

LIFE IN SCHOOL: THE ACADEMIC IDENTITY STORIES OF FIFTH GRADE
AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS

By

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To Aline Brewer, my grandmother, who provided everlasting unconditional love,
encouraged me to follow my heart and taught me to see beyond the obvious

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	4
ABSTRACT.....	8
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	10
Statement of the Problem.....	10
Significance of the Study.....	11
National Context.....	12
Local Context.....	13
Purpose of the Study.....	15
Research Questions.....	15
2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	17
Brief Descriptions of Bodies of Literature.....	18
Identity.....	18
Hidden Curriculum.....	21
3 METHODOLOGY.....	24
Questions.....	24
Rationale.....	24
Setting.....	25
Criteria for Selection of Participants.....	26
Description of Participants and my Relationship with Them.....	27
Brandon.....	27
Dante.....	27
Franklin.....	28
Data Collection.....	29
Data Analysis.....	33
Subjectivity Statement.....	34
4 FINDINGS.....	36
Research Questions.....	36
RQ1. What Is the Trajectory of Academic Identity Development of Three Elementary School African American Boys?.....	37
Brandon.....	38
Dante.....	39
Franklin.....	43
RQ2. What Factors Appear to Have Influenced Their Academic Identity?.....	46

Classroom Supports	47
The Support of Family	52
Identity Factors.....	54
5 CONCLUSION.....	55
Summary of the Study	55
Contributions to the Literature.....	57
Implications for Practice.....	59
Next Steps	64
Concluding Thoughts.....	68
APPENDIX	
A INTERVIEW ONE: BACKGROUND, GENERAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCES	70
B INTERVIEW TWO: KINDERGARTEN THROUGH SECOND GRADES	71
C INTERVIEW THREE: THIRD AND FOURTH GRADES	72
D FOCUS GROUP – DISCUSSION ABOUT THEMSELVES AS STUDENTS	73
E EXCERPTS FROM INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS FOR EACH PARTICIPANT.....	74
F EXCERPT FROM THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW.....	77
G EXCERPT FROM MY RESEARCHER’S LOG	79
REFERENCES.....	80
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	84

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The vexing educational phenomenon coined the achievement gap draws much attention in America and describes a significant negative performance discrepancy between Black and White students. The effect of this phenomenon on the future of Black students, especially boys, is tremendous and can present lifelong difficulties. This research is an effort to understand that phenomenon within the localized context of one elementary school by examining academic identity through the educational experiences of three African American boys.

Utilizing participant interviews with three African American boys, the construction and trajectory of academic identity and factors that may have influenced it are examined. The perspective of the participants is considered invaluable in understanding academic identity and its connection to the achievement gap. In order to accomplish this connection, I began by reviewing literature related to academic identity and hidden curriculum. I then discussed my methodology, the findings and implications of this study.

The research found that the participants had internalized negative academic identities, beginning from their earliest years in elementary school. Suggestions were made about possible strategies for shifting these identities to positive and incorporating insights into a more supportive academic curriculum. In addition, suggestions to include various teaching methods, based on participant feedback, were explored.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The biggest problem in education today is that children are not all educated in an equal manner. Despite the promise of equal educational opportunity, the United States education system has largely failed to provide Black children with a high-quality education. In fact, Black students, especially in urban communities, are not achieving at the same levels as their White peers. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics in 2009, Black males in grades 4 through 8 who were ineligible for free and reduced lunch scored lower on math tests than their white male peers who were eligible for the free and reduced lunch (as cited by Howard, 2014), indicating that socioeconomic status does not explain the achievement gap. These differences in academic performance have serious implications for the future life opportunities of Black students and for our society at large. The achievement gap between Black students and White students has remained despite years of educational research and reform efforts targeting this phenomenon.

In 2012, the College Board reported, “Black males are among the subgroups least likely to take and pass AP courses and exams” (as reported by Howard, 2014, pg. 16). Closing the achievement gap has been a priority educational goal at the national, state and school levels for several years. There are many factors that contribute either positively or negatively to the academic achievement of all students. Ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status and language are among a few. Integral to this issue, academic identity has been found to be significantly associated with the academic achievement of students (Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996).

Researchers claim that academic identities are constructed from perceived social and academic proficiencies and are constantly shaped, consigned, and reproduced in ongoing cycles that privilege some and marginalize others (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Lin, 2008). The development of a positive academic identity is essential towards helping Black students sustain an interest in and develop perseverance with academics. Examining the perceptions of Black students is critical to identifying the significant factors that promote a positive connection with academics. Yet, based on my 23 years as an educator, site-based educators do not explicitly learn about academic identity in teacher preparation programs or through professional development once their teaching careers begin. What is found in research is often from the psychological theorist's perspective, and while informative, this does not include the student's perspective. As a researcher, I consider the students' perspectives to be invaluable in understanding academic identity and how educators can support the development of a positive student connection to learning, thus promoting higher academic achievement.

Because the achievement and life chances of African America boys are, in particular, of great concern both locally and nationally, there is a need to better understand how their academic identity is developed, altered and sustained. In this study, the school lives and educational experiences of three African American fifth-grade boys was examined in order to better understand how academic identity is constructed and reconstructed in an educational setting.

Significance of the Study

This study will describe the experiences and academic identity development of African American male students through their elementary school years. Examining the educational stories of Black boys told from their own perspectives will add to current

research that characterizes the academic achievement gap between Black and White students and will assist in improving teaching and learning practices that guide current school curricula, pedagogy and classroom and school practices. Expanding the existing body of knowledge that focuses on understanding Black boys' school experiences could directly inform teaching strategies and interventions aimed at improving their academic identities. Educators need to recognize how intricately connected academic identity and academic achievement are and find ways to help students, specifically Black boys, develop a positive academic identity while still maintaining, and possibly even reinforcing, their other shifting identities.

Certainly, a positive academic experience may help promote a strong academic identity. However, the unsaid and inverse relationship suggested here is that a negative academic environment, actual or supposed, may impede the development of a positive academic identity. Though some researchers have examined how a positive academic experience affects positive identity formation, research is lacking in how interventions may be used to promote a strong academic identity in less positive environments (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000). This research may help explain students' perceptions of positive and negative academic experiences and the connection between students' perceptions and academic identity. It may also identify possible interventions or best practices that could narrow the academic achievement gap between Black boys and their White peers.

National Context

The educational achievement gap between Black and White students is America's most vexing social problem and closing this gap is often considered the civil rights issue of our time (Ladson-Billings, 2006). At the national level, the fourth-grade

Black-White achievement gap in mathematics for 2007 was 26 points, while the fourth-grade reading gap was 27 points (Lee, Grigg & Donahue, 2007).

Despite the promise of equal educational opportunity, the education system in the United States has fundamentally failed to provide Black children access to the high-quality education they need to compete on a level playing field with their White peers. When we fail to educate all students to the same level, the result is predictable: underachieving elementary students become underachieving middle school students and eventually high school students who are unprepared to succeed in college or to compete in today's economy. The results of this failure are disastrous: increased poverty, crime and incarceration, and decreased productivity and quality of life (Noguera, 2008). Indeed, the achievement gap has serious implications for the life opportunities of students and for our society at large.

Local Context

According to the Florida Department of Education (DOE), and as measured by the 2013 Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT), the reading achievement gap between Black students and White non-Hispanic students is 31 points. In the district in which this study is set, the gap is 39 points, the largest of all like-size counties in Florida. However, the study's specific school site gap is 28 points, still higher than the national average of 27 points. As a principal in an elementary school serving a diverse population, I have become aware of internal practices that serve to benefit some students while marginalizing others in my school.

Developing critical consciousness begins with an awareness of the social, political and economic oppression that is present in our society and leads one to take action against those oppressive forces (Freire, 1970). Mirroring society, the educational

system is influenced by these oppressive forces. As a leader for social justice, I believe I have some control over many practices that are oppressive to our minority students and families. I often see students in my office due to behaviors that seem to portray a negative academic orientation or identity. Sometimes I see them once, and other times, I see them weekly. I began to wonder how some students seem to thrive in classrooms irrespective of race, ethnicity, or class, while others struggle.

I became interested in studying the academic identity of Black boys when I was introduced to a new student at my school. He arrived at school early in his 4th grade year. His mother explained that Keyonte did not like school and was often in trouble at the other two schools he had attended. However, we did not experience this at our school. Although he spent some time testing us, we learned that Keyonte was able to excel academically and stay out of the principal's office. I then began to wonder what school and classroom practices support or negate a positive academic identity. I spent many hours thinking about this conundrum. What did Keyonte experience at other schools and our school that resulted in such different connections to academic learning? Realizing that my own perspective and even the perspective of other educators was limited, I began to wonder what students would tell us about their educational experiences and the effects of our school and classroom practices on their academic identity.

