declaration is consistent with her feeling of being invisible as an “IDCFS ward” and forgotten about upon the removal of her from her parents and/or family setting by IDCFS. Lisa explains that “being in foster care, everyone expects that you are in a better place where people are going to love you and take care of you but that’s not the case.”
When children are removed from their home of origin and placed in foster care, it further validates the child’s negative view of family and the child’s role within a family (Delaney, 1998).

Adoption rates for Black children have remained consistently lower than those of other racial/ethnic groups (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Studies have shown that agencies often fail to provide good care for children who are removed from parental care, especially older children who may be harder to place for adoption (Bala, 2000). Lisa’s failed foster care placements and her failed adoption leave her vulnerable to challenges in her adolescent identity development as she struggles to personally define herself outside of “ward status.” Some of the challenges include lowered self-esteem and poor identity formation (Kools, 1997). Research conducted by Anglin (2002) regarding foster and residential care indicates that a child’s personal history becomes fragmented due to multiple placements.

Fahlberg (1991) agrees that multiple placements are injurious and make it difficult for them [wards of the state] to develop a “strong sense of self.” The labeling of Lisa as “DCFS ward” supports the hegemonic practices of racism, classism, and sexism, which is intrinsic to the foster care system. Lisa does not indicate that she is aware of why society does not see her beyond race, class, or gender. By default, Lisa is situated to conform to a social structure that categorizes vulnerable populations. Her behavior as a female is in response to the invisible standpoint developed through her identification that the foster care system is not taking care of the children in their custody. Lisa chooses to resist the constrictions of being labeled “DCFS ward,” despite the likelihood that racism and economic factors will continue to play a large role in her life efforts. These factors
may serve to diminish Lisa’s status as African-American, female, and as a participating member of society if she is unable to navigate the mixed messages invented for her by society based on her race and status.

“When I went to court the guy was saying um who, not who accompanied the minor, or who accompanied the ward or who something. He didn’t even say my name. I’m like I just explained like, I’m a person you know, I’m not no different from the next person. I just happen to be in DCFS.”

Leilani’s experience with the court system, where she was not recognized by name but rather by her “ward status,” left her with feeling less than fully human. Her lack of validation by the court worked to negate who she is as an African-American and female. The court experience demonstrates for Leilani that her fate and life are being defined by individuals in a position of power who dictate how she is viewed as a person. This reinforces the notion that institutions of care by their virtual operation of authority, tend to depersonalize and dehumanize the individuals with whom they are charged with caring for. As a consequence, Leilani is forced to participate in her own oppression. Eisan (2003) calls this state of oppression “diminished status.” Eisan argues believes that based on societal views, foster children acquire a diminished status and contends that it is internalized and acted out in everyday life given societal views of a foster child’s existence. The diminished status could then be attributed to the fear of failure that Leilani demonstrates in pursuit of her GED.

Class also contributes to diminished status by way of silencing Leilani. Weis and Fine (2000) states “if silencing is about who can and cannot speak, it is also about what
can and cannot be spoken” (p. 36). Class makes silencing possible by limiting Leilani’s conversation and participation in her life composition. Silencing acts stifle Leilani from moving forward in her goal of independence by teaching her to not talk about the structures that directly affect her life. Impairment of her ability to make choices and having to defer to positions of authority certainly handcuffs Leilani’s future outcomes.

Further complicating Leilani’s sense of self, as she battles being labeled, is her need for attachment. This is apparent as she borders on the cusp of womanhood. This is shown in her fundamental statement: “I’m a person.” Here, Leilani is seeking acknowledgement of being human and a part of society aside from her label of “DCFS ward.” She knows that she is not recognized by the courts as “Leilani,” which is evidenced in the identification of her as “unaccompanied minor.” Yet, the connection to why she is not recognized by her name is unclear. How Leilani attempts to gain recognition from a system that marginalizes individuals based on their race, class, and gender will perhaps depend on her construction of self as woman. At this phase, she may begin to challenge the invisibility that both she and Lisa have encountered.

**SABINE**

Sabine discusses her view of DCFS ward:

“They want you to be crazy. They keep telling you to see a therapist. Talk to someone, like you don’t know what’s going on with you. If I don’t see the therapist, they say I am not following the rules and they put it in my file. If I do see the therapist then they say something’s wrong with me. At least I don’t have to take medication anymore. They can’t make me do that.”
Sabine’s depiction of being forced to take medication and talk to a therapist refers to her lack of input from IDCFS about what her needs may be. It is also indicative of her current stage of psychological development or lack of. Sabine feels that as a “DCFS ward” the foster care system wants “you to be crazy”. This statement focuses more on the behavior of Sabine as “DCFS ward” rather than who she is as a person. Sabine relates that she was diagnosed with a learning disability and depression. Sabine vehemently denies that she has a learning disorder; however her performance in school indicates that she has difficulty connecting learning concepts. Sabine’s refusal to take medication as referred by IDCFS is Sabine’s attempt to gain control over her body and her life. Her need for balance and control eliminates the structure that is imposed on by IDCFS, via her status as “DCFS ward”. Sabine is seeking autonomy and battling to gain independence as she transitions to womanhood. She may not be aware of how her choice to refuse therapeutic treatment and medication, impacts her ability to be independent. Her lack of awareness may also impair her functioning in school.

Research indicates that African-American adolescents are overrepresented in special education classes (Skiba et al. 2006). Stigma associated with being categorized as learning disabled has been found to impact student self-concept. Class, as well as race, are at work by virtue of Sabine’s low socioeconomic and minority status. Poverty has also been found by research to impact minority student overrepresentation. O’Connor and Fernandez (2006) deconstruct the theory of poverty and its influences on class as the sole blame for minority’s low educational performance. They further emphasize that the culture and organization of schools situate minority youths as academically and
behaviorally deficient based on their socioeconomic status which places them at risk for special education placement.

The argument above correlates with Sabine’s view of herself as a successful student based on her status as DCFS ward, the struggle by how she thinks of herself, and how she feels others see her. Coupled with the additional stigma of having to take medication to address her learning disability adds to Sabine’s construction of a negative self-concept, as the medication indicates that she is not “normal.” Her refusal of the medication fosters her right to self-determination to be treated as an ordinary student.

Magid and McKelvey (1987) support the analysis of Sabine’s behavior in their statement: “children in foster care become unattached by the very process designed to help them” (p. 148). Although IDCFS is charged with ensuring that Sabine’s medical and mental health needs are met it actually hinders Sabine’s mental ability to achieve autonomy and independence by influencing her to take medication. The contradiction of care by IDCFS, allows Sabine to detach both from IDCFS, which leads to a negative sense of self and self-destructive behavior, in this case, Sabine not taking her prescribed medication. Bogenschneider (1996) recognizes that a positive sense of self is instrumental in protection against antisocial and self-destructive behavior. As a DCFS ward, Sabine is then classified and managed as having both a learning disability and a depressive disorder. According to studies, behavioral and emotional problems have been positively associated with factors such as the number of placements a child has experienced and the child’s gender (Dubowitz et al. 1993). Sabine’s status as “DCFS ward” is directly connected to class as a result of her removal from her home, and also to her status as female and as an African-American. Roberts (2003) indicates that poor,
Black struggling families with children are more often involved with the child welfare system than White middle class families. Sabine’s mother’s racial and class status as an African-American woman resulted in scrutiny of her parenting style, normally not applied to White parents. Familial behavior that appeared opposite of the status quo automatically placed Sabine’s family in a situation where their family structure was challenged by dominant ideologies regarding familial relationships and behavior.

**Self-Definition: Hip-Hop and the “B” Word**

“Like for instance, there is this girl in the program and she strips to keep money in her pocket. She say ain’t no shame in what she doing, she on the pole, but she making her money. She say at least she ain’t giving it up for free like some of the girls in house. She called us bustdowns.”

- “Leilani”

Adolescence is a difficult and complex period of transition. Developmentally, adolescents are just beginning to create and own particular social identities in the construction of the narrative of self (West Stevens, 2002, p. 24). Given that African-American adolescent girls have membership in both an ethnic group and in mainstream culture, the co-collaborators in this study find themselves caught between their own cultural values and those of the dominant society (Guanipa-Ho & Guanipa, 1998). The co-collaborators appear to struggle with their feelings regarding the resident who strips within the facility based on what is currently reflected in society about African-American girls, particularly in media through videos. The co-collaborators discussed among themselves about why the resident would want to represent herself as a stripper for
financia"l gain. Leilani indicated that the resident always “kept money in her pocket and could buy whatever she wanted.” Delgado and Stefanic (2001) maintain that financial independence becomes a social expectation of adolescence as they began their transition into womanhood. While Leilani, may not agree with how the resident obtains her money, albeit as an exotic dance, she recognizes the financial aspect of the resident in securing her independence. How African-American girls in foster care gain access to financial independence through conventional employment (e.g., bank teller, cashier, laborer) or non-traditional means (e.g., exotic dancing, prostitution, drug dealer) may place them on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy.

The co-collaborators also stated that boys their age expect them to dress and act in the same fashion as the resident identified as a “stripper”. The co-collaborators said that they liked to wear the latest fashions but would not leave their residence dressed inappropriately. Paul (2003) maintains that media images of African-American women dressed provocatively and parading their sexuality contribute to the negative images of adolescent African-American girls. Paul extends that hip-hop videos promote the portrayal of African-American girls as “video hoes” or “strippers” and that African-American women have always been seen as an object of desire and lust commodified in the industry. Brown (2009) substantiates Paul’s claims in her identification of the operation of media and hip-hop. Brown believes that media and the culture of hip-hop function as a patriarchal tool of control and manipulation which authenticates racism as a part of everyday reality. Racism works to classify and stereotype African-American girls within hierarchal structures of power. Race and gender are important in the social construction of adolescence in these co-collaborators lives because they confirm the
power that is used to divide and isolate their experiences from other adolescent girls. Hunt (2005) elaborates on race as a social construction: “Race is a social construction in America that does double duty...it is also a potent social representation that people, both dominant and subordinate, routinely embrace and re-circulate in their attempts to understand the actions of others and in their own ongoing rituals of identity affirmation” (p. 59). Racial identify affirmation is important in the lives of the girls in this study as they seek validation for the creation of their new identities.

**Language, Labels, and Symbols**

“A lot of the girls call each other bitch. It’s a common used word in the house.”

The co-collaborators discussed using the word bitch as a common language to refer to girls. Lisa identified that her boyfriend called her his bitch and that she did not have a problem with the word. Leilani stated that some girls try to use the term as a smokescreen to refer to other girls as their friend and they know that they don’t like the girl. Sabine did not like being called the “b word” and viewed it as negative.

**LISA**

Lisa explains the “b” word:

“My boo [boyfriend] calls me his bitch. I know the difference like he uses it in different situations like if me and him arguing then be like bitch, then I, you know. Then I know he means it like that, then that’s when I have to get mad, but other than that he’ll sometimes be like, I’m hanging with my bitch, like that or that’s my bitch, something like that.”
The naming and acceptance of bitch as a term of endearment can be viewed as an act of resistance to dominant society. Ward (1996) identifies this type of resistance as “tongues of fire” or “truth-telling” in which words are bold, unreserved, and “in your face” honest. Lisa accepts the reference of “bitch” from her boyfriend to signify that he is proud to say that she is his girlfriend. Despite the fact that Lisa receives affirmation as a female and young woman, she is unaware that she is participating in creating her own form of social control by allowing her boyfriend to refer to her as “bitch”. A second strategy that Ward (1996) identifies is resistance for liberation. Positive recognition is the influential factor in this strategy. Assisting Lisa in a critical analysis of herself and the self-definition of the “b word”, the process of liberation will challenge Lisa’s identification with the “b word” so that she may begin constructing her own positive self image and her place in the world outside of the constructed image of her boyfriend and society.