As a White female, I cannot possibly comprehend the experiences of Black students in public school systems that mirror the values of the larger American society. Nonetheless, I understand that there is an impact from the experience and that impact plays a role in the construction and deconstruction of academic identities. Perhaps by

studying students' stories of life at school, other educators and I may learn how to better support a positive academic identity for all students and minimize the oppressive powers in our society that are reflected in and perpetuated by our schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the school experiences of three fifth-grade Black boys. In particular, this study will focus on their views of themselves as students by gaining insight into the development of their academic identity throughout elementary school. The intention is that information gleaned from this investigation will provide educators with additional knowledge about more effective ways to engage Black students in academics and thus increase their achievement to a level that allows them to participate effectively in higher education and society.

Research Questions

There are two main questions that will guide this study designed to examine the development of academic identity in three Black male elementary school students:

1. What is the trajectory of academic identity development of three elementary school African American boys?
2. What factors appear to have influenced their academic identity?

The existing body of research regarding Black student under-achievement is vast. However, the body of knowledge on academic identity focused on elementary students is minimal. Furthermore, absent from this body of knowledge is the voice of the Black elementary student as it specifically relates to his or her schooling experiences and achievement. When the values, norms, and experiences of Black students are either overlooked or misconstrued, our schools may unwittingly be in direct

conflict with the democratic ideals of diversity and social justice on which our country was founded.

From a broad perspective, the purpose of this study is to add to the body of existing literature and to build a conceptual framework surrounding academic identity, educational experience, and academic achievement of elementary level Black students. More specifically, this study will examine the educational experiences of African American elementary-aged students and explore academic identity within the school context. Furthermore, such research, which expands on current knowledge of the development and situational nature of academic identity based on the constructed reality of Black students, is warranted. Analyzing the personal narratives of Black elementary aged students may provide greater insight into their educational experiences.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study will attempt to better understand the academic identity of elementary-aged Black male students and the factors that shape that identity. These insights may help educators to support a persistently positive academic identity, thus perhaps closing the achievement gap between Black and White students.

Miles and Huberman (1994) described theoretical orientation and conceptual framework as more than a summary of the current research. They described these two terms as a systemic approach that reveals the various assumptions, views, and theories of previous studies that guide the development and implementation of a study. For this particular study, I will draw from the literature in the areas of academic identity and hidden curriculum. A review of literature in both these areas will follow an introduction to the theoretical perspective that I bring to this study.

The theoretical perspective of Critical Social Justice informs my study, as defined in the following section. It is my perspective that inequalities, which are deeply ingrained in American society, are reinforced and perpetuated in our school systems. In an effort to further social justice, I attempt to identify, then eliminate or change practices that serve those in power and marginalize others.

Locating a definition of social justice that encompasses the broad concept and provides enough detail to include concrete and practical value was challenging. Upon reviewing three edited books about educating for social justice, Hytten (2006) determined that the wide variety of issues and perspectives presented in each of the books are reflective of the key challenges of social justice work. She further explained that the richness and multiplicity of social justice couldn't be easily condensed.

According to Hytten (2006), the role of educating for social justice is “to engage the very real struggles that exist in the world around us in classrooms and in the broader life of schools” (p. 441). She further explains that the central goals of educational curriculum and practices must be democratic issues rather than efficiency and high stakes accountability. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) reinforce Hytten’s view when they point out that society is stratified in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality and ability. They assert, “Critical social justice recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society, and actively seeks to change this” (p.xviii).

A social justice leader must recognize that unequal social powers are constantly at play in our society. Educators need to think critically about how these power imbalances are perpetuated in the social interactions within the school, and how they can affect the development and deterioration of academic identity (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Brief Descriptions of Bodies of Literature

The bodies of literature I will draw upon for this study include those in the areas of identity, academic identity, and the hidden curriculum.

Identity

Research on identity included in this study is based on the premise that identity is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gee, 1999; 2000; 2002; McCarthey, 2001). This meaning is important to the study because it supports the idea that there are things we can learn about our practices and social interaction with students that may promote or hinder the development of a positive academic identity. Identity

development research is prevalent, especially as it pertains to minority or Black student populations.

Academic identity. Many theories of academic achievement include the idea that students' connections to their school support internalization of academic values, encourage academic-supporting behaviors, and therefore play a role in academic success (e.g., Eccles, 2004; Finn, 1989). The development of a positive academic identity is highly correlated with academic success (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000). Therefore it is important for this study to review the current body of knowledge that supports this claim and any research that may provide insight into how educators can promote students' connection to learning in school.

Academic identity has been described as students' psychological attachment to their academic environment (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Many scholars also contend that the strength of students' academic identity is normally connected to their academic behaviors, academic achievement, motivations and values (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Goodenow & Grady, 1993, Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Understanding how academic identity is formed and transformed within a school setting will encourage teachers to better understand differences in students' needs. Furthermore, understanding the behaviors and motivations that manifest from the academic identity will enhance teachers' ability to effectively increase student achievement.

Establishing a strong academic identity that promotes academic achievement in elementary school is especially important because research indicates that motivation wanes as students enter adolescence (Green, Rhodes, Hirsch, Suarez-Orozco, &

Camic, 2008). Furthermore, research findings from early adolescence propose that students may become increasingly less connected to school over time. Significant differences between early and middle to late adolescence suggest that declines in school identity that occur in middle school may not continue into high school.

Therefore, educators need to understand what behaviors and practices promote strong academic identity before students enter middle school, and especially before compulsory education ends. The degree to which students sustain a positive school identity may determine whether or not they drop out of high school before graduation, a decision that can have lifetime social and financial consequences (Finn, 1989; Rouse & Kemple, 2009).

A positive academic identity greatly correlates with self-reflection, problem-solving ability, cognitive complexity, vigilant decision-making, and openness (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000). Additionally, researchers conclude that the absence of a strong academic identity tends to correlate with avoiding work and problems, and poor approaches to decision-making. Lack of academic identity also negatively correlates with reflective thinking, conscientiousness, and persistence in cognitively challenging tasks (Berzonsky & Neimeyer, 1988). Therefore, students with a weak sense of academic identity are far less likely to be academically successful than students with a positive sense of academic identity.

Positive academic identity development is often a challenge for minority students due to the many barriers they encounter in schools (Phinney & Rotheram, 1987). Scholars have attempted to recognize the extent of these challenges by developing theories around the role of schools in the educational experiences of Black students

(Lomotey, 1990; Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001; Solomon, 1988 as cited in Hopkins, 1997, p. 64). Black children underperform in comparison to their White peers because there are structural factors within schools that place parameters on their opportunity for optimum growth (Phinney & Rotheram, 1987). Black children face additional risks if they are not taught to understand and take pride in their culture. Ample studies examine the effects of culturally relevant curriculum on the achievement and connection to learning of African American students (Asante 1992; Gay 2000; Hale 2001; Ladson-Billings 1994, 2006; Lynch 2006; Thompson 2004; Webster 2002).

Apple and Weis (1983) contend that students living in poverty see schooling as implicitly teaching middle-class values, norms and temperaments through institutional expectations and the routines of day-to-day school life. The result is that those students living in lower income households and marginalized in society feel alienated and disconnected from learning (Phinney & Rotheram, 1987). To address this disconnection, our educational system needs to recommit to promoting democracy and social justice in our schools and in our society.

Hidden Curriculum

School curriculum is generally accepted as an explicit, conscious, formally planned sequence of lessons with specific objectives. In addition to explicit curriculum, students receive a different set of lessons that are referred to as a hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum includes values, social relations and ideas that shape students' socialization. This theory evolved from the work of various researchers such as Dreeben (1967), Jackson (1968), and Vallance (1973).

The practice of using school as a socializing agent is well established in education, beginning with the inception of public education in the 1800s (Jackson, 1968).

Education foundations scholars agree that a main goal of public school is to maintain social order by teaching certain behaviors, beliefs, and values. Hidden curriculum refers to that which is learned by implicit teaching. The term describes the non-academic teaching that is systematic but not explicit, including the norms and beliefs of society that schools have traditionally been responsible for delivering (Vallance, 1973). For many years, hidden curriculum theorists have tended to focus on how students experience the unwritten curriculum.

Hidden curriculum is embedded in the nature and organizational design of the school and is basically unknown to the learner. It is often unknown to the educator as well, especially if the educator is a member of the dominant group. It is important to understand that this form of curriculum may be as significant to a child's education as the explicit curriculum learned in school (Vallance, 1973). Hidden curriculum serves to maintain the status quo, thus the current social order. The hidden curriculum has influenced and promoted inequities that remain in our society in regards to class, gender, race, and ethnicity.

Students receive powerful messages about their ability, personality traits and behaviors through the hidden curriculum. Apple (1995) describes the hidden curriculum as a way to sanction hegemony. He argues that the concept of hegemony shapes the school in many respects and defines schools as not just suppliers but also creators of culture that are vital for the socialization of students. In *Ideology and Curriculum*, Apple (2004) asserts that the hidden curriculum corresponds to the moral and political needs of those holding the power in society.

In conclusion, the hidden curriculum is always in play in schools and serves to transmit unspoken messages to students about values, attitudes, and their own self-worth. Given that the hidden curriculum is shaped by the dominant culture, we must wonder about the messages communicated to Black students. How do young Black boys respond to the hidden curriculum? Does it have an impact on their academic identity?

Based upon my theoretical perspective of critical social justice and the current research on academic identity and hidden curriculum, there is clearly a need to better understand how we as educators can better support an academic identity that consistently promotes the academic achievement of Black male students. Through this study, which is focused on the students' perspectives, I intend to gain knowledge that will guide myself and personnel at my school toward diminishing the marginalization of Black boys and promoting a more just and equitable environment for our students and families. This research will honor the students' voices and use their lived experiences as data to identify the school's hidden curriculum, thus opening the door to reform that seeks to provide equity for all students and actively pursues changing current injustices.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to study the elementary school experiences of fifth-grade African American boys and to provide insight into their academic identity development and the experiences that shaped it. The study was based on students' recollections of school life beginning in kindergarten and continuing through their current school grade. A deeper understanding of how African American boys respond to people, practices and structures in their school settings may suggest opportunities for reforms that have the potential for nurturing a strong and resilient academic identity in African American boys entering middle school.

Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions.

- 1) What is the trajectory of the academic identity development of three elementary school African American boys?
- 2) What factors appear to have influenced their academic identity?

Rationale

I selected a qualitative methodological design for this research because it was appropriate in linking the personal lived experiences of African American students with the construct of academic identity in a way that that could not be investigated adequately with a quantitative approach. My approach was based upon Dewey's (1922) perspective that considers the association between education, experience and life. I grounded my approach to inquiry and research design within a qualitative research paradigm. I believe a qualitative approach is appropriate for this study because it will yield insight into how Black boys respond to the people, practices and events in their educational setting (Creswell, 2013). Interviews with the boys will enable

me to construct meaning from their educational narratives (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Furthermore, subscribing to Creswell's (2013) framework of inquiry and design of qualitative research was appropriate because the research questions were centered in the "what" of the phenomenon. That is, I want to know what promotes positive and negative academic identities for these African American boys. This design will allow participants to explore their academic identities in the context of particular school environments in their elementary school years.

Setting

The setting for this inquiry was an urban elementary school located in a southern state within the U.S. The school was situated in a densely populated area where school districts are defined by county. The district was comprised of several communities that have merged to form a densely populated conglomeration with no distinguishable boundaries. Located in a smaller city within the large district, the school had approximately 700 students in attendance at the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year in Pre-K through 5th grades. The student demographics are 50% White, 20% African American, 20% Latino, and 10% Asian. Approximately 75% of the school population are eligible for free and reduced lunch. School personnel consist of two administrators, 56 instructional members, six student services personnel, and 36 support staff members. Although inclusive of minorities, the staff demographics are significantly different than that of the student population. Approximately 83% of the staff are White, 9% are Black, 5% Hispanic, 2% Asian and 1% American Indian. The turnover rate of instructional staff over the last 3 years has been minimal, with 2 retirements, 2 family leaves and 3 teachers relocating to other schools within the county. The school currently has two first-year teachers and 24 teachers with more

than 20 years' experience. The school currently has a grade of "B" based on the accountability system applied in the state. I am currently in my third year as principal at this school.

Criteria for Selection of Participants

When approaching this research, I especially wanted to focus on the academic identity of African American students and what they can tell us about their experience as learners in school. Creswell (2013) describes the selection of participants as a critical step in qualitative research, stating that the criteria for selection must be very clearly defined, and justifications for the choices should be explicitly explained.

Therefore, the criteria for participants in this study were: (1) male students of African American origin who are currently in fifth grade, (2) age 10-12 years, (3) attendance at the school of at least two years including the year of the study, and (4) the ability to communicate freely, be reflective in nature and have the capability to tell the story of their educational experience in both individual and focus group interview situations. Evidence of the criteria would be determined in part through the review of student records.

I chose male students who were currently in fifth grade in order to draw from the maximum years of elementary school experience. I included the criterion of being a student at the school for at least two years because I was particularly interested in the experiences of African American boys in the setting in which I am the principal. I determined the potential participants' communication skills through discussions with current and past teachers. My intention was to include three participants in the study to enable me to explore their school experiences and academic identities in depth.

Description of Participants and my Relationship with Them

The boys selected to participate in this research are briefly described below. As previously stated, these boys were chosen based upon being African American, 10-12 years of age, having attended the site school for a minimum of two years, and having the ability to communicate personal experiences about their elementary school years.

Brandon

Brandon was a ten-year-old boy with a glint in his eyes and an excitability about him that portrays a passion for life and a deeply embedded sense of fairness. He lives with his father and sister and enjoys spending time with his family, going to church and playing basketball. When he grows up, he aspires to be a NBA player. I have known Brandon for the two years he attended this school. I have often had lunch with him, and I have interacted with him through his work as a school safety patrol. Brandon and his friends sometimes stop me in the halls to let me know how they are doing with their sports teams. Brandon easily engaged in conversation with me and the other participants. He was quite talkative during the interviews and often provided examples to explain his thoughts and ideas. His words demonstrated a thirst for knowledge. He stated that he “wants to know everything.” He also demonstrated a respect for teachers, explaining that strict teachers are “just doing their job.” Brandon is academically an average student.

Dante

Dante was a twelve-year-old boy with an infectious smile who thrives on social interaction. He lives with his mother, her boyfriend, one older sister and two younger brothers. He enjoys his family, saying they are all helpful to each other. He loves being the big brother because he can tell them what to do and teach them. His favorite

activities are playing Xbox and sports with his family and friends. When he grows up he wants to be a NFL star. Dante has been at the school site for the past two years. I am familiar with Dante due to the fact that he has been in my office several times. He has learned to ask his teacher to be allowed to speak to me when he senses that he is becoming frustrated and angry. Thus, he usually comes in to calm down without a discipline referral. Dante is easily frustrated with academics and often becomes upset if the teacher (usually a substitute) calls him out because he is socializing rather than completing his work. I listen to him, and we talk about ways in which he might manage his behavior. Before long, Dante lets me know that he is ready to return to class.

Dante easily engaged in conversation with me and enjoyed the attention he received in the one-on-one interviews. His responses to the interview questions were thorough and filled with optimism for his future. He clearly values education and believes that teachers help students reach their goals. Dante is a below average student academically and was retained in Kindergarten and again in third grade. He began receiving Exceptional Student Educational services in 2011.

Franklin

Franklin was an eleven-year-old boy with a quiet personality and patient nature. He lives with his parents, grandmother and two sisters. "Kind" is how he describes his family, especially his mother, who he calls "Ma," and his grandmother. He enjoys watching movies with his family, playing video games, and riding bikes with his friends. Franklin originally wanted to be a soldier when he grew up, but changed his mind when he learned that he couldn't quit the military if he did not like it. Now his future goal is to be a game designer. Although Franklin had been at the school for 3 years, I did not know him well before this study. He had never been in my office for a discipline referral

nor was he interested in working as a safety patrol. I did meet with him early in his fifth grade year to see what kind of service responsibility he would like to assume. The options were News Crew, Tech Assistant, Library Assistant, Pre-K Assistant or Classroom Assistant. Franklin said that he really was not interested in working at any of these positions.

Franklin easily engaged in the interview process, yet struggled to remember his early educational years. His answers were consistently short, usually only a few words, and when prompted he offered additional short responses that lacked details. Franklin enjoys learning when it is fun. He readily describes school as boring and claims that most every day he would rather stay home to play games. Franklin is academically an above average student.