LEILANI

Leilani does not like the over usage of the “b word” and how it is so easily and readily used in everyday language to demean a person. The usage of the “b” word referring to Black women is often used as a means to disempower African-American women particularly in oppressive situations. The environment of the transitional living program (TLP) is a place where the word bitch is commonly used within the social relationships among the residents. The TLP then becomes an at risk locale where demeaning remarks can occur without reprimand. Living in an environment where her race and gender is subject to attack, thus places Leilani at risk of having her identity devalued. Fine believes that the environments are at risk rather than the girls themselves.
Leilani is forced to navigate her daily existence in a facility of care that does not value who she is as an African-American female. This occurs as Leilani’s identity is shaped by a negative word, promoting her to claim an identity that she does not like.

SABINE

Michele Cliff (1989) writes, “it is claiming an identity they taught me to despise” (p. 157). Sabine has to find ways to reject the image being imposed on her as an African-American female while being bombarded with consistent negative images of who she is. The TLP as an institution of care and as a site of social construction is then teaching Leilani to despise who she is as both as an African-American and woman. Sabine’s attitude coincides with Leilani’s because she does not like being called a bitch. Sabine stated that she did not see the purpose in calling someone out their name, “when society does it to women everyday.” Sabine is demonstrating agency by not participating in the usage of the word. This indicates that she is creating an awareness of the language of race, class, and gender and how it could serve to destroy her positive self image.
Chapter 3

Relationships: Person to Person

“Amber and I lived together in a group home for almost two years. We both had problems trusting people...I trusted Amber with so many things I kept hidden away from everyone else... I am scared to get close to people because I am still in a lot of pain” (Jacob, 2002, p. 66).

As youth travel through adolescence they are carefully focusing on their maturity and growth, but also making sure they bond and relate to others (Jacob, 2002, p. 105). Clarke (1992) states that adolescents’ positive self-image is reaffirmed by those who welcome them and reinforce their sense of belonging. Clarke also maintains that adolescents’ development of a positive sense of self and the confirmation of people who welcome them and fortify their sense of belonging is important to creating solid relationships. Interactions with family, staff, peer, and significant others are important in the formation of adolescent African-American girls’ identities. The girls discussed their relationships.

In the girls’ discussing of their relationships, four major themes emerged: (a) relationships with parents; (b) relationships with staff; (c) relationships with peers; and (d) relationships with significant others. Observations of the participants and their interactions with staff and peers were observed within the TLP. Field notes were maintained about the co-collaborators and their activities within their environments. The observation protocol (Appendix A) was utilized to record the observations and document both descriptive notes (i.e., portraits of the participants, dialogue, and physical settings/activities) and reflective notes (i.e., the researcher’s personal thoughts which include feelings, idea, impressions, and prejudices).
Relationship with Parents. All three co-collaborators experienced a form of loss or abandonment by their biological and foster parents. Guilt and shame were also present with two of the co-collaborators regarding their parent’s involvement with DCFS. All of the co-collaborators did not have any familial involvement with their fathers though they had some form of relationship with their biological mothers or extended family.

Public policy including that of social institutions manifests in a systemic form of oppression of African-American families. Policy does not take into consideration the cultural aspects of families when making decisions regarding their well being. Kilty et al (2006) states:

“A proper understanding of the strengths of African-American families, the difficulties they face, and the ways in which they are affected by public policy is confused and clouded by several commingling issues, among which the most prominent is racism” (p. 56).

The portrayal that African-American families have significantly closed the socioeconomic gap between White and African-American families does not bode well for those families who are faced with social issues including inadequate or substandard housing and poverty as it removes the spotlight from the social conditions that plague African-American families. For African-American families who face adverse conditions such as homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, and substance abuse issues, race and socioeconomic issues play a major role in their ability to access services (Kilty & Segal, 2006; Sudarkasa, 2007).
African-American girls and their families involved in the foster care system find that race and class are constant factors in their lives. Broken up and displaced, a casualty of war—the child is often left to discover life lessons on her own. Maneuvering with no connections to family and without proper family guidance, the life choices that she makes will impact the rest of her functioning in society.

West Stevens (2002) identifies the mother-daughter relationship within the African-American community at the core and as the foundation for all developmental domains that an adolescent African-American female should experience. West Stevens contends that during adolescence, mothers continue to see the maternal role as one of protection and discipline.

For the young women in this study, the relationships with their fathers is absent in their discussion of family. The presence of the father in and out of the home is significant in family functioning and how girls formulate social relationships. About 25% of African-American children live with both biological parents (Teachman et al. 2000). Father involvement can be viewed as an asset both emotionally and financially (Coles, 2009). In particular instances, the absence of fathers can be constituted as a positive as the nature of the relationship with the mother and child may be abusive either physically or emotionally (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002). Stereotyped as irresponsible and absent, Black fathers are stigmatized by public policy. Public perceptions aside, there are Black fathers who do make a conscientious effort to parent and participate in their children’s lives beyond financial support (Coles, 2009).
LEILANI

“They blame me. They don’t blame no-one but me.”

Leilani’s statement of her family’s involvement with DCFS stems from feelings of guilt and shame. Leilani states that she was the one that went to the police station and asked for help with her mother because she didn’t have anywhere else to go. West Stevens (2002, p. 83) claims that African-American females’ experiences can be a normative relational crisis, where it is socially expected that one must separate or disconnect from family. Unfortunately, Leilani’s separation was compounded by the fact that her family required IDCFS intervention and that her mother could no longer provide adequate care for her or her siblings. Leilani’s need to sustain her relationship with her mother, siblings, and extended family, places her in a precarious position out of loyalty because of her membership in a cultural group-African-American and her gender as a female.

While Leilani indicates that she does not want to see her mother, she continues to maintain contact with her via telephone and has limited knowledge of her whereabouts. Leilani’s maintenance of the relationship with her mother, although minimal, serves as a means to preserve the familial ties between her and her extended family. Family involvement has been identified as an important aspect in assisting Black children in overcoming life obstacles. Ward (1996) in her study on African-American families indicated that the sharing of life experiences among African-American parents with their children allowed children to see and feel their pain and frustration in tough situations. Although Leilani did not have the benefit of a positive shared parental experience, the
lessons she learned from her mother have inspired her to develop her own ways to overcome impediments to her move into independence.

**LISA**

Lisa describes her relationship with her mother:

“I talk to my mama a lot...I’m not going to give up my place...I’m nine months away from getting it...why would I want to go and live with her and go right back to her rules and have to pay rent... I won’t have no freedom, a little room to share with my brothers and sisters...why would I give up my own place that I’m fixing to get cause you [biological mother] should have been telling me to come live with you when they was trying to adopt me originally.”

**SABINE**

Sabine tells of her relationship with her mother:

“I understand now why my mom can’t face me because I am her past and by me being her past, if she faces me then she has to face the past and that may make her relapse...by me hurting and going through pain it can turn to anger and resentment...she is going to have to face me because everything that she been through, I been through...I feel like some of the things she went through I feel like I didn’t maybe have to go through because she could’ve taught me...by her not being able to face her past it made my present hard for me.”

Both Lisa and Sabine’s analysis of their relationship with their mothers’ is a contradiction of the stereotypical image of “strong Black mother.” Rather, the discussion of their mothers’ represents a more pervasive stereotype of “bad Black mothers.” In
“bad Black mother” is defined as:

“women who are abusive (extremely bitchy and/or who neglect their children either in utero or afterward...bad Black mothers are stigmatized as being inappropriately feminine because they reject the gender ideology associated with the American family idea. They are often single mother, they live in poverty, they are often young, and they rely on the state to support their children...they allegedly pass on their bad values to their children who in turn are more likely to become criminals and unwed mothers (Collins, 2004, p. 131).”

The representation of the mother-daughter relationship through the negative image of “bad Black mother” reveals class issues inherent in dominant ideology because it is about normal families and relates specifically to economically disadvantaged households. Given that both Sabine’s and Lisa’s relationships with their mothers’ involve addiction, desertion, and the inability of their mothers’ to address the issues which placed them in foster care, their relationship does not represent the conventional, societal, mother-daughter relationship. This includes roles such as teacher, nurturer, caregiver, protector, and role model (Ladner, 1971).

According to West Stevens, family is the primary context for adolescents’ learning first meanings of racial, ethic, and gender roles. Sabine’s feelings of anger and resentment are in response to her mother’s unavailability both growing up and in her present maturation into womanhood. Sabine’s statement, “she could have taught me,” references Sabine’s mother taking on the role of teacher to assist Sabine in learning how to be a woman and how to deal with life. Ladner (1972, p. 65) emphasizes that “…the Black child learns to view the world as friendly and protected or with suspicion and hostility…” In view of the fact that Sabine’s mother was not present to provide the
protection or surveillance, her survival depends on how independent she can be and how well she can fend for herself when necessary.

Because of the emotional instability of both girls’ relationships with their mothers’ and the lack of guidance provided by their mothers’, Lisa and Sabine deal with their pain by unconsciously taking on the image of “strong Black woman.” “Black children are taught to be strong and not to allow others to take them for granted” (Ladner, 1971, p. 65). If the girls allow their defenses to be penetrated too often, they can then be taken advantage of. Race and gender ideology is directly connected to this image. In this role, both girls demonstrate resilience by attempting to move forward in their future aspirations despite the issues between them and their mothers. Notable is how the girls view separation. It is alluded to as being “given away”. Lisa’s statement “you should have been telling me to come home with you when they was trying to adopt me originally” shows her feelings of resentment towards her mother for not fighting for her. Sabine’s feelings are similar. Feelings of inadequacy surface based on the unresolved issues of separation. Since the girls’ did not fully understand their reasons for being in care, ambivalence arises when the issue of family are discussed. The girls were able to note that their parents’ various problems were attributed to their parents and not a result of anything that they had done. While this was the case, their self-construction was still a point of contention because of mixed messages received by them. Without their mother or another parental figure providing them with guidance, Lisa and Sabine’s navigation of race, class, and gender issues are constrained because of the negative view of being unworthy, valuable, or lovable, which limits positive outcomes beyond foster care.
Relationships with Staff. The co-collaborators had similar interactions with staff members within the TLP program.

LEILANI

Many professionals have a limited understanding of what being in foster care is like, which limits the ability of professionals to provide meaningful supports to youth in foster care (Samuels, 2008). In long-term foster care or TLP’s, the importance of staff or caseworker is significant because it represents a resource for a range of supports. Within a TLP or group home setting, staff is often seen as babysitters (Anglin, 2002).

Leilani discusses her relationship with a staff member:

“…They expect more from us…they are not positive and they put a lot of pressure on us…I got into an argument with a staff person because she wouldn’t let me use the phone…I cussed her out. She didn’t respect me so I didn’t respect her.”
Leilani also references her life in the group home setting in a poem entitled “Pain”: (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Leilani’s Poem

How could a person like me, be so depressed
Because of all the stress, I will never get any rest.
Everytime I cry it began to rain,
So the people could feel my pain.

-Excerpt from “Pain”

LISA

Lisa describes her interaction with staff:

“Staff doesn’t treat you like an individual. If one girl messes up then everybody is in trouble. I feel like they treat us like the way they treat us is because they know we can’t go nowhere else.”
SABINE

Sabine’s views of staff are somewhat similar to Lisa’s:

“Staff don’t do things in a timely manner. They don’t take ownership when they make a mistake.”