Data Collection

In order to add to the existing body of knowledge relating to the academic identity of African American boys, data collection for this research consisted of a series of participant interviews. According to Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2009), "Capturing talk can be an important part of data collection" (p. 84). Hatch (2002) expands on this by explaining that interviews provide exchanges that can be used to explore participants' experiences and their interpretations of those experiences. There are several approaches to qualitative interviewing which include structured, semi-structured and unstructured. For this study, I used semi-structured interviews with the three participants. This approach allowed me to begin with a set of interview questions, but also allowed room to probe into areas that surfaced during the interviews (Hatch, 2002). In fact, I asked many probing questions that were not in my interview protocols. I engaged each participant in three individual semi-structured interviews and brought the

three participants together for a final semi-structured focus group interview. The decision to include a semi-structured focus group interview was made in order to gather data about each student that could be stimulated through conversations with the other participants. Each interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes and occurred once a week for four weeks. As the researcher, my role was that of active-listener who would choose when to probe and when to focus the dialogue on a particular area exploring for additional details (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Because the study participants were elementary aged students, I did not directly ask them to describe their academic identity. Instead, I asked a series of questions about their experiences as students and then interpreted their academic identities from their responses. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The boys were given a choice about when they wanted to be interviewed. They could choose times before school, during the lunch hour, or after school. Brandon and Franklin chose lunchtime, and Dante was eager to interview anytime I could see him. The three individual interviews and the focus group interview each had a particular emphasis that was purposefully planned to encourage students to retell their impactful experiences in elementary school. The interviews were sequenced as follows:

1. Building rapport and general thoughts about school and their educational experiences (Appendix A),
2. Memories from grades K, 1, 2 (Appendix B),
3. Memories from Grades 3, 4, 5 (Appendix C),
4. General thoughts about themselves as students (Appendix D).

Data were collected from each participant over the course of four weeks. The first interviews with each participant covered not only rapport-building and general

information, but also let me know how comfortable the boys were with the interview process. I immediately recognized that Brandon was very comfortable and expressed interest in the recording process. From the first interview forward, Brandon did not spend much time thinking about his responses. They came easily to his mind and were quickly and at times elaborately put into words. He would often use examples to further explain his answers, and he reminded me several times that they were just examples.

Dante was also very comfortable during the interview session although he took a little more time to think before responding. He also asked for the questions to be repeated several times. Dante tended to repeat his responses, especially about how all his teachers were there to help him reach his goals.

Franklin was the one participant who did not appear to be comfortable during the initial interview. I spent more time with him talking about his life and family than I did with the other boys, because I knew the least about Franklin prior to the research. Franklin did not appear to take time to think about the answers he gave during the individual interviews. In response to many questions, he said that he did not remember. I repeated and rephrased questions, thinking this might give him time to think or might jog a memory if he heard the question differently. However, he generally did not respond differently or elaborate more when probed. The exception to this was during the focus group interview with all three boys. Franklin appeared more comfortable with the other boys present, or perhaps his memory was stimulated by the others' responses. Once the other boys joined the interview, Franklin was much more talkative and expressive with his responses. In fact, all three boys elaborated more during the focus group, adding to the responses of others (Appendix E).

Upon reviewing the data collected in the interviews, I believe there were sufficient data collected to answer the research questions. The semi-structured interviews allowed me to probe when more information was needed to understand what the participant was sharing. Also, instituting multiple interviews querying the same topics with different questions helped to provide validation of the responses.

Throughout the process of data collection, I maintained a researcher's log in which I recorded observations and interpretations about the boys and their stories. The log helped me to keep track of my insights into the boys' school experience. I especially tried to capture my thoughts and feelings about what the participants disclosed that surprised me. This allowed me to examine any assumptions and biases that I brought to this research.

For example, after asking about a time he felt really smart, Brandon described a day in third grade when he beat other students at a math fact game. He remembered feeling smart because, "they are really smart and I beat them, so I felt really smart." After this interview I recorded a journal entry that described how surprised I was that Brandon did not feel smart about knowing his math facts. It was not until he was able to beat the "smart students" in a game that he felt smart. Why was this surprising to me? Did I assume that all kids felt smart just because they learned? Do some students only feel smart when they beat others? After Dante answered the question in a similar way (Appendix G), I realized that my assumptions about "being smart" may be quite different from the boys' beliefs about being smart. This insight served as a warning to me to monitor assumptions I might be imposing on the data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this inquiry followed the process of typological analysis as described by Hatch (2002). This process allowed me to organize a large data set derived from my interviews and research notes. My goal was to describe each participant's academic identity over time and the factors that appeared to have shaped their identities. The data analysis began by determining typologies, which Hatch (2002) described as "generated from theory, common sense, and/or research objectives" (p.152). He further explained that the typologies should be easy to determine if this method is useful for the study. For example, typologies within the data are likely to include evidence of positive academic identity, evidence of negative academic identity, factors that shaped positive identity, and factors that shaped negative identity. I read the data and recorded entries associated with the typologies. Hatch (2002) recommended proceeding with this part of the analysis by focusing on one topology at a time. The level of analysis at this point merely determines if the data are related to the typology and if so, recording those entries.

The next step was determining the main ideas of the entries for each typology by looking for patterns, ideas or associations within the typologies. Then I determined if my data supported the patterns, and as suggested by Hatch (2002), I "searched the data for non-examples of . . . patterns" (p.153). I continued the analysis by searching for relationships among the patterns identified and wrote succinct generalizations for each. The last step was to select data to support the generalizations. I conducted the analysis for each of the three participants and then looked for patterns across the three cases.

Subjectivity Statement

I am a white middle class female who has worked in the educational field for over 20 years. I grew up in a small Mid-western town comprised of middle to low socio-economic white families who primarily worked in farming or manufacturing. My first interaction with a person of color was when I entered college. Since early childhood, I remember having an affinity for the underdog. I was the one who played with neighbor kids who had no other friends and the one who stood up for the kids being teased at school. When I began my teaching career, my desire was to work with a minority population in an inner city because I felt an unwavering dedication to those whom I understood to be disadvantaged.

However, my first teaching job was in one of the higher socio-economic schools in the district. Being a special educator, I found myself teaching primarily the Black children who were bused in from a project several miles away. It was not until six years later when I became an administrator that I began working in the school setting I had first envisioned. I spent eight years in that setting and felt that every day was another opportunity to serve the unseen children in my world. When I began my doctoral studies, I quickly learned that what I felt since childhood had a name, as supported by movements and even theories, all classified as Social Justice.

Currently I am the principal of the school in which this research was conducted. To avoid confusing the boys and other students who may have noticed that I was spending additional time with them, I worked diligently to maintain boundaries between my role as the school leader and my role as a researcher. I carefully explained to the boys at the beginning and end of each interview session that as a researcher I wanted their help to answer some important questions. I was especially cognizant of reinforcing

my role as researcher during our interviews. For example, I kept us focused on the interviews and did not venture into other conversations about school. Similarly, outside of our interview sessions, I made it a point not to discuss the interviews, only discussing our work together during our interview time. The boys appeared to understand the two roles I held at school and did not venture into school topics during the interviews. I also maintained a researcher's log in order to note concerns about how my role as principal might be affecting the data. In addition, I reviewed the data and my data analysis with my advisor who has considerable experience conducting qualitative research.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

Research Questions

In this study, I examined the educational experiences of three Black boys for the purpose of better understanding the construction and trajectory of their academic identities. I also wanted to determine factors that might influence academic identity during the elementary school years. I defined academic identity as a student's connection to learning in school. In fact, scholars explain academic identity as students' psychological attachment to their academic environment (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Increasing my knowledge of effective educational practices and instructional strategies which foster positive academic identities, particularly in Black boys, was important to me as a principal of a school who consistently strives to provide equitable educational opportunities to all students. I believe the key to eliminating the achievement gap between our Black and White students lies in providing equitable educational opportunities. Equally important is to understand what educational practices and instructional strategies adversely affect the academic identities of the participants in this study. I sought to answer two questions through this research:

1. What is the trajectory of academic identity development of three elementary school African American boys?
2. What factors appear to have influenced their academic identity?

Because I consider the participants' perspectives as instrumental in understanding their school experiences, I collected data in a series of semi-structured individual interviews and concluded with a focus group format. As mentioned earlier,

my thoughts and reflections, documented in a researcher's log, were also used during data analysis to help me manage my assumptions and biases.

I chose to organize this chapter by research questions. The first question is followed by an individual analysis of each of the three participants. However, the second question called for a cross-case analysis in order to present the factors that affected the participants' academic identities.

RQ1. What Is the Trajectory of Academic Identity Development of Three Elementary School African American Boys?

Originally, I anticipated that I would find evidence of the boys' academic identity changing over time. However, this was not the case. Instead there was evidence that the boys' psychological connection to learning in school was established early and remained constant. It appeared that early school experiences shaped their views of themselves as students.

Data analysis revealed a consistency among the responses in relation to the boys' likes and dislikes about school. For instance, all three participants thought kindergarten was a good experience for several reasons. They enjoyed the playground games, taking naps, good snacks and the nice teachers. As the interviews continued, the boys began to mention the parts of school they did not like. When asked about the school years after kindergarten, the boys mentioned issues such as less time for play, having to take tests, and getting in trouble. Actually, all three participants measured their own identity as a student based on how often they got in trouble. Specifically, the participants' self-identification as students was based on behavior criteria: Brandon as hyper, Dante as talkative, and Franklin as one who goofs around.

Although there were commonalities among the boys' educational experiences, each participant had a unique story. The following individual stories reveal how the participants' academic identities were constructed and reinforced in elementary school.

Brandon

Brandon entered kindergarten and immediately perceived school as fun, primarily due to the amount of what he viewed as "play time" and the nap they took in the afternoon. His memories are filled with accounts of play, beginning and ending the day on the playground, playing games on the computer, and playing with props in the classroom. He especially enjoyed the daily nap, stating that it made the rest of the day better: "Because I was refueled after the nap, and then it'll [school] be more fun when you have a lot of energy." He did not remember how he felt as a kindergartener, but when asked if he felt smart, he replied, "Well yes, I already knew the stuff. My mom would tell me stuff." He then stated that kindergarten was easy because "all you had to do was listen and then go play." He indicates having a strong connection with school due to the fun he experienced but does not associate this fun with learning. As he pointed out, he knew much of what was taught in his kindergarten year. When asked to describe himself as a kindergarten student, Brandon said, "I was hyper." He did not describe himself as smart even though he entered school having already mastered much of the curriculum.

Furthermore, when asked numerous times throughout the interviews to describe himself as a student, he consistently answered with the same response, "I was hyper." He received this message beginning in kindergarten, explaining that his teacher would "turn into her strict mode and she'd say, 'Why are you so hyper?' and then I would have to sit in that chair."

Brandon continued to define himself as a “hyper” student when he conveyed that he believed his friends and teachers would also describe him as “hyper.” Although Brandon communicated that he liked school and his teachers throughout his elementary school years, the label of “hyper child” pinned on him in kindergarten continued to be how he described himself as a student. This was evident via his response to a culminating question that asked what he wished his teacher knew about him: “I’m not a horrible person. And I don’t, I’m not mean, well, not mean to others. I won’t hurt anybody or say mean things.” I found this to be an unusual response, so I asked him to explain. “Why do you want your teacher to know that?” He replied, “So they know I’m more of a calm person, because they think I’m hyper, so I’m crazy. But I can be calm, too.” When asked why this was important for his teacher to know, he explained that he is hyper most of the time, and she probably does not know. He also acknowledged a fear of being put into a lower grade because he is hyper. Brandon made no association to his class work or grades when describing himself as a student. Rather, his identity as “hyper” dominated his descriptions of himself.

Dante

Dante remembers liking school from the very first day in kindergarten. He remembers nice teachers who bought things for the classroom like books and videos, and he remembers playing with friends and playing at the playground. When asked how he felt about school after that first day, he stated, “I could like school, and that I’d like to keep going to it.” He loved the taste of the food as in the graham cracker snack, the naptime, and drawing pictures with his friends. He also remembers being able to go outside to play when all the students finished their work. He does not remember disliking anything about kindergarten, stating, “I think it was one of my best years

because when you get up in higher grades you can't sleep [nap] and you can't, like, draw pictures and you gotta pay attention to the teacher because she will give you tests." He went on to describe how he felt in kindergarten. "I feel like when I grew up, I could be anything I wanted to be." Dante understood as early as kindergarten that the purpose of education is to reach your goals. He relates how his kindergarten teacher, as well as all his teachers through elementary school, talked to him often and helped him to reach his goals.

When asked to describe something about kindergarten, first or second grade that he most remembered, Dante related moving to another school for second grade and being nervous because he did not know anybody. Dante self-reports as thriving on social interaction. The experience of changing schools could be disruptive to a child's academic and social connections. However, in Dante's case, the experience of moving before starting second grade gave him the knowledge to understand change and the confidence to know how to successfully navigate change. When I asked if he made friends at the new school, he proudly exclaimed, "I got to know everyone in the class and what's their name and what's their favorite sport." This experience was life altering for him as he stated, "I'm not nervous anymore, because we keep on moving. It doesn't matter anymore, so I won't be scared anymore. Like when I go to middle school or high school or college, I won't be scared."

When asked to describe a great experience in his primary grades, Dante described how his teacher in second grade told him why his education is important for his future. She explained "that she did not want to see me dropping out or living on the streets so I need to pay attention to her to get my education." Later he reports that he

remembers her stating that she wanted to see him on TV or in the movies. According to Dante, those words were the key to a deeper connection between his choices and his future. He realized that it was up to him to take responsibility for his education: "I know what I have to do in school. I have to listen, write down the notes and read." Hearing the teacher talk about his future helped him to dream and plan for his own success. When asked why the memory of this teacher was such a great experience in his primary years, Dante clearly expressed how this teacher and her words made him feel: "I felt confident in myself. And like I said, I could be whatever I wanted when I grow up."

Dante does not recall a bad experience in all of his elementary years. When asked if he had any teachers that he didn't like, he declared, "No, 'cause they are teachers and they are there to help you." He believes that teachers are always on his side and want the best for him. Beginning in kindergarten and continuing throughout his elementary school years, Dante exhibits a strong connection to school and learning. He feels confident that all teachers are there to help him reach his goals and, therefore, he will be successful at school, college and whatever he wants to be when he grows up.

Dante describes himself as a good student. He distinguishes a "good" student from a "great" student by explaining that he gets in trouble sometimes for talking, but he appears to be content with being good. Dante explained, "[I'm] good because when [my teacher] tells us what to do, I like to go back and talk. She tells us to stay in our writing, but I like to talk to my friends, so I say I am a good student." When asked how his friends would describe him as a student, he claims that they would say he is a great student because he is funny and makes them laugh. Interestingly, he also asserts his teacher would describe him as an outstanding student. In his words, "Because when

we do reading, nobody can get me out of the book and sometimes when she calls on me, I can barely hear her because I stay there like I'm in the book, like a character in the book.”

Dante’s conflicting descriptions of himself as a student, how his friends would describe him and how his teachers would describe him were unlike the other participants in this study. They described themselves using the same words as they felt their friends and teachers would. Dante appears to perceive that his friends and teacher would describe him more favorably than he would describe himself. Is this a reflection of his self-esteem when it comes to learning? Dante demonstrates enthusiasm and a motivation for learning. He professes to be confident in reaching his life goals. He also states that he does not always listen to the teacher and would rather talk to his friends. There appears to be a disconnection between how Dante believes his friends and teacher would describe him as a student and his actions. Dante is a struggling student who has been retained twice in elementary school.

In contrast, Dante would be considered high performing in the social world. He was selected for this study based partially on his communication skills, described by the teacher as very sociable. He maintains respectful and positive relationships with his classmates. Could Dante be using his social strengths as a measure of his status as a student? He knows he is well liked by his friends, explaining that he makes them laugh. He describes “having fun” as his favorite part of school. Perhaps he believes his friends would describe him as a great student because he creates fun at school and makes them laugh. This could also apply to Dante’s perception of his teacher describing him as an “outstanding” student. Many of his most favorite memories of school relate to his

conversations with his teachers about how he can reach his goals through education. To predict that his teachers would describe him as an outstanding student indicates his criterion is based more on social behaviors than academic behaviors.

Franklin

Franklin, the quietest of the participants, had the least to say about his elementary school days. His first inclination in answering many questions was to declare, "I don't remember." However, sometimes after probing, he would provide a brief response. Franklin appears to be nonchalant about school and teachers, having no favorites or least favorites. When asked if he remembered his teachers, he explained that he did remember them, but he still had no favorite or least favorite. He interjected that kindergarten was his favorite grade because it was easy, and there were a lot of games to play. He also did not share any good or bad experiences from his elementary school years. What Franklin did reveal is that he feels school is "mostly boring," and he would like school much better if there were more projects and games to play.

Franklin enjoyed the playtime and naptime in kindergarten, but he does not recall the teacher or any academic tasks. When asked what he didn't like about kindergarten, he reported nothing, stating that kindergarten was fun: "I was happy because there were lots of games to play." Describing the kind of student he was in kindergarten, Franklin said, "Good, nobody got in trouble, I think." This response to describe the kind of student he was in kindergarten made me realize that Franklin assesses himself as a student based on behavioral criteria.