While adult relationships are often experienced as very important for youth in care, the co-collaborators all expressed negative interactions with staff. The daily life situations and struggles within the co-collaborators lives were often situated in direct conflict with the rules of the TLP and the behavior of the staff in enforcing the rules. This is a common reality of TLP’s, group homes, and other long-term care facilities. The interactions between staff and the girls often include outbursts, explosions, acting out, and fighting. Instead of negativism, the girls expected empathy and understanding from the staff when they are experiencing emotional difficulties.

The co-collaborators are aware of the power and control that exists between them and the staff. Class also plays an important role in the relationship among the staff and co-collaborators as both participants come from a different social group. The socioeconomic status of the practitioners and the racial composition differ slightly. The directors of the program are required to possess an advanced degree, Master’s degree or above, while the direct care staff are required to possess at least 18 credit hours of college. The staff is comprised of African-American women between the ages of 26-55. Most of the staff have held various jobs, are married, and work at the facility part-time.
Communication among the staff and residents within the facility was often inconsistent. This appeared to be related to power struggles that occurred surrounding the position of authority that the staff members held and the lack of power that the residents experienced. Relationships with the staff spotlight the interaction among both groups.

Culturally, the staff represents the population of residents that are served within the facility. However, questions regarding competency of the staff to work with the girls is apparent in the conversations and interactions observed within the TLP. The development of cultural competence in facilities of care has focused on teaching providers about the attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs of specific cultural groups (Noddings, 2003). Skill development has also been a primary focus. The building of trust, demonstration of empathy, and power relations are key areas focused on in training and the professional development of group home workers.

During one of my observations, staff was observed telling one of the co-collaborators that “no one had to do anything for them…they needed to take care of things on their own.” This statement was made after a verbal argument where the co-collaborator complained about the staff not cooking them dinner. One of the rules of the TLP is that the residents learn to prepare meals. The responsibility of the residents is to cook a meal for the entire facility as a means of demonstrating their ability to provide for themselves. While the response of the staff member was following the rules of the facility, this incident showed the inability of the staff member to turn the situation into a teaching experience. This would include elaborating upon the life skills needed to maintain her independent status or assisting her with the preparation of the meal. Upon review of my field notes, it appears that the angry complaint of the co-collaborator may
have simply been acting out for attention and nurturance by the co-collaborator. In spite of this, opportunities such as these are missed, because of the attitudinal environment of staff that exists in the facility.

Because of their turbulent and chaotic lives prior to their entrance into care and after their entrance into care, the co-collaborators carried with them the traumatic and deep-rooted painful experiences. The pain was often emotional and evidenced in the TLP and acted upon the staff members. For example, Lisa expressed her feelings of pain in her poetry. Her pain, while not precipitated by staff, is a result of loss and abandonment issues, as well as anxiety about her upcoming move into independent living and future outcomes. Lisa’s poetry also indicates that she has feelings of depression which is also associated with her loss and abandonment issues which include the stress of having to meet all of the requirements of the TLP to transition and school to transition out of foster care.

Raychaba (1993) indicates that much of the writing about the experiences of youth in care by careworkers and by former youth in care themselves explicitly used the word “pain” to describe their emotional feelings upon being removed from their homes and sent to alternative placements. Examples of the behavior include acting out and self-defeating behaviors such as negative self talk or sexually acting out.

Despite the issue of “pain” that is evident in Lisa’s experiences, she is not without strength, hope, and potential. Scott (1991) discusses how Black women display the “warrior mode” which she describes as an attitude, a style of approaching life, in which one perceives existence as a continuous battle (p. 8). In their interactions with staff, the
co-collaborators use survival tactics to ward off perceived threats by staff and those in positions of authority.

Class conflict is also present in their interaction with staff in terms of power and control relations. The girls rebel against the position of authority that they believe staff members hold. The residential staff holds the power to enforce punishment and consequences, such as taking away privileges and withholding allowance from the girls. Since staff has the authority to make changes without the girls consent, the girls are clearly at a disadvantage. Resistance by the girls is displayed in their continual operation in “warrior mode,” where they never let down their guard even to each other. Leilani demonstrates her warrior mode stance: “since staff don’t respect me, I won’t respect them.” Operating in warrior mode to resist the power structure of the facility and staff mode is reflective of Black women’s historical legacy as strong and resilient; however it does little to assist the co-collaborators in overcoming obstacles with staff as it is a temporary and prohibitive response.

Relationships with Peers. A sense of belonging and trust issues were present for all three co-collaborators in their relationships with peers.

LEILANI

While oftentimes there is no family to meet their needs, young people will come to depend on peers and may “become totally dependent on peers to meet all of their desires for approval” (Fahlberg, 1991, p. 149). This reinforces their sense of belonging. For African-American girls in foster care, their sense of belonging and the development of their peer relational skills are informed by the social expectations and requirements of
adolescence. Dominant social expectations for African-American girls include confusion, rebellion, and a generation gap regarding relationships with others (Ladner, 1991, p.107).

Edelman and Ladner (1991) maintain that social beliefs regarding adolescent development involves the ability to form satisfying emotional attachments to others. Characterized by sensitivity, mutuality, responsibility, and trust, intimacy and interpersonal responsibility are essential to formulating future adult relationships (p. 24). The journey through adolescence for adolescent African-American females in school and foster care, where peer relationships can serve as an active support system, is a rocky and tumultuous one that is fraught with issues of identity and trust especially after experiencing so much mistrust in their lives.

Leilani provides an example of her relationship with a peer:

“For instance, when a peer, first got here she was cool, respectful, everything you know and we clicked like this (client is crossing her fingers). But it seems like now, since we getting all these new people, all the old people leave and people coming back to visit, she phony kicking it...I feel like that’s not a person that you can trust you know, because whenever you come around this person they only want what you can offer them not what you can instill in them, they only want what they can get out of you.”
SABINE

Sabine expresses her thoughts on peer relationships and friendships:

“A person can only be your friend if you trust them. They have to respect you. Respect is earned and some of these girls don’t deserve respect.”

LISA

Lisa’s explanation of friendship is similar to Leilani:

“A lot of the girls act like they want to be your friend, but they all phony. When I get into arguments with them I say whatever I want to…I get angry easy and want to fight. I don’t care about them, they don’t care about me.”

All of the co-collaborators experienced a lack of trust and short-term relationships with peers. One of the co-collaborators noted that you can trust a person if they respect you. The collaborators’ need for self-protection is reflected in their responses. Kools (1997) indicates that children and older youth in foster care develop a set of self-protective skills in the absence of real or perceived support from others. This coping mechanism of protection and putting up emotional walls, serves to keep others from invading the co-collaborators sheltered space. Although the girls spend an enormous time with each other in their living arrangement, the girls did not indicate a level of closeness that is often characterized by peer relations. Since much of their life within the foster care system is plagued with placement disruptions and constant chang, either in school or in their foster home /living situation, without notice or their consent, it impacts their ability to create and maintain relationships since these are environments where much of heir
daily life occurs. The girls’ present as guarded in social situations with peers and their relationships are ultimately constrained. Their girls’ relationships with peers then resemble much of the same structure that is reserved for male relationships. Liebow’s (1967) *Tally’s Corner* as cited in Ladner’s (1971) *Tomorrow, Tomorrow* references Black men’s peer relationships: “The recognition that, at bottom, friendship is not bigger than life relationship is sometimes expressed as a repudiation of all would be friends… or as a cynical denial that friendship as a system of mutual aid and support exists at all” (p. 150).

The co-collaborators appear to find it difficult to trust or maintain close ties with other girls for fear of losing the relationship, and rather than acknowledge the possibility of a friendship, it is easier to remain distant. Their behavior is also tied to their previous loss and abandonment issues with their biological parents. Utilizing self-distancing as a means of testing a person’s trustworthiness was also a coping skill. While most youth work to obtain unconditional acceptance and support among their peers, the co-collaborators shunned advances of friendship by the residents in the home. This is in direct contrast with the portrait of “women as sisterfriends” (p. 103). Karen Hollaway, as cited by Collins (1995), identifies the value of Black women’s friendships:

“The events we shared among ourselves all had a similar trigger—it was when someone, a child’s school principal or teacher, a store clerk, medical personnel, had treated us as if we had no sense of our own, no ability to filter through whatever nonsense they were feeding us, or no earned,…power to make choice (Collins, 1995, p. 31).
Collins (2000) indicates that only another Black woman could fully understand how it feels to be treated differently and how to respond in kind. Based on the aforementioned theory of solidarity among Black women and the co-collaborators behavior regarding the cultivation of social relationships, the co-collaborators did not make the connection between race and gender in their lives with peers as African-American females. A variable of class may exist in terms of how the girls have come to view the foster care system as a non-trusting environment filled with broken promises, in which their peers are complicit. In essence the girls who resided in the TLP were not trustworthy due to their association with the foster care system. None of the girls mentioned peer relationships in their school environment as being significant. Their interactions with peers in the facility vacillated between being negative and positive. Negatives included yelling at and stealing from each other. The girls reported that the stealing also resulted in mistrust. Yet, there were times where the girls cooked for the entire facility, did each others hair, or borrowed items. The co-collaborators made choices in their development and maintenance of peer relationships which influence their perceptions of race and gender experiences within foster care. As a result for the girls in this study the attainment and maintenance of friendships may come with conditions.

*Relationships with Significant Others.* The co-collaborators identified boyfriends and discussed their relationship as a part of their support system. The co-collaborators indicated that they often felt left on their own to cope with their experiences and that they needed the emotional support from significant others within their lives. Emotional support was crucial for the co-collaborators because it served as a foundation in their daily lives and also assisted them in making good choices. The co-collaborators did not
identify staff or supportive staff such as case managers, attorneys, school personnel or therapists as providing any emotional support.

**Boyfriends: Supportive Relationships**

**LISA**

Lisa explains her relationship with her boyfriend as a part of her support system.

“I trust my boyfriend. He is one of the people that I think is my best friend. I can tell him anything. We actually talk to each other”.

**SABINE**

Sabine is in agreement with Lisa in her support of her boyfriend as a trusting individual:

“…Cause he is trustworthy, he always comes through. He be coming from the same place that I’m coming from so we can relate with each other.”

**LEILANI**

Leilani relates her experience with her boyfriend demonstrating his support:

“Before I came into the system, I would leave my house and go to his house. I can talk to him about what’s going on with me and he listens.”

The co-collaborators perception of their relationships with significant others is based on such things as the boyfriend offering or willing to offer support. This made the relationship uniquely valuable to them. The co-collaborators view their boyfriends as their confidants with whom their thoughts and emotions are safe. Leilani viewed her boyfriend as a protector: “before I came into the system, I would leave my house and go
to his house.” Being able to enter a non-threatening environment where there was safety and protection, placed Leilani’s boyfriend in the position of protector.

The participants in this research pointed out that the presence of a best friend in whom anything could be confided in was important. Different from their experiences with female peers, these young women indicated that their boyfriends were considered like their best friends because the were able to have a relationship with them where they did not have to put up a protective wall, no limits to support, or conditions placed on them, garnered them the feeling of unconditional acceptance. Not needing to control the circumstances around them in the presence of their significant others, may have assisted in providing a level of comfort to the co-collaborators.

Omolade (1994) as cited in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, argues “that protecting Black women was the most significant measure of Black manhood and the central aspect of Black male patriarchy” (p. 13). Participants discussed feeling protected and able to confide in their boyfriends. Collins states that if Omolade is correct, then the important choice to protect Black women, for many men, became harnessed to ideologies of Black masculinity in such a way that Black manhood became dependent on Black women’s willingness to accept protection. The co-collaborators presented both a need of protection and vulnerability in various relationships, but this was often camouflaged by coping mechanisms that were both positive and negative. The boyfriends were seen as a valuable resource for the girls to rely on in the formation of positive relationships. Deferring their safety and protection to their boyfriends, however, placed the girls at risk for co-dependency with men because of the uncertainty and power and control differential that
could be exercised by the males in their lives. Collins warns against this version of masculinity because of the balance between protecting Black women and controlling them.