When asked about first grade Franklin remembers nothing again, except that his mother told him he used to get in trouble a lot when he was hanging around with a particular boy. Franklin states that he does not remember much of school life up

through his second grade year. He became a student at the research site school in third grade. He does state that his family moved around a lot and that may be why he does not remember. Franklin's school records indicate that he attended four different elementary schools before third grade. This frequency in changing schools could be a factor in the absence of memories from his early school years.

Upon enrolling at the school research site in third grade, Franklin describes field day, a physical education celebration day, as a favorite memory: "It was fun and everybody was getting wet and it was just fun." This experience with field day, however, did not change the way he felt about school. He still described school as boring. He states that he cannot remember a time in third or fourth grade when he didn't like school, but also states that every school day, he would rather stay at home because "I have a lot of stuff to play with there."

An interesting exchange with Franklin occurred when I asked him if there was a time in third or fourth grade when he felt really smart. Franklin does not remember a time when he felt smart in school. He answered briefly, "No, not really." I rephrased the question, asking him to try to go back to third or fourth grade and describe a time when he did a really good job in school. He replied, "Well, I don't really even remember if I felt really smart or anything like that, but I was a good student." Probing, I asked him to explain how he was a good student. He responded with, "I always try to obey the rules, and I always try to do my work." When I asked if being a good student meant being smart, he replied, "Not technically." Probing further, I asked him to explain. He rationalized that being a good student is about trying, and being a smart student means knowing a lot of things. Fascinated by this conversation, I stated, "Well you know a lot

of things, don't you?" Again, his reply was a quick, "No." When asked to tell me more, Franklin replied, "I do not have a good memory, so I do not know all the answers." Was Franklin referring to the ability to answer academic questions in class? Does he not feel like a smart student because he has trouble remembering things? Then according to Franklin, being smart is about having a good memory. Self-described as lacking a good memory, he could not possibly feel like a smart student.

I wondered what impact this thought process had on his academic identity. Could he have a strong psychological connection to learning if he did not believe he was smart? Also, could his view of himself as a student who is not smart be a reason for describing school as boring? This is possible. What was unclear in the data collected was how Franklin's belief that smartness is synonymous with memory originated. Was it because he could not answer the questions during his early school years?

When asked to describe himself as a student, Franklin says, "One that goofs around." He also said his friends and teachers would describe him as a student who goofs around. When probed for his thoughts about how students and teachers viewed him, he stated that they may conclude that he works hard as well. With his original description of goofing around and secondarily of trying hard, Franklin is describing himself as a student based on behaviors rather than achievement. Because he does not feel smart, is he creating a niche for himself in the classroom, one of being the class clown?

Franklin's academic identity appears to be connected to his perception of lacking a good memory. His connection to learning is limited based on his idea that smart is

knowing a lot of things. Perhaps his love of games and having fun is really how he learns best, and school would be much more interesting to him if more learning occurred in a game format.

The trajectory of academic identity of the three participants in this study seemed to have been set early in their elementary years and remained constant regardless of schools or teachers. Brandon, the participant who described himself as hyper each time he was asked, first heard that he was hyper from his kindergarten teacher. Dante, the participant who counts on his social relationships to function successfully at school, recounts playing with his friends as a favorite kindergarten memory. Franklin, a high performing student, says he does not feel smart because he does not have a good memory. He described school as boring, beginning in first grade.

RQ2. What Factors Appear to Have Influenced Their Academic Identity?

After finding that the trajectory of the participants' academic identities remained relatively stable throughout the elementary school years, I questioned whether I would find many factors that appeared to have influenced their academic identities. After all, their psychological connection to school appeared to have been set early and to remain persistent. Nevertheless, I identified factors that increased the connection to learning for these students and others that reinforced the identities that were established early in their school years.

I separated the factors that appeared to have influenced academic identity into two categories, classroom supports and family supports. Classroom supports included several sub-categories that consisted of those factors that occurred within the classroom setting. Such factors included teachers' instructional and behavioral practices. The second type of supports that appeared to affect academic identity was

the influence of family. These supports were much narrower in scope and may or may not influence what occurs in the classroom. However, the data indicate that these supports also influenced the participants' academic identities.

Classroom Supports

The boys all reported memories of classroom practices and how those practices made them feel. One such practice might be referred to as instructional design. The boys expressed a strong connection to learning through hands-on projects, games and the use of technology. Formal assessments appeared to have a negative influence on the participants' connection to the learning environment. They did not see them as learning opportunities, but rather as difficult tasks and perhaps even evidence of their failure as students. Additionally, important to all three participants was being recognized and rewarded within the classroom. The students gave several examples of these methods of reward including teacher praise, completion incentives and using technology with built-in rewards.

Instructional design. Instructional design encompasses the consideration of learning needs and goals and the development of a delivery method to meet those needs. In other words, it includes how students will interact with content and how they will relate to the process for the purpose of learning. In this section, the participants' description of three preferred delivery methods are discussed as related to their academic identities. They described hands-on projects, the use of games, and technology as not only engaging, but also as the way they learn best.

Projects/hands-on activities. All three of the study participants mentioned the projects or hands-on activities in which they participated in school. They revealed the

extent to which they connected to this approach to learning by sharing their memories of projects that spanned the elementary school years.

When asked to describe a great experience from kindergarten, first or second grade, Brandon said, “Projects, like when I said at Christmas, we did the gingerbread house. We did lots of special things and so I liked that. And more than the gingerbread house. We colored eggs at Easter and stuff like that.” What made the projects so fun for him? Was it connected to what he learned? He explained: “I could build stuff. It felt cool.” When asked why it felt so good, he replied excitedly, “Because I didn’t know how to build it and when you look back at it, it’s really fun to see what you can do.... I never built anything before!” This delivery method provided him with the opportunity to discover something about his capabilities and led to a positive personal and academic identity. It was a powerful teaching method for him.

Dante’s experiences with projects were a bit different. He mentioned projects in the first interview when asked about what he did not do well in school. His answer was, “Science, you have to do a lot of projects that you have to put stuff together and I can barely put stuff together.” However, later when I asked about his favorite grade, he replied, “I’d say fifth because we do a lot of stuff in fifth, like projects.” They had to figure out how to turn on the lights with a battery. The kindergarten project, likely an individual effort, required assembly, an activity that is difficult for him. However, when given a project where he works in collaboration with others and that does not require assembly from part to whole, Dante found enjoyment in learning and success. Thus, projects remain important vehicles in delivering academic connection, but their power increases when the student experiences success with them.

Franklin conveyed his enthusiasm for project-based learning when asked about how he liked to learn new things. He declared without hesitation, “Do hands-on activities.” Actually, all three participants claimed that projects or hands-on activities were how they learned best. I asked Franklin, who states that school is boring, what would help him want to come to school every day. He replied, “Hands on projects and stuff like that.” Additionally, when asked what they would change about school, all three boys commented that they would include more projects.

All three participants also reported being more engaged in learning when they were actively involved with projects. In addition, they felt even more excited about learning when their social needs were met through project learning in cooperative groups. One example Dante enthusiastically shared was working with classmates on historical plays in 4th grade. The impact of participating in such hands-on projects on academic identity appears to be important. Unfortunately, these activities were not a daily part of the participants’ school life. Even in the early years of school, the boys described them as occurring only sporadically.

Games for academic learning. The earliest memories of school for all three participants included play, both outside on the playground and in the classroom. They talked of basketball games, center play, and computer games. Each participant reported that one thing he liked best about kindergarten and every grade thereafter were the games that were played in school.

When asked what he remembered most from kindergarten, first or second grade, Brandon talked about a game that was played at lunch: “The cafeteria lady, she would play stuff like Simon Says.” This game is often used to teach listening and following

directions. He also shared a memory about winning a math fact game in 3rd grade. He explained that he felt smart when that happened because he “beat all the smart students.” Interestingly, knowing his math facts did not make him feel smart, but beating the smart students in a math fact game did. Brandon referred to the other students as smart, even though he beat them in the math fact game. However, feeling smart was temporary and did not have a lasting effect on his description of himself as a student. It appears that first impressions, even in reference to oneself, are important.

Other academic games were also considered to be engaging and promoted a connection to learning. Dante shared this story of a game he remembered:

It was a smart board game. It was a math question. So we have our teams. If you got it right, you just put a check mark. You got to draw it on your white board. When you hold it up and show it to them (teachers), she'd say yes or no? If she say yes, we just put a check mark right there next to the question.

Again, Dante recollected the use of the collaborative structure of this game. The social factor, as well as the game format, appeared to increase his engagement with the content.