Having a boyfriend who listened, cared for, and consoled made the relationship uniquely valuable. The co-collaborators view their boyfriends as their confidante where their thoughts and emotions are safe. Leilani’s narrative confirms the consensus of all of the girls, of the boyfriend as protector: “before I came into the system, I would leave my house and go to his house.” Being able to enter a non-threatening environment where there was safety and protection, like their boyfriends’ place, situated all of the participants’ boyfriends in the position of guardian and someone who could be consistently counted on to fulfill their needs for affection.

**Best Friends**

The participants pointed out that the presence of a best friend in whom anything could be confided in was important. In contrast to their experiences with female peers, they indicated that having a relationship with someone where they did not have to put up a protective wall, no limits to support, or conditions placed on them, garnered them the feeling of unconditional acceptance. Not needing to control the circumstances around them in the presence of their significant others, may have assisted in providing a level of comfort to the co-collaborators. For these young women, it all came down to trust.

Tied to race and gender, the participants’ relationships with significant others can be a threatening thing while they continue to gain their independence as African-American women and become more self-reliant. Without an acute awareness of race and
gender and its influences within love relationships, specifically where power and control are present, they could find themselves in abusive relationships—an area that they are prone to given their history and socioeconomic backgrounds.
Chapter 4

Foster Care & Independent Living: 1, 2, 3 Ready or Not, You are done!

Research indicates that youth who transition out of the foster care system experience a variety of negative outcomes (Choca et al. 2004). In order for youth to transition successfully, a variety of life skills are needed. The most important are education and employment. Without a solid footing in these areas, youth are more likely to experience homelessness, unemployment, mental health issues, or incarceration. Unfortunately youth who move into independent living arrangements, do so with inadequate resources or a strong support system.

For whom then is independent living most important-youth who are in a foster home placement or youth in group homes or residential facilities? Each year, 25,000 to 30,000 young people approximately 18 years of age, emancipate from care (Mech, 2003). Youth who reside in long-term foster care, residential, group home, or transitional living facilities, often do not receive the knowledge or skills needed to gain self-sufficiency. Once they are emancipated, the majority of youth struggle economically. This is also exacerbated by the multiple placement disruptions and traumatic experiences suffered while in foster care. Regrettably these delays negatively impinge upon the successful independence and integration of youth in society. In order to assist youth in transitioning successfully, a self-sufficiency plan that recognizes the needed skills, attitudes, and behaviors is needed to adequately assess a young person’s readiness to live successfully on their own.

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 also known as the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, requires that all youth that are in out of home care be
tested for life skill competencies by the age of 16. The purpose of the initiative is that the life skill deficiencies be identified and addressed before emancipation occurs as a preventative measure for re-entry into care or entry into other systems (Nollan et al. 2000). The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) offers assistance to help current and former foster care youths achieve self-sufficiency. Components of the CFCIP are highlighted below:

Grants are offered to States and Tribes who submit a plan to assist youth in a wide variety of areas designed to support a successful transition to adulthood. Activities and programs include, but are not limited to, help with education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support, and assured connections to caring adults for older youth in foster care. The program is intended to serve youth who are likely to remain in foster care until age 18, youth who, after attaining 16 years of age, have left foster care for kinship guardianship or adoption, and young adults ages 18-21 who have "aged out" of the foster care system (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

Under the auspices of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, an assessment tool would be utilized to determine the life skill competencies of foster care youth. The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) tool was developed by Casey Family Services. The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) is a tool that is used to assess the life skills needed for successful living in communities and larger society as youth transition into independent living and out of long-term foster care. The tool contains nine life skills domains: career planning, communication, daily living, home life and money management, self-care, social relationships, home life, work life, and work and study skills. This tool is strength-based which looks at the strengths and abilities of the individual as a young adult and incorporates the youth in the assessment, a benefit to youth who are already in a disadvantaged position by their status as ward of the state.
While strength-based, the ACLSA is not culturally specific. For African-American adolescent girls who participate in the assessment, customization of the assessment should be mandatory because they have specific developmental needs and challenges. Since results are used to determine their success for adult living, the ACLSA may not be the best predictor of the girls’ outcomes for success. One of the main reasons is that usage of this tool may not accurately rate the level of dependency on community resources needed by the girls, which may carry over well into their adult lives. This includes public assistance or institutionalization (Gavazzi et al. 1996).

Adding to this mixture is the limitation of economic opportunities that the assessment tool does not factor in. This is also affected by ethnic status. When youth are removed from their family of origin, they are also taken from their social and cultural environment influencing negatively their ability to form attachments and create their own ethnic and self-identity which impairs both their school and social functioning (Jackson & Westmoreland, 1992). This is a crucial factor for adolescent African-American females because attention should be focused on their educational outcomes which will enhance their abilities to take advantage of opportunities.

For the co-collaborators in this study the move into independent living represents the ability to live on their own, freedom to make choices, and the ability to overcome the obstacles that brought them into care initially. The co-collaborators discussed these issues in the following categories: control, normalcy and stability, obligations of foster care, and feeling protected.
LISA

“I have had to act like the parent when my mom relapsed. I know that I have to limit when I am around her, especially when I get my own place.”

Lisa has often had too much responsibility and control at a very young age. Often placed in the position of parent, Lisa feels the need to remain in control. While in her mother’s care, Lisa operated within a dysfunctional relationship based on her mother’s behavior and her substance addiction. Boyd-Franklin (1989) provides a synopsis of the outcomes that Lisa encountered by taking on the role of running the family. This included an increase in anxiety and the creation of defense strategies that limited her ability to form attachment relationships to parental figures or reconnect with her biological mother in a healthy manner. In Lisa’s case, she becomes the parent taking care of her mother. Lisa is demonstrating “womanish” behavior. Walker’s (1983) definition of “womanish” pertaining to Lisa includes: acting grown up, being grown-up, responsible, in charge (p. xi). Acting grown up, being grown up, responsible, and in charge is a race and gender role that Lisa is assigned by default.

Because Lisa has experienced various transitions and changes in her life which include loss, rejection, and abandonment by her mother, she does not trust her mother’s ability to prevent a relapse into substance use. Her coping strategy is to reject and place limits on her relationship with her mother as a means of remaining in control. Lisa then becomes what Brisbane and Womble (1985) call the “Black family hero.” According to the authors, the “Black family hero” is often female and assumes total responsibility for the parent but receives little or no nurturance. Brisbane and Womble state “the oldest or only female child, acting as family hero may feel a sense of duty to save the family.” The
authors further elaborate that this is an important role and the role reversal of nurturing is necessary if she is to pass through the various stages of her own development with a sense of fulfillment and mastery (p. 254). This is another outcome of a “parentified” role that causes Lisa to relinquish her expectations of her mother.

Wexler (1991) states “when so much of their lives are in flux and transition…when they have experienced loss, rejection and abandonment from caregivers, the teenager feels incapable of trusting other people” (p. 181). Lisa’s plan to maintain her apartment by limiting her contact with her mother indicates her awareness of how delicate her status is as an African-American female leaving foster care. These are issues that could endanger her and the power of the foster care system to impact her ability to live on her own. Wexler further reiterates that “every delay appears to be deceit, every wait an experience of impotence, every hope a danger, every plan a catastrophe, every possible provider a potential traitor” (p. 181).

“I wouldn’t wish this life on nobody. I cry…I want to be treated like a person.”

Lisa’s need for respect is about being treated as a human being. Collins (2000) points out that the non-existence of an archetypal Black woman whose experiences are normal or stand as an authentic representation of Black women leaves girls’ like Lisa without an image of Black women that is positive and whole.

Because of its institutional and oppressive nature, the foster care system groups Lisa with other Black teenage girls, frustrating her self-esteem and self-worth. Impaired by this group affiliation and label, Lisa’s self-efficacy is also challenged. Her cry to be treated like a person represents the larger need for society to recognize her as unique and fully human. Recognition of the variations of experiences that Lisa encounters within in
foster care then could positively reaffirm who she is both as African-American and as female. Her attentiveness to her dual status of African-American female increases her persistence to gain her independence.

**LEILANI**

“They probably think we just ain’t nothing. Its like they think we need this place or something...like you know there is no other place your are going to get it [care] from. ”

In a group home environment, a sense of normalcy is most often times unattainable, whether it is a new staff member, new residents, or trouble within the residence where the focus is on behavior and proper conduct, residents are bombarded with rules. Nurturance by the group home staff is practically non-existent in the lives of residents. With no one to attend parent-teacher conferences, take them to doctors appointments, or advocate on their behalf, the girls who reside in these facilities are left to their own devices. Group homes and long-term foster care unfortunately produce feelings of rejection and reinforce the feelings of not belonging among the girls. These feelings reflect perceptions of staff according to Leilani as “they probably think we just ain’t nothing.”

Leilani does not feel in control of her living situation or how she is viewed by staff. She feels that decisions are made freely without her input. This lends to feelings of entrapment within the foster care system. Her feelings of powerlessness, like she has no other alternative and is unable to make and implement basic life decisions in her life, is directly linked to how foster care systems act to categorize those in its care. Boyd-Franklin (1989) believes child welfare agencies should instill a sense of empowerment
when working with African-Americans clients to assist them in regaining control of their lives and making important life changes for themselves. Leilani’s transition into independent living is threatened by her treatment in the foster care system which creates her feelings of victimization. Victimization is reintroduced through the inequities and follows her interactions in schooling by way of race and class.

“I don’t feel safe, this house is not safe…they [IDCFS] don’t do anything to protect us…they put us in places that no one would live in.”

As a result of the ever-changing residents, staff, and the frequent and constant movements of the girls, consistency and predictability are virtually non-existent. These infringe on one’s feeling of safety and trust. This results in the residents feeling unsafe and uncared for.

Leilani’s fear of being in an unsafe environment may have more to do with the lack of consistency in the operation of the TLP program rather than the actual structure of the building. Leilani also experienced a variety of unsafe environments prior to her placement in the TLP which has also altered her view of a safe home environment. Depersonalization of relationships and constant moves leave Leilani feeling vulnerable without a space to call home. Leilani’s statement “they put us in places that no one would live in,” indicates that she believes that because she is a “ward of the state” she is forced to participate in a living arrangement that only girls with a “ward of the state” status would be placed. Related to this is the connotation of “bad Black girl.”

Messervey (2004) states that society often has the perception of foster children as bad or negative. Collins (2000) discusses how institutional sites [foster care facilities]
operate: “institutional sites where Black women construct independent self-definitions reflect the dialectical nature of oppression and activism…reproductions of controlling images [i.e., ward of the state] of Black womanhood occur via these institutions” (p. 89). Thus being a ‘ward of the state” challenges Leilani’s self-definition because her destiny is determined by her involuntary participation in IDCFS. The connotation of being a bad girl and the negative images associated with it are connected to her racial, class, and gender status, because it suggests that her status as a ward of the state which is connected to class is her fault--being an African-American female, neither of which is under her control.

SABINE

Sabine feels that staff has a negative viewpoint of her regarding family relations and a support system.

“I hate the fact where staff think its like we ain’t got no family, like we ain’t got no other…but that’s not necessarily true, I talk to my grandmother all the time.”

Fahlberg (1991, p. 24) indicates that children in foster care have moved from one family to another, never having experienced the continuity in relationships which seems to enhance self-esteem and identity formation. Collins (2000, p. 178) indicates that historically, temporary child care arrangements often turned into long-term care or informal adoption. In Sabine’s case, a consequence of her mother’s substance addiction, Sabine’s care was granted to her grandmother. Once it was determined that her grandmother could not provide care for her, Sabine was then placed back in the foster care system. Sabine however contends that she does not have a negative attitude towards her grandmother and enjoys their relationship. Unfortunately foster care serves to
maintain images of broken and extended families in its minimal effort to promote extended familial relationships among youth. Sabine counters the negative view of African-American families being dysfunctional projected into society by the foster care system by maintaining a relationship with her extended family. Such stability and emotional well being of teens in care (Eisan, 2003) is very important.

**LISA**

Lisa’s feelings resemble Sabine regarding what she is owed by foster care:

“...I feel like if they couldn’t let me live with my mother, then I’m gonna use them...they are going to give me my own apartment.”

Both girls clearly desire to live independently in their own apartments. At the root may be the lack of a sense of attachment with their mothers. Like Lisa, Sabine’s mother was both a substance user and had mental health issues. Fahlberg (1991) states “once a child has been removed from his birth [biological] family, it is the responsibility of the child welfare system to insure that his needs are better met than they were when living with his family of origin” (p. 12). Both girls have the expectation that by being a “ward of the state” that she should be taken care of in a manner that is better than what she experienced with her mother. The ability of the foster care system to carry out restrictions is an example of an agency who which utilizes hegemonic practices to restrict an individual’s choices. Sabine and Lisa are acting out a form of resistance, as African-American and women, to remove the controlling barriers of classist and racist ideology by demanding their payment—an new residence and a life independent of DCFS.
Chapter 5

Conclusion and Implications

My findings reveal some of the specific challenges and struggles faced by African-American girls involved simultaneously in two important social institutions: foster care and education. This study also identifies their experiences and how they make meaning of them as they transition into adulthood. The purpose of this work is to enhance the understanding of the experiences of adolescent African-American females in the educational and foster care system and the meaning of their experiences while navigating their transition into womanhood.

There were several aims of this study: (1) to understand the complexities of challenges faced by a vulnerable population--African-American adolescent females and their participation within two social institutions of care; (2) reveal the lived realities and complexities of girls in foster care; (3) bring African-American girls voices to the foreground of social science research; and (4) extend the present research literature on this specific population.

Three young African-American women ages 18-20 years of old participated in this study. Two of the participants had experienced multiple foster care placements and placement in a group home facility. All three had a child abuse/neglect history where they had experienced loss or abandonment by their biological parents. Two of the participants’ biological parents were former substance abusers. All three of the participants’ parents were diagnosed with a mental health disorder.

The usage of a qualitative research design for this study makes use of Black feminist theory (BFT) and narrative inquiry (NI) as approaches that are responsive to the
specific experiences of the individual girls while depicting the multiplicity of meanings made by them as co-collaborators. The research design used Black feminist theory (BFT) as the theoretical framework to critically examine the impact of race, class, and gender on everyday lives of the participants. The research design also used Black feminist theory as a guiding theoretical framework to assist in analyzing what West Stevens (2002) calls “hostile environments” (p. 145). These environments include school settings (p. 147) and foster care placements. Narrative inquiry was used as a method to gather data on this phenomenon and comprehend how these young women participated in institutions of care and the discovery of their needs as told in their own voices. Narrative inquiry provided a method in which the telling of the participants stories, their lived experiences, serves as a means of educating larger society so that all institutions of care can understand the complexities that this vulnerable population faces— as a client, an African-American, girl, and as a emerging woman.

In my study to understand the complexities that young African-American females encountered in both the long-term foster care and education system, I utilized semi-structured interviews, observations, a focus group, and documents provided by the participants. The participants became co-collaborators during the study by providing personal accounts and provided documents report cards, poetry, art work and short stories. This substantiated the stories provided by the participants.

Their participation in a focus group provided them an opportunity to reflect upon where they are and where they hoped to go. The observations allowed me to study the participants in their respective environments in order to understand their lives and the complexities and construction of their stories.
As an African-American female, emerging researcher, academician, therapist, social worker, daughter, granddaughter and friend, I learned much about my three co-collaborators’ life experiences and the difficulties each face as African-American young women. This was important because both I and the collaborators began this journey with questions about “who am I” and “what does it mean to be an African-American female?” with the added benefit of investigating the young women’s stories and the events surrounding their circumstances. Through their stories, they made connections from both their past and present situations. I too, had to travel to my past as a starting point of being an adolescent African-American female. How did my experiences connect me to the co-collaborators? My thoughts and feelings crafted the beginning course for my research. However, the co-collaborators were always at the center of my research, never at the margins. Initially, I had to remind myself that stereotypes of African-American girls could not influence my judgments, if I were to truly partner with these young women. I appreciated this caveat. I struggled with the labels that I and the co-collaborators were confronted with during the course of this research.

During my inquiry, I reviewed a the literature on African-American women that referenced Black girls, youth, and young women. The bulk of the social science and educational literature on Black girls that currently exists, discusses them in the context of other races and along side boys. The emergence of literature on Black girls from African-American authors such as Jacobs (2002), Evan-Winters (2005), Brown (2009) and Paul (2003) including personal and fictional narratives of African-American girls and young women brings diverse images and voices of these females to the center of research and allowed me to delve deeper into the lived realities of the participants in my study.
My personal journey and philosophy of womanhood have been shaped by my mother, my grandmother, my godmother, and various African-American women who influenced my adolescent and young adult years. As both a starting and departing point, I continued to reflect on my adolescence and how I was unconsciously aware of racist, sexist, and classist attitudes about my personhood. Being a teenager in my eyes was more than enough weight to carry. While I recognized that I was African-American and female, I was not aware of the negative images and associations attached to being Black girl, especially in school settings, where I was always told that I was “smart” or commended on my ability to complete school tasks. The participants in this study seem more self-aware of how they are located in society based on their interactions with the foster care and educational system.

While not necessarily naming their understanding in the actual categories of race, class, and gender, the collaborators in this study were able to make meaning of their encounters that signified their positions in these areas. Responses to the research questions reveal their multiple ways of knowing and understanding their social location by way of race, class, and gender constructs. Findings from the interviews, focus group, documents, and observations are combined to address the research questions. The research questions are: 1) What are the schooling experiences of young African-American women involved in a long-term foster care placement; 2) What is the meaning of the educational and foster care experiences for these young women; and 3) How do African-American young women navigate both the education and foster care system as they transition into womanhood?
RESEARCH QUESTIONS REVISITED

1) What are the schooling experiences of young African-American women involved in a long-term foster care placement?

Important to young African-American women involved in long-term foster care and their experiences with school is how they are treated and viewed by schools. How the participants were treated influenced either a positive or negative experience which left a lasting impression on their transition into womanhood. Lisa and Sabine had different experiences with teachers regarding race, gender, and class. Leilani did not participate in the interview regarding her general experience because she had not attended formal school since 10th grade. However she discussed her ambivalence regarding the GED exam. Lisa reported a negative experience with schooling based on stereotyping by school personnel. She did not feel that she was treated in a respectful manner by teachers because of her status as a DCFS ward, her special education designation, and as an African-American female. For Lisa, being stereotyped as a student and as an African-American woman, undermined her self-concept.

Sabine’s experience with school differs from Lisa. Although Sabine, also had a special education designation and sometimes struggled with the material, she described her experience with school as a positive one. Sabine discussed her excitement of attending a college fair and feeling supported by her teachers. Her engagement in school reflects her performance of the achievement ideology prevalent among African-Americans that asserts that she needs an education to get ahead in the world. Thus, Sabine gains access to education through the validation of her teachers. In Sabine’s case, race, class, and gender are positive constructs present in her learning process because she
feels validated and supported in pursuit of completing school. This support serves to facilitate her positive transition into womanhood.

Completing school has an important influence on the girls’ transition into womanhood. Lisa, Leilani, and Sabine emphasized the importance of completing school and academic achievement as it relates to their independence. All three girls experienced race, class, and gender issues in their pursuit of education. Both Lisa and Sabine’s educational pursuits are influenced by future outlook. Lisa’s pursuit diverges from Sabine’s goals for her future outlook, because her goal is to prove others (society) wrong by graduating high school and moving beyond her foster care status. Sabine’s pursuit of economic independence influences her future outlook. Sabine recognizes that completing school is a means of achieving material goals and getting a good job. Leilani does not feel connected to the process of schooling or her peers who are attending and succeeding at school. Her disconnect stems from two preceding failed attempts at passing the GED exam. Leilani’s attempt to overcome her ambivalence regarding the GED was though her desire to take the exam when she was ready and not when the staff thought she should. Leilani’s not seeking permission or approval to think or feel a certain way also demonstrates her need to feel like a normal person who is able to make choices. Exerting her right to choose when to take the exam provides a way for Leilani to demonstrate her ability to make an independent decision regarding her future.

Although Lisa and Sabine’s experiences within school settings varied, they cast light on Leilani’s reluctance to participate in the schooling process. While varied, all of their experiences and their feelings regarding education are important areas to consider during their transition into independence. A significant factor is the special education
designation placed on African-American youth deemed at risk. The special education status assigned to Lisa and Sabine positioned them to fail because it stigmatized them and their academic ability which influenced their subsequent treatment within the educational process. Yet, outside of their negative experiences within special education classes, both participants indicated a high level of interest in school. Sabine was the only participant to indicate a personal connection with her school and teachers. Overall, all three of the participants’ experiences appeared to engage them in a higher level of self awareness of their educational needs while they evolve into women. The acts of resistance displayed by the girls at different points in their educational pursuits, speaks to the need for them to feel in charge of their lives. Including them in the development of their educational plans a long-term life plan and thus alleviates the anxiety and frustration that the girls experience in both their school and foster care settings.

2) What is the meaning of the educational and foster care experiences for these young women?

From the perspectives of the young women, living in long-term foster care appeared to impact their self construction of who they are as developing women and their relationships with others. All of the co-collaborators had a propensity to project the view of being self-reliant. However this appeared to be more of a protective mechanism because the girls encountered stereotypes and associated stigmas based on their race, class, and gender, which weakened their self-confidence. The girls discussed feelings of self-doubt and low self-worth, even though they displayed personal strengths when confronted with numerous obstacles that impeded their educational pursuits and limited their transition from long-term foster care into independent living.
The young women were unfortunately vulnerable to living out a script of negative outcomes based on social and stereotyped views. This is seen in their behavior within the school environment and the independent living facility. Because they are in open social environments, they are especially sensitive to what others think of them and how they are perceived; negative associations of “DCFS ward” which included “damaged goods,” and “unwanted” in particular. The negative associations of DCFS ward however were balanced by the resilience that the girls demonstrated as they challenged several obstacles. This allowed them to have an optimistic vision of their potential of what they might become as adult women.

Interpersonal relationships between the young women and others were important. This is primarily based on their traumatic experiences with loss, abandonment, and incidences of rape or molestation. Exposure to these types of severe traumas affected the girls’ interactions with their parents, peers, school personnel, and staff within the independent living facility. Peer relationships and the validation that accompanies it, is important in the lives of adolescent African-American females in long-term foster care, because the girls are at a crucial development period. Their girl-to-girl relationships appeared to be influenced by their perceptions of themselves and the associated stigmas of being DCFS wards. This was most visible in their relationships and contact with the other residents in the home. When there was a disagreement with one of their peers, the girls seemed to take differences personally and were hurt, although they projected an outer façade of being able to survive without peer relationships.