Finally, Brandon and Franklin mentioned academic games on the computer. In kindergarten, Brandon played a game with a talking animal. “You have to solve the problems and then it'll be fun because if we solve it right we would earn points and then we can buy a character and if we get more right, we can buy new clothes.” Franklin shared that using the computer for ST (Spatial and Temporal) Math helped him remember and learn more in math. This computer program teaches mathematical concepts using only visual input. Clearly, all the participants viewed games as a motivating and engaging way to spend time at school.

Technology. All three participants discussed technology as a preferred method of learning. Each participant wanted to have access to a variety of technologies including academic games such as Ticket to Read, ST Math, You Tube videos, and computers. Brandon recalled using technology in kindergarten and being especially motivated by compliments he received when his answers were correct. “If you would do a question right, it would say ‘wonderful, ‘great,’ or ‘good job.’ ‘You got it right.’” Dante explained, “You-Tube videos for math and science tell you how to do things before you go try it. So you go back to your seat like you know what to do.” Franklin explained that ST Math is “really fun and it helps me learn or remember stuff that I forgot.” He continued to explain, “I would like to use computers more. We could go on programs that help us learn.” Thus, technology not only provides the content of a particular subject, but also stimulates a connection to the learning process by providing instant positive reinforcement.

Instructional design as exemplified in hands-on projects, games and technology appeared to be an important factor in all three participants’ connection to learning. They became more engaged, had fun and felt positive about their abilities. It would be interesting to see if the positive effects would become more permanent if these types of instructional delivery methods became a bigger part of the boys’ instructional day.

Assessment strategies. Brandon’s perception of a pretest or “show what you know” activity was quite telling. He describes the effect of pretesting on his academic identity:

At first I wouldn’t get the subject but I would get mad because I would understand it so easily after she told me about it. Then I was thinking that she, (teacher) could’ve told us before we started it (pre-tests), but she wanted to see what we know. So I didn’t do so good because I don’t know

that much about math. I'm not showing what I know. Well, I am showing what I know, but what I know is not that good. It doesn't make me feel like I can't do it, but it's saying that I don't know it, and I want to know everything.

Brandon clearly revealed vulnerability when discussing his experience with pretests. He expressed confidence in his learning ability, believing that he could learn anything, if taught first. The pretest process, however, appeared to feel risky to him in that it provided evidence of what he did not know. The repeated experience of not feeling smart may have had a significant influence on his academic identity.

Dante also expressed an aversion to these types of assessments. Asked to discuss a bad experience in 3rd or 4th grade, Dante replied, "Well when we first started fourth, we had to do a test. We had to do a test, and I don't like doing tests." He explained that this test was to see what students knew from third grade and earlier. Being tested before explicit teaching appears to affect the academic identity of both these participants. Both boys were uncomfortable showing what they knew before explicit teaching occurred. While pre-tests may be useful to the teachers, it is possible that they are damaging to some students' psychological connection to school.

The Support of Family

All three participants discussed how their families have provided support in their education. As mentioned earlier, Brandon remembers kindergarten was easy, claiming he already knew "the stuff" because his mother helped teach him. Brandon also credits his father for helping him with his math: "He's teaching me about perimeters and then that's what you are supposed to learn in 6th grade so he is giving me a jump start in life." The support from his family has been more than academic as evidenced by Brandon's rendition of a conversation he had with his father. There was a time in third

grade when he did not like school. “A teacher would say I did something, and I did not do it. I felt like people just wanted to get me in trouble, but my dad said, ‘This is not operation-get-Brandon-in-trouble.’” By re-adjusting Brandon’s perspective, his father helped Brandon refocus his previous school affiliation.

Dante explains how his family supports his education by helping him with his homework: “Mom is a great person. When I can’t do something she helps me with my homework or advice.” He reports his dad helping with science projects or looking things up on the computer, and even his sister helps when he needs to make things. Dante remembers when he first went to school, his teacher in kindergarten would tell his mother how well he did at school. He remembers her saying, “He really sticks to his work.” His mother would then tell him what a good job he was doing. Positive feedback from both the teacher and his mother about his behaviors in the process of learning had a significant impact that Dante recalled years later. Since the praise was about behavior (i.e., staying on task), not his academic progress, it may have reinforced his association of his academic identity with behavior rather than academics, an association that continues today.

Franklin talked about the support his parents gave him with his homework and behavior. He remembers his mother talking to him when he was young, and the teacher would write about his behavior in his agenda book. Franklin remembers his mother telling him about a time when he was hanging out with a boy who was not good for him. His mother said he was always in trouble that year. Again, it was behavior that was mentioned by the teacher in the agenda book, helping to form Franklin’s academic identity around his behavior, rather than his academic accomplishments.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the boys in this study appeared to describe themselves as students based on how often they got in trouble at school. After analyzing the data on family supports, it became clear that the students' families reinforce this thinking.

Identity Factors

I learned that the trajectory of the participants' academic identities was actually quite stable. The most important factor in forming their initial academic identities was the hidden curriculum of the first two years of school. In particular, teacher comments about the boys appeared to shape their views of themselves as students. The factors that appear to have influenced the stabilization of these academic identities were found both inside and outside of the classroom. Classroom and family supports served to solidify and sometimes modify academic identities. Factors that may have influenced a change in the trajectory, such as the participants' preferred delivery methods of learning – specifically projects, games and technology – were not prevalent enough in the instructional design to effect a permanent change. However, it is an exciting prospect that these instructional design methods could have a significant effect on academic identity by being featured more prominently in instructional design. This could represent a direct way to increase the boys' academic achievement and decrease the gap between Black and White students.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this research was to study the elementary school experiences of three fifth-grade African American boys and to provide insight into the development of their academic identity and the factors that influenced it. By analyzing the boys' personal narratives, I sought a deeper understanding of how African American boys respond to people, practices and structures within the school setting.

The knowledge I have gained will be used to evaluate practices at my school site that are found to either strengthen or weaken African American students' connection to learning. It is critical to identify factors that promote a positive connection to learning because the outlook for African American boys has been dismal.

This study was conducted at the elementary school of which I am the principal. The school, as well as the district and state, presents an achievement gap between Black students and their White peers in both reading and math. As the leader of the school, I advocate for equitable educational opportunities for all students, especially those marginalized in society. Academic identity is found to be associated with student achievement, so I wanted to investigate how the academic identity of three fifth-grade African American boys was formed and shaped during elementary school. To do this, I collected data through a series of four interviews, three individual and one focus group. The participants ranged in age from ten to twelve years old and had attended the school for a minimum of two years. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. I analyzed the data collected from the interviews and was informed by the researcher's log I kept throughout the study.

The findings of this research revealed that the academic identities of African American boys were established within the first year or two of school. The study participants developed academic identities based on descriptions of the behavior of teachers and students rather than their connection with learning. That is, one described himself as the hyper student, another one as the talkative student and the third participant, as one who goofs off in class. Not one participant associated his academic identity with achievement or grades.

I found that once set, the academic identity of all three boys did not change throughout elementary school. In fact, all the participants identified as students in the same way, using the same words, each time they were asked to describe themselves as students. Their identification as students remained unwavering from kindergarten or first grade and into fifth grade regardless of how much I probed for more information.

In answer to my second question that sought to discover factors that influenced academic identity, the findings were primarily related to classroom supports, especially instructional design. All three participants reported they felt more connected to learning when physical movement and social interaction were a part of the lesson delivery methods. These included hands-on and project-based learning, game formats and the use of technology for learning. However, even though the boys felt successful and enthusiastic with these lesson delivery methods, their positive response did not appear to alter their academic identities as students who did not behave well in school.

Another factor that influenced the boys' academic identities was family support. In relating family support, the participants told of the emphasis on the learning or academic aspect of school, more than the behavioral aspect. However, this focus did

not appear to overcome the boys' focus on behavior. For example, Dante explained, "My parents help me with my homework and they did like other things for me. If I needed help for a science project, my dad helped me." Again, the boys continued to describe themselves based on their behaviors regardless of positive or negative academic success.

Contributions to the Literature

The findings of this study were consistent with the literature on academic identity and hidden curriculum. As noted in Chapter 2, academic identity refers to a student's psychological connection to the learning environment, and this connection is related to the identities that students construct through the hidden curriculum (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). The findings indicated that the study participants' constructed their sense of themselves as students from what appeared to be the hidden curriculum in their classrooms.