Regarding relationships with staff and parents, the girls experiences were similar. The girls all maintained some form of contact with their biological parents. However,
they limited the closeness of the relationships for fear from further loss and rejection. This lead to the deprivation of any potential supportive networks that could be garnered from the relationships. Inconsistent staff contact and staff turnover resembled the instability of the relationships with the girls’ biological parents which in part was related to perceptions. This further impacted the girls’ ability to form any solid relationships. In their interactions with staff, the girls often attempted to demonstrate independence from staff members by making decisions on their own. Related to this is the development of sense of self and lack of attachments. Their development of sense of self was directly connected to the lack of attachments with both staff and parents. Having a history made up of unstable familial relationships coupled with the instability of foster care, the girls became indifferent to cultivating and maintaining supportive networks.

The voids in these interpersonal relationships placed them at a risk of failure to live independently because they lacked the social support from individuals who interacted in their daily lives. This leaves the girls susceptible to dysfunctional relationships and dependency on other systems, which include mental health and social welfare services.

Within both education and foster care institutions, the girls displayed skills that indicated minimal abilities to live independently. Their abilities were compromised due to the focus on behavior within both institutions where they were under constant scrutiny to perform acts of “normalcy.” For example, Lisa’s disruptive behavior in both the regular and therapeutic school, indicated that she felt she was in a hostile environment that did not value her personhood. While Sabine reported a positive interaction with her teachers, she indicated that she often became frustrated when she did not understand her
school work. Accordingly, if both Lisa and Sabine participated in a schooling environment that did not validate their presence as DCFS ward, as girl, as young women, and as an African-American, their experiences reinforced the social reproduction of African-American girls and young women who were at risk and dysfunctional.

How well they performed in the face of social stigmas was contingent on their ability to be assertive and to negotiate the demands of conformity. Depending on the institution of care and the situation, their sense of confidence and competence was often discouraged or diminished if they did not meet the criteria of either institution. This included their performance as “bad girl” versus “good girl.” Representations of “bad girl” include being sexual, loud, drawing attention to themselves and speaking out. Their performance of “bad girl” contradicted the “good girl” image—calm, quiet, obedient, non-demanding, and responsible, that both institutions required. Both institutions placed the girls in a non-negotiable situation where they were constantly penalized for their lack of conformity to the “good girl” notion. This resulted in the girls questioning their ability to be good enough to be accepted while forcing them to demonstrate their strength through associated acts of “bad girl.” Despite this the girls were able to identify their goals for the future, based on their observed behavior to comply when needed with the competing expectations of both institutions. The skills displayed by the co-collaborators to maneuver in school and foster care indicated their ability to survive in the present. Their ability to live on their own long-term without assistance however was not immediately evident. The girls’ shortage of long-term abilities to sustain themselves is attributable to the conflicting messages of being girl and emerging woman that is delivered by both institutions and played out at their expense. The level of importance of these institutions
in the girls’ lives resulted in them constantly balancing the demands and feedback of staff, teachers, and society which endangered a healthy construction of self and their move into independent living.

3) How do African-American adolescent females navigate both the education and foster care system as they transition into womanhood?

Several strategies were employed by the participants in the study to navigate both systems while the participants moved into womanhood. Viewed as coping mechanisms, voice, resistance, and “armoring” were the most identifiable methods employed. These methods were utilized by the young women when their sense of belonging, identity, and control were threatened. This assisted them in plotting a course to Black womanhood while living at the intersection of race, class, and gender. The girls demonstrated their need for foundational resources such as self-esteem in their efforts to become self-sufficient members of society. Equally important to their goal of self-sufficiency is an understanding of who they are in a variety of contexts. For the participants in this study, the individuals charged with providing these necessary tools—family, school, foster care, system, and other supportive community members were not present.

Education was a continuous challenge for all three co-collaborators in the study. The complexities of adolescence, the oppressive nature of schooling, and the drama of everyday life within long-term foster care, directly influenced the girls prospects as they prepared for independence. This was inherent in their hope of graduating from school which signified their transition into womanhood.

The participants were aware that their independence was in danger if they did not graduate from high school or pass the GED exam. Their success or lack of success would
also determine the services and support that would be provided to them as wards of the state. How they would live, where they would live, and if they would have a supportive living arrangement were all considerations that were contingent on how they navigated both foster care and education.

Survival and armoring are consistent themes in the girls’ lives. The participants in this study demonstrate that they have come to believe that by distancing themselves from others (particularly caregivers in the form of staff and school personnel) that they are controlling the outcomes in their relationships. Nonetheless, they did indicate the importance of love relationships in their lives. All three of the girls indicated that these relationships were special and positive. While the girls indicated that they had a close relationship with their boyfriends, it appeared that the relationships were of a co-dependent nature. Their need for belonging and feeling special is based on how they perceive being cared for. How they perceived being cared for made the relationship with their boyfriends significant for them rather than the role or the length of the relationship. The feelings gained from their relationships--being cared for, accepted, and belonging appeared to matter most to the participants and allowed them some form of personal connection.

Outside of the context of their love relationships, the survival mechanisms employed by the girls were either positive or destructive. For example, Sabine utilized survival as a tactic in her educational setting by forming relationships with her teachers. This influenced her sense of belonging which enhanced her motivation for completing high school. This form of survival directly ties into a controlled form of socialization where the oppressed is conditioned to respond and accept the dominant status-quo
prevalent in schools. Sabine’s conditioned educational performance under this form of control, underrates her status as an African-American young woman because of the demands that she will continuously navigate based on different standards and notions of girl. This could hamper Sabine’s ability to navigate the demands placed on her based on different standards and notions of girl.

In contrast to Sabine, Lisa used survival as a means of resisting the stereotype of special education student. Lisa would be disruptive in class as a means of resisting the oppressive form of control, i.e. teachers watching students go to the bathroom. Lisa’s employment of this form of survival was based on her feeling and reaction of being mistreated. She recognized a different kind of expectation for her in school which included paying attention and participating silently. Based on her identification that she is not what teachers or staff respect, she responds in an aggressive manner. Lisa’s response is connected to the contradictory messages that she continuously receives in both settings regarding femininity and her struggle to define herself as an adult woman.

Similar to Lisa, Leilani used resistance as a strategy of survival. Leilani was fearful of failing the GED exam, yet she did not ask for assistance from staff. Instead she acted on her belief that staff thought she was dumb which prohibited her from requesting help. This placed Leilani in direct opposition to staff and removed any form of caring and comfort that they have provided to reduce her anxiety regarding the GED exam. Although necessary that she receive assistance based on her non-attendance in a school setting, Leilani’s perception of staff regarding her abilities cause her to reject the assistance of staff. Further complicating matters is the staff’s reactions to her behavior and their withdrawal of assistance. This reinforces the belief in Leilani that she is dumb
and unworthy and that caregivers (staff) are not reliable and will not meet her needs. This cycle of mistrust is detrimental to Leilani’s transition into womanhood.

For Lisa, school did not appear to serve as a place where she felt respected. Often Lisa would resort to being loud and confrontational as a means of asserting her personhood. Her resistance to the stereotypes of idealized femininity was displayed through her voice. Loudness served to draw attention to Lisa and it often resulted in a negative outcome. Schooling for Sabine was the opposite of Lisa’s experience. This is attributable to Sabine’s buy-in of the achievement ideology. Because of this she felt connected to the school environment and positive experiences with teachers. Based on self-report of a good relationship with her teachers, Sabine felt she learned more in school than within the TLP. In this manner, Sabine’s sense of belongingness assisted in her transition into womanhood.

Individuation was also an important factor into womanhood. At the same time that the girls desired to be unique individuals, they also had to learn to make decisions, voice their feelings in an appropriate and acceptable manner, and advocate for themselves in the world. As a social construction, individuation influenced the girls’ positive and negative responses to both the education and foster care system. What the girls actually appeared to value in both settings was autonomy and independence. The connections between individualism and autonomy and independence relates to the connotation of “strong Black woman.” The girls’ involvement with DCFS which was the result of loss, abandonment, and separation, forced them to subscribe to the above stereotype and inoculate themselves against any hurt or pain. This form of protection prevented the girls from positive relationships within the facility and in the school setting. In their narratives,
Lisa and Sabine valued their autonomy and independence in obtaining an education to acquire a good job and material items so that they would not have to rely on IDCFS. Leilani also favored autonomy and independence but was in more need of supportive services from IDCFS before becoming self-reliant.

Residency in the TLP resulted as a placement disruption experienced in the participants’ previous foster home. All of the participants indicated that they had no power in making decisions about their living situations and wanted to be in control of their future. Their social location within long-term foster care is directly tied to race, class, and gender based on the number of African-American girls and young women who enter foster care and how they end up in foster care based on their families’ station in life. Because of the instability and inconsistency of their current living environment, their sense of normalcy is threatened. The girls expressed feelings of disappointment in the foster care system because of its treatment of them and its failure to provide a sense of security. In turn they retaliated by “making DCFS pay” i.e., getting whatever they could with little effort. They felt that DCFS owed them their independence based on everything that they had to endure. The girls also viewed their social living environment as hostile; hence they felt compelled to react aggressively. This materialized as a reoccurring theme in the transitional living facility when the girls vacillated between their desire to have unstructured control-doing what they wanted to do, and having input alongside staff and DCFS regarding decisions that impacted them.

Based on the operational structure of the transitional living facility, staff who work within the facility often are programmed to focus on the behavior of the residents in the facility. The lack of personalization from staff is also an influence in the lives of the
girls and how they navigate foster care. The girls would often resist the authority of staff by violating curfew, fighting, running away, and disrespecting staff. The lack of a viable and positive relationship with staff is compounded with the inconsistencies of the transitional nature of staff, the underpinnings of the program, and the code of conduct that both regulates and restricts the development of relationships among staff and the girls.

The response of the foster care system to meet the needs of young African-American women appears to be reactive in nature. Foster care is a difficult transition that impacts education, identity formation, and life trajectories. TLP’s, group homes, and residential facilities are predisposed to experience a high turnover rate in staff. This is based on pay, lack of training and preparedness, and the minimal skills needed. Therefore the continuity and consistency in services and relationships are reduced. Personalization of relationships with the residents and staff are also inhibited because staff are encouraged to maintain professional boundaries with the girls. This includes refraining from socializing outside of the program, not disclosing personal contact information, and driving clients in personal vehicles or receiving gifts. While these rules serve to maintain the professionalism of the staff, it does little to encourage the girls socialization skills. The mixed messages sent to the girls regarding staff consists of staff operating both in a parental and authoritative role. The paradox of the staff functions do little to encourage the girls in learning to form trusting supportive relationships. This includes the type of relationships that can be developed with substitute caregivers. Accordingly, the girls’ personal development is adversely effected.
All three of the participants specified a need to predict and depend on consistent messages from both the educational and foster care system in order to live independently as young women. The struggle that the young women engage in becomes obvious through the behavior that is projected towards the staff and teachers. They need to rely and depend on someone is evident in their formation of relationships with their boyfriends and their maintenance of relationship with parents. The lack of supportive relationships constrains their successful transition into womanhood by limiting the growth of their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.
Summary & Future Research Indicators

Because of the scope of this study and the difficulty of accessing this particular population, it was not possible to explore all of the areas that I saw as being pertinent and deserving of further investigation.

There are few research studies if any specifically related to examining the lives and experiences of African-American girls and their simultaneous involvement in long-term foster and education and their development as young women. As is characteristic of most in-depth qualitative studies my study was based on a small number of participants. This has resulted in limiting the findings to this select group of young women who were involved both in foster care and education systems. While I sought additional participants, only 3 volunteered for the study. Given the low response rate, it is possible that the girls who did not participate in the study disqualified themselves based on the established criteria of willingness to participate and participate in school. The inability to meet the criteria is also an indicator that African-American girls in long-term foster care are not progressing at a high rate in their educational pursuits or goals of achieving independence from foster care.

This study also has methodological limitations. Of note is that the participants belong to a homogenous group of individuals who possess similar backgrounds and currently reside in the same environments of care which may have influenced the recounting of their experiences and minimized generalizability. As noted by Creswell (1994) qualitative studies are not designed to be able to generalize findings or to be able to exactly replicate the findings in another context. However, themes generated by this specific population provide indicators that the findings may not only be applicable to
African-American girls and young women who are wards of the state, but also those that possess similar backgrounds, or who are involved with or reside within other institutionalized environments.

Bias was also a key element that was focused on in an effort to maintain the integrity of the study. This was done by working closely with another researcher outside of my study who reviewed the transcripts and reviewed my analysis and themes to ensure that my impressions and thoughts were consistent with the data. Because the temporary and unpredictable attendance of the participants, member checks posed an issue with this population when the girls were often absent from the facility.

As mentioned earlier, qualitative studies typically have small numbers of participants. For this reason the number of interviews conducted within a study is influenced by the number of themes that are generated during each interview. For the purposes of this study and the transient behavior of this population, two interviews were conducted with each participant to ensure that all of themes had been exhausted to the point of saturation.

Inability to conduct observations within the schools also limited this study. While the TLP provided the researcher with access to the participants, CPS did not. There appeared to be a concern among CPS officials regarding how the findings would be used. Based on the lack of actual observations of the girls’ in their educational environment, I am limited in the analysis of what happens to, during, or with the participants while involved in this setting.

Chapter 7
**Recommendations**

Policy and programming changes within the foster care and educational system are also a limitation that warrants reflection. The institutionalized operations of both structures in terms of race, class, and gender are areas that are often discussed in research, but are not often put into practice in generalized settings or with the immediate population.

Structural features of the foster care environment, enhanced independent living skills preparation, social support linkages including community agencies, and staff training should be included in an examination of foster care policy and its role in the lives of African-American girls as a means of reducing the negative impact of institutional care.

While the actual policies of foster care were not analyzed, the foster care facility and the observations of staff were important in understanding the experiences of the young involved in long-term foster care. Based on the observations within the facility more training and education opportunities for group home staff are needed to assist them in acting in a parental role. The existing policies force staff to act in an institutionalized way that limits any form of attachment. This also limits the interactions and effectiveness of staff because they are prohibited from providing the girls with the things that they need to both heal and grow as mature women. Lack of consistent staff was also an important observational factor that limits a successful outcome of African-American girls, because of the non-formation of genuine relationships which should serve as a supportive foundation. Finally staff should provide additional interventions like behavioral training to address aggressive and defiant behavior.
Family relationships and resilience factors are areas for further exploration. A combination of family, adversity, and resiliency studies might explain why some African-American girls in foster care are more resilient than others in adverse situations and what combination of factors work to shield against risky behaviors which pose barriers for educational outcomes. A deeper analysis of ways that families influence both positive and negative developmental outcomes among African-American girls could expand family system frameworks when working with African-American families involved in both foster care and education.

Various studies on adolescent and young African-American women and their experiences with schooling tend to focus on either gender, race, or class as an individual category, rather than all three. While social science research is emerging to include the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, educational institutions continue to employ a deficit model both in practice and policy in the schooling and treatment of African-American girls because of its one dimensional application. This includes the assignment of at-risk and special education designations. Functioning as a stigma, the use of defective labels renders African-American girls, especially those involved in long-term foster care, incapable of pursuing education without the risk of failure because of their status of at risk, special education, or DCFS ward.

In order to examine the developmental needs of African-American girls in long-term foster care, researchers must take into account the participant’s level of functioning. This includes identifiable risk and protective factors, traumas, or stressors that may affect their ability to successfully navigate school and transition into womanhood: cultural and
environmental factors, such as families, peers, and schools, and the reinforcement of social norms.

To assist African-American girls in long-term foster care in becoming healthy Black women, policy makers and practitioners alike must first acknowledge that gender specific treatment is needed for this population. This is important for African-American girls and young women in institutionalized settings of care because of their unique needs.

Secondly, validation of African-American girls’ ways of learning and participating in educational settings outside of the idealized feminine notions which is related to middle-class standards rather than school connectedness. African-American girls in long-term foster care need to feel supported to make attachments and connections in school settings and in personal relationships. The girls in this study demonstrated their need to have control over how they are defined and what happens to them as a result of the definition.

Lastly, researchers must do more than conduct research. Research must be translated into usable tools for African-American girls in institutionalized settings so that they may counteract risk factors. This includes the recognition of African-American girls’ voices. Researchers must be willing to hear what the girls’ have to say. This provides meaningful insight into the world of African-American girlhood. African-American girls and young women in long-term foster care do not want to be treated like they are empty vessels. They want to be treated with respect and understanding. Incorporating their voices and allowing them to tell their story provides ideas about how to change institutions to meet their needs. Acknowledgement of African-American girls’ voices
also results in expanding studies on African-American girlhood—who she is and what she brings into the environments.

Since schools are “the most salient institutions that shape adolescent and young adult experiences and these experiences have a direct impact on their future outcomes” (Eccles & Lord, 1996, p. 252) institutions of care such as education must broaden their structures to employ multi frameworks of race, class, and gender in order to enable the adolescent African-American girl population that they serve to flourish in their development of identity. Attention to this issue is also applicable to foster care settings. The importance of gender, race, and class cannot be overlooked when working with African-American girls in institutionalized settings because all three operate in their daily lives. The intersectionality of these constructs have a profound impact on their development as a girl and woman and influence their social realities.

The social realities that girls and young women in institutionalized settings navigate require interventions that represent and authenticate who they are. Consideration should also be given to positive themes which could be expanded into a long-term study on African-American girls in school and foster care as a part of their transition into independence and their future outcomes.

The recommendations above provide a useful starting point in broadening research around the intersectionality of race, class, and gender and its influences on black girlhood, social, cultural, and developmental needs of African-American girls, and emerging womanhood in the lives of African-American girls in institutionalized settings. If research is to be useful for this population it must take the total context of African-American girls’ lives into account. The challenge of both institutions is to utilize policies
and practices in working with African-American girls that will prevent additional risks to their welfare and promote long-term positive outcomes on their lives.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix A  Observation Protocol
Appendix B  Interview Protocol
Appendix C  Consent Form
Appendix D  Focus Group Information Sheet
Appendix E  Focus Group Interview Guide
Appendix F  Other Sources of Information
Appendix G  Glossary
Appendix H  Points of Reference
Appendix I  Lisa’s Report Card
Appendix J  Sabine’s Report Card
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APPENDIX A

Observation Protocol

Observations occurred in 30 minute intervals. Each participant was observed for a total of 2 observations.

Date: 
Time of day:

Description of the Setting:

Participants:

Aim of observation:

Feelings about the observation:

Difficulties:

Insights/Reflections:
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

2 interviews were conducted per participant of approximately 45 minutes each.

Identifying information was obtained via a short questionnaire. These questions required general information and were designed to provide an understanding of the participants entry into foster care.

Identifying Information about foster care

1) What age did you enter into the foster care system?
2) How long have you been in foster care?
3) How many foster home placements have you lived in?

Questions about the foster care experience

1) When you first came into foster care, what was your understanding of the circumstances that brought you into contact with DCFS?
2) What were your feelings about entering foster care?
3) What were your experiences in foster care like? Tell me about that experience through your eyes.
4) How did you enter the transitional living program?
5) How do you feel about living in a transitional living program?
6) Who did you live with at the time?
7) How many brothers and sisters do you have?
8) Since being placed in a transitional living facility what have your experiences in foster care been like?
9) Were you ever returned home to your family?
10) Did you ever think of your foster parents as family?
11) Do you consider the transitional living facility home?

Family of Origin

1) Please describe what your home life was like prior to entering DCFS.
2) Do you have contact with your biological mother/father? Or other family members?
3) How do you feel about your parents and what has happened with DCFS?
4) Please describe your relationship with your family.
Supportive Relationships
1) Tell me about your relationship with facility staff.
2) Tell me about your relationships with the girls in the facility.
3) How would you describe yourself as a friend?
4) Tell me about a relationship or person that you would consider to be your best friend.
5) Tell me about a close relationship with an adult.

Schooling experiences:
Background Information: What grade are you currently in? What school do you attend?

1) What was your schooling experience like prior to entering care?
2) How many schools have you attended since being in foster care?
3) How would you describe yourself as a student?
4) Do you have any friends at your school?
5) What do you like most about school?
6) What do you like least about school?
7) Have you ever been diagnosed with a learning disability?
8) How do you deal with being a student in foster care?
9) Tell me about a teacher in your school.
10) How would you improve your school experience?
11) Are you treated differently by others (e.g. peers, teachers) because of your involvement with DCFS? Please provide an example(s).
12) Has being in foster care affected your education?
13) Why is school important to you?
14) What are your future goals after graduating from high school/obtaining GED?

Self Construction
1) How would you describe yourself?
2) Does that description change at times?
3) Tell me something about the girl who came to the attention of DCFS. What was she like?
4) Are you different now before coming into foster care?

Questions about Gender
1) What are things that you believe about yourself as a girl?
2) Please describe your experience of being female in foster care/group home.
3) Do you feel that being in foster care makes you think differently about being a female?
3) Do you feel that being in foster care makes you think differently about your future as an adult woman?

**Questions about Race**
- What does it mean to be identified as African-American?
- Do you identify yourself as African-American or Black?
- Do you think that you are treated differently because you are African-American?

**Questions about Class**
- How does it feel to be labeled as a DCFS ward?
- How do you think others view DCFS wards?
- How do you think others view African-American girls?
- How do you deal with stereotypes of being an African-American girl?
APPENDIX C

GUARDIAN (DCFS) WRITTEN CONSENT FOR TEEN’S PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY

Intersections: The schooling experiences of adolescent African-American Females involved in long-term foster care and their transition into womanhood

What is the purpose of this research?
As legal guardian of ____________________, minor (referred to as “the teen”), DCFS ID#_____________, DOB______________, I hereby give my consent for her to participate in the Intersections: The schooling experiences of adolescent African-American Females involved in long-term foster care and their transition into womanhood study. I am giving consent to the following conditions and understandings:

We are asking __________________, to be in a research study because we are trying to learn more about the experiences of African-American adolescent females involved in long-term foster care and their educational experiences as they transition into womanhood. The purpose of the project is: 1) to understand some of the challenges faced by African-American adolescent females and their involvement within two social institutions of care, 2) to bring the voices of African-American adolescent girls to the foreground of social science research and practice, and 3) to enhance the present research literate that focuses on adolescent development within the intersection of race, class, and gender. You are being asked to participate in this study due to your involvement with long-term foster care. This study is being conducted by Sonia Kennedy, Doctoral Student, at DePaul University as a requirement to obtain her Ed. D in Education.

How much time will this take?
This study will take about 3.5 hours of your time. Two interviews in the intervals of 45 minutes each will occur. Two observations in the duration of 30 minutes each will occur. A focus group will occur in the duration of 1 hour.

What will my child be asked to do if I allow her to participate in this study?
If you allow the minor to be in this study, she will be asked be asked to participate in 4 areas: 1) an interview, 2) a focus group, 3) to provide report cards, artwork, or poetry, and 4) she will be observed within the residential facility and/or other social settings as available. The interview will cover different areas of the minor’s life, including school experiences/functioning, foster care experiences, and adolescent experiences.

What are the risks involved in participating in this study?
Being in this study does not involve any risks other than what the minor would encounter in daily life. The risk of participating in this study are minimal. For example, the minor may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about answering certain questions. To minimize this risk, she choose not to answer the questions and/or discontinue the interview. The participant may also divulge information about abuse, neglect, or a harmful situation that must be reported to DCFS. If the participant reports this information during the interview, the interview will be terminated and the PI will immediately contact the participants casemanager of DCFS to address the issue as required by law.
What are the benefits of my child’s participation in this study?
The minor will not personally benefit from being in this study. However, through their participation, they will be contributing to the knowledge base in child welfare regarding African American adolescent girls and their involvement with institutions of care. We hope that what we learn will help improve current policies and practices with this population.

Can I decide not to allow my child to participate? If so, are there other options?
Yes, you can choose not to allow the minor to participate. Even if you allow the minor to be in the study now, you can change your mind later, and they can leave the study. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to allow the minor to participate or change your mind later. Whether or not the minor participates will not affect their current or future relationship, benefits, or living arrangements with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

How will the confidentiality of the research records be protected?
The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any report we might publish, we will not include any information that will identify the minor. Research records will be stored securely, and only the PI will have access to the records that identify your child by name. Some people might review our records in order to make sure we are doing what we are supposed to. For example, the DePaul University Institutional Review Board, may review the minor’s information. If they look at the records, they will keep your child’s information confidential. Audiotapes of the research study will be kept in a secure and locked file cabinet, and will be maintained for one year. Audiotapes will be destroyed via erasure of the tapes.

Whom can I contact for more information?
If you have questions about this study, please contact Sonia Kennedy, DePaul University, 773-406-0884. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University’s Director of Research Protections at 312-362-7593 or by email at sloesspe@depaul.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. I have all my questions answered. (Check one:)

☐ I permit my child to be in this study.       ☐ I DO NOT permit my child to be in this study.

Child’s Name:__________________________________ Grade in School: ____________

Parent/Guardian Signature:___________________________________________ Date:____________

Printed name:______________________________________________________
APPENDIX D

Intersections: The schooling experiences of adolescent African-American Females involved in long-term foster care and their transition into womanhood

INFORMATION SHEET—FOCUS GROUP

The focus group is part of a research study conducted by Sonia Kennedy, Principal Investigator, DePaul University. All residents of the facility are invited to participate in this focus group.

➤ The purpose of this focus group is to get your opinions and your experiences regarding race, class, and gender and how important these areas are in your everyday life. Issues involving service provision in long-term foster care and educational needs will also be discussed.

➤ Information that is shared in the focus group will be recorded in the research records anonymously—no names or other identifying information will be recorded. Sonia Kennedy, Principal Investigator, will conduct the focus group. She will write down the opinions and advice that you and other focus group participants share. She will summarize this information and will include it in the research study. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the information recorded in the research records, the records will be stored in a locked file cabinet.

➤ Sonia Kennedy, Principal Investigator, will not be asking personal questions about your life situation. She will be asking your opinions on race, identity, and gender, and how you view adulthood. All focus group participants will be asked to make a commitment to keep any personal information that may be shared by other group members confidential—to not repeat this information to anyone after the focus group meeting. You should know, however, that there is no guarantee that everyone will keep this promise. Therefore, we recommend that you not share any information in the group that you would not want shared with others outside of the group.

➤ Before the focus group begins, Sonia Kennedy, Principal Investigator, will describe the study and answer any questions you have about the study and the focus group. You can make a final decision at that time.
whether you would like to participate in the focus group. The focus group is completely voluntary so you can say no and there will be no negative consequences. The PI will not report who participates in the focus group and who does not. Also, your decision to participate in the focus group or not, will have no affect on any of legal matters that you face (e.g. sentencing, probation, etc) or services you receive.

- If there are questions you do not want to discuss this is perfectly fine. If you decide at some point you do not want to continue participating in the focus group and would like to leave the room, this also is okay. You may also talk with your caseworker or another staff person if you become upset after discussing your opinions.

- During the focus group, Sonia Kennedy, Principal Investigator, will ask participants their views regarding (1) What it means to be African American? (2) What it means to be female? (3) What it means to be a woman? and (4) What it means to be an adult? Focus group members will be asked to give their opinions about these areas to include class. Focus group members will also be asked to provide advice about services that should be provided to African American girls in long-term foster care and their educational needs.

- All residents of the transitional living facility are invited to participate in the focus group. The researchers are hoping that at least 3 women will participate.

- There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. There is no payment or compensation of any kind for participating in this focus group. However, your participation could provide knowledge, which could improve current policies and practices with this population. If you have any concerns about this research project you can discuss them with Sonia Kennedy, Principal Investigator or you can call her at 773-406-0884.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject you may call DePaul University, Institutional Review Board at 312-362-7593
APPENDIX E

Intersections: The schooling experiences of adolescent African-American Females involved in long-term foster care and their transition into womanhood

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

We are interested in getting your opinions and your experiences regarding race, class, and gender and how important these areas are in your everyday life. Issues involving service provision in long-term foster care and educational needs will also be discussed. The focus will last approximately 1 hour.

1. Do you think that there is a need for special services for African-American girls involved in long-term foster care? If so, what do you think these services should look like? If not, Why?

2. Do you think that African-American girls view themselves differently when compared to other girls because of their involvement in DCFS? If so, Why?

3. Do you think being in long-term foster care can make African-American girls think differently about being adults? If so, Why? If not, Why?

4. Do you think that involvement with DCFS can change how African-American girls see themselves as adults?

5. Do you think that special services for education should be offered for African-American girls in foster care? If so, Why? If not, Why?

6. Do you think that African-American girls in long-term foster care identify struggle with being identified as DCFS wards? If so, Why? If not, Why?
7. Do you think that African-American girls involved in long-term foster care understand the difference between being a woman and an adult? If so, how? If not, how?


9. Do you have any other suggestions or comments about services that might help African-American adolescent girls involved in long-term foster care?

10. Do you have any other suggestions or comments about services that might help African-American adolescent girls who are transitioning into adulthood and leaving DCFS?

11. Do you have any suggestions or comments for how the services we’ve discussed for African-American adolescent girls in long-term foster care could be provided?

Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us!
APPENDIX F

In addition to the referenced material, literature on and by African-American scholars, writers, and poets were reviewed. While not directly referenced in this study, these prolific women writers influenced and contributed to my overall knowledge base.


Hurston, Z. “How it feels to be colored me.” I love myself when I am laughing and then again when I am looking mean and impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader. New York: The Feminist Press.

APPENDIX G

GLOSSARY

*Definitions pertinent to child welfare and foster care services were obtained from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services website: www.state.il.us/dcfs/policy

**IDCFS or DCFS**-refers to Illinois Department of Children and Family Services often referred to as DCFS. IDCFS and DCFS will be interchangeably throughout the study to refer to the child welfare services.

**Foster Care**-is the temporary placement by IDCFS of children outside their homes due to abuse, neglect, or dependency. Placement is not intended as a permanent living arrangement but is for protective purpose with the ultimate goal of the child returning home.

**Transitional Living Program or TLP**-refers to a substitute care program which is managed and licensed by The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS/DCFS). The TLP provides residential and supportive services to youth between the ages of 17 and 20 who are words of IDCFS/DCFS. The TLP is required to teach the life skills needed to become self-sufficient while transitioning to independent living.

**At Risk Youth**-youths who are at risk of being failed by one or more adults or adult-driven system or institution. The definition is also used to describe youths who are at risk of failing in some major task that is necessary to be productive members in society. Retrieved from http://www.cyc-net.org/today2001/today010824.html

**CPS**-refers to the Chicago Public School system which operates under the Illinois School Board of Education. Referred to as the third largest school district in the United States, both public elementary and high schools in Chicago are managed by CPS.

**“Bustdown”**-usually used to refer to a female; indicates that she is sexually promiscuous with no discretion. Retrieved from urbandictionary.com/define.php on August 10, 2010.


**“Hoochie”**-a woman usually defined as being promiscuous or otherwise a slut or flirtatious; a woman who advertises herself by dressing in tight clothes and wearing a large amount of makeup. Retrieved from urbandictionary.com/define/php on August 10, 2010.
APPENDIX H

POINTS OF REFERENCE

1. Throughout the study, I use the terms “African-American” and “Black” interchangeably to refer to people of African descent who reside in the United States.

2. “Girls” and “young women” will be used interchangeably in this study due to the age of the participants and to reference various developmental issue/stages.

3. BFT refers to Black feminist theory and is simultaneously referred to as Black feminist thought.

4. At risk youth will be utilized throughout the study to refer to youth who are involved in institutionalized settings or youth who are at risk of failing a life skill/task.

5. CPS will be used throughout the study to refer to Chicago Public schools.

6. TLP will be used to refer to the transitional living facility, group home, residential facility, and long-term foster care.

7. The foster care facility, school, and participants names have changed to maintain anonymity.

8. IDCFS and DCFS are used synonymously to refer to the foster care or child welfare system.

9. Female and girl are used interchangeably to refer to adolescent girls.

10. Womanhood will be cross referenced with the synonymous terms of adulthood and independence.

11. The usage of “co-collaborators” in the study refers to the empowerment of the girls, their position as experts in the telling of their narratives, and their contributions to the research study. Co-collaborators will be used in the study where pertinent to make reference to the girls’ voices and experiences.
APPENDIX I—LISA’S REPORT CARD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Hour</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>C+</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Hours: 12.5
Score: 92%
APPENDIX J-SABINE'S REPORT CARD
APPENDIX K-RECRUITMENT FLYER

Do you have a story to tell about foster care? school?  
Are you between the ages of 18-21?  
Are you involved in social/recreational/ therapeutic/educational activities?  

We are looking for girls to participate in a study about their experiences in foster care, school, and barriers to womanhood. Your participation will be confidential.  

Location: To Be Announced  
Contact Sonia Kennedy, Principal Investigator, DePaul University at 773-406-0884 for more information  

Your participation will include two interviews which will be audio-taped and you will be asked to participate in a focus group. In addition you will be observed within the facility and will be asked to provide report cards, art work, and or short stories. The risks to participating in this study are minimal and your participation will remain confidential.
EDUCATION:

**2004-Present**  
DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois  
*Ed. D Doctoral Candidate*

**1996-1997**  
University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois  
*Master of Social Work*

**1992-1996**  
Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, Illinois  
*Bachelor of Social Work*

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS:


PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

TEACHING:

- **Fall 2001-Present**  
  Adjunct Professor, Harold Washington College, Chicago, Illinois
- **Fall 2004-Spring 2005**  
  Adjunct Professor, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, Illinois
- **Fall 2003**  
  Guest Lecturer, Kennedy King College, Chicago, Illinois

RESEARCH/FIELD/ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE:

- **May 2010-August 2010**  
  Field Research Interviewer, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
- **July 2005-December 2008**  
  Clinical Consultant, Jane Addams Hull House, Chicago, Illinois
- **October 2005-October 2008**  
  Crisis Worker, Ada S. McKinley Services, Chicago, Illinois
- **October 2001-July 2005**  
  Youth Services Coordinator, City of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
- **August 2006-November 2007**  
  College Coordinator, City Colleges of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
- **October 1998-July 2001**  
  Supervisor Intern, Illinois Department of Children & Family Services, Chicago, Illinois

FELLOWSHIPS & AWARDS:

- 2007  
  Albert Schweitzer Fellowship Award
- 2007  
  Fellows for Life Conference Scholarship
- 2005  
  American Association of University Women College Leader Scholarship

PRESENTATIONS:


Kennedy, S. (June 2008). What To Do When You Want To Scream, Trauma Debriefing Training, Jane Addams Hull House Independent Living Services, Chicago, IL.


Kennedy, S. (October 2007). Effects of Trauma on Girls Involved in Multi-Institutionalized Settings, Albert Schweitzer Fellows For Life Conference, Boston, MA.