The hidden curriculum refers to that which is taught implicitly and is shaped by the dominant culture (Apple, 2004). Previous research indicates that the hidden curriculum is always in play in schools, and it serves to transmit unspoken messages to students about values, attitudes, and their own self-worth (Dreeben, 1967; Jackson, 1968; Vallance, 1973). Students receive powerful messages about their ability, personality traits and behaviors through the hidden curriculum. For example, Brandon learned in his kindergarten year that physical activity was not a positive attribute in school. Brandon, a physically active boy, internalized the idea that the label of hyper was not good. His academic identity became that of a hyper student. His teacher did not explicitly teach this, but Brandon picked it up through five words that were often

heard throughout his kindergarten year; “Why are you so hyper?” Brandon incorporated “hyper” as the primary component of his academic identity.

All three of the study participants identified as students based on behavior criteria. This identity was neither positive nor connected to learning. This finding is consistent with previous research that found the development of positive academic identities to be challenging for African American students due to barriers in school (Phinney & Rotheram, 1987). These barriers mirror those in society and are based on societal expectations determined by the dominant class. For example, Franklin, an above-average student as measured by state testing, chooses not to do his homework, and regularly goofs off in class. He also describes school as boring. It would not be unusual for an above-average student who is able to excel without doing his homework to be considered for an accelerated curriculum. However, Franklin has not been considered for an accelerated program. Perhaps his status as an African American male is a barrier to certain opportunities and the development of a positive academic identity.

As previously mentioned, it is important to establish a strong academic identity that promotes academic achievement in the elementary school years because a decrease in motivation often occurs during adolescence (Green, et al., 2008). The boys in the present study have not developed a connection to learning and perhaps as a result, do not associate achievement with their identity as students. This is consistent with the body of research that finds that students who are marginalized in our society feel disconnected from learning (Phinney & Rotheram, 1987). The participants in my study did not base their academic identities on the explicit teachings in the classroom,

but rather the implicit ones. Their identities appear to have derived from the hidden curriculum, possibly by repeated correction and redirection in the classroom. The results of the present study are consistent with the previous research finding that suggest a hidden agenda to maintain social order exists in schools and influences academic identities (Apple, 2004; Dreeben, 1967; Jackson, 1968; Vallance; 1973). The participants' descriptions of themselves as students, although related to behavior rather than learning, was nonetheless strong and stable.

Implications for Practice

The primary purpose of this research was to answer two questions about academic identity and African American boys. I wanted to determine the trajectory of academic identity and also the factors that influenced that identity throughout the elementary school years. In answering these questions, several findings emerged as key implications of this research. With respect to the trajectory of academic identity, I found that all participants described themselves as students early in their school history, and that identity remained static throughout the elementary school years. I also learned that the identity adopted by each of the three participants was based on behavioral criteria rather than academic criteria and was learned through the hidden curriculum. Finally, I found several factors that appeared to influence the participants' connection to learning, although they did not alter their academic identities over time.

Determining that the academic identities of the participants were developed early and remained constant throughout the elementary school years made me realize that the first few years of schooling are the most important in preparing a student for continued success. This implication is critical because the identity developed during the first few years of school may very well determine the educational outcome for students

by setting the course they will follow throughout their education. After all, research indicates that a positive academic identity is highly correlated to academic success (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000). Thus, the formation of a negative academic identity could lead to long-term failure in school. As I think about pre-school and kindergarten classes, I understand how the participants in this study developed negative academic identities, ones connected to behavior rather than learning. During those early years in school, students are indoctrinated with procedures. For example, walking in line, taking turns, sitting still and quietly listening are all a big part of early education, for the purpose of providing order in the learning environment. Because all these activities fall under the behavioral aspect of school, it is not difficult to see how students would identify themselves based on behavioral criteria, particularly when they are repeatedly given the message that their behavior does not meet the teacher's expectations. The participants in this study identified themselves as students based on behaviors that deterred them from feeling success as students.

When students gauge their success based on behavioral criteria rather than academic criteria, they only need to meet behavioral expectations to feel like a great student. Regardless of their academic achievement, these students may leave elementary school feeling like good students because they have learned how they are expected to behave in class. If students already feel like good students based on behavior, their motivation to achieve academically may be diminished. This may work for them in elementary school because academic competition is not emphasized. However, it does not work in middle school and high school where students become competitive in preparation for their futures. Without an academic identity based on

academic achievement, students begin to miss opportunities that may affect their futures in and out of school. In order to support the academic success of African American students, it is imperative that elementary school teachers learn how to foster academic identities based on a positive connection with academic achievement.

Further research in this area could determine if academic identities based on behavior are related to ethnicity, gender or race. It would be important to understand the roles that these features play in the formation and evolution of academic identity. As we understand the social construction of academic identity better, we will be in a better position to cultivate the development of positive academic identities that are based on achievement among the diverse students in our classrooms.

A second finding pertaining to the participants' static academic identity is that they were constructed through the hidden curriculum in the classroom. The teachers did not explicitly teach Brandon that being "hyper" was bad; however, he got the message. Similarly, teachers did not explicitly teach Dante that talking with friends was a negative behavior. However, each boy described his connection to school based first on these behaviors and interpreted them as negative. All three participants determined their status as students based on how often they were in trouble. They focused on the negative messages and maintained this focus for years. In other words, they incorporated the negative hidden curriculum and did not change their self-perceptions regardless of whether their grades were good or poor. Hidden curriculum was more powerful than explicit curriculum for these African American boys.

The implication of this finding lies in the power of the hidden curriculum. This is an important implication, suggesting that educators must attend as closely to the hidden

curriculum as the explicit curriculum. In particular, educators must first recognize and acknowledge hidden curriculum as a force that serves the values and interests of those who have established it, that is, white, middle class, and often female educators. Thus, the hidden curriculum may serve to reinforce inequities related to class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Once understood, educators would recognize the power of the hidden curriculum and use it to diminish the marginalization of non-dominant group members. Perhaps they would also begin to recognize the impact of negative attention to student traits and judgmental language with very young students.

If the study participants learned that their specific traits were negative in the classroom, then the hidden curriculum could also teach the participants to identify their unique traits in a positive manner. I propose that the study participants could have embraced a school identity associated with their individual behaviors that encouraged academic success, had the teacher promoted their attributes as positive rather than negative. That is, the participants might have embraced the terms “hyper” as bringing energy to learning and “talkative” an asset in learning, if the teachers had presented them that way. In this manner, early in their school experience, the attention to student behaviors would be interpreted as assets rather than deficits, thus cultivating a positive academic identity. Perhaps identifying the students’ characteristics in positive terms would have helped the boys to understand when and how to use their individual traits to enhance their learning experiences. Further research in this area could well lead to changes in the curriculum for teacher preparation and continuing education programs.

In exploring factors that appeared to influence the participants’ academic identities, I found that these African American boys favored a certain type of

instructional design. They wanted to be physically active and socially engaged during the learning process. Given the way the boys described themselves as socially and physically active, it was not surprising that their preferred learning mode would encompass these two characteristics. The more active/interactive delivery method could be accomplished by pairing cooperative grouping with project-based learning opportunities, as well as having students interact with games and technology. These methods would address the social needs in a cooperative way while maintaining an academic focus.

The participants all explained that projects were their favorite way to learn. However, opportunities for this type of instructional design were infrequent, described as occurring only on special occasions. The participants in this study were given a message that their preferred method of learning was not a priority in school, thus continuing to marginalize them. What if the boys were engaged in their preferred learning activities on a daily basis? Would the influence be enough to strengthen their connection to learning or even shift their academic identities from a behavioral to an academic focus? Would Dante, the participant who would rather talk than complete his writing assignments, describe himself proudly as the reporter for his group's project if he had the opportunity to do so on a regular basis? Perhaps by designing instruction to match the boys' learning preferences, educators might help them see themselves as successful learners and identify enthusiastically with academic learning.

An area of future study I believe is important to examine is racial identity as it relates to academic identity. This will help me to further understand how to support the education of Black boys. Another area of future study would be to examine the use of

the boys' preferred instructional designs over time. A study of the effects on academic identity and achievement of instructional designs consisting primarily of projects, games and technology would be helpful to educators.

Although I have interviewed children before, this was the first time I conducted interviews for research purposes. I learned that the study participants must fully understand what the research is about prior to beginning interviews. I did explain the study and our roles, but it was not until the third interview that I believe the students really understood what we were actually doing. I found that the further we progressed through the interviews the more the boys understood what their role was in the study. I was able to answer their early questions as they came up, but this experience made me realize that the more I shared about the study with them, the more they shared during the interviews. I also learned that it is important to share information throughout the process, such as how the audio recordings were transcribed, how I organized the data for analysis and what was recorded in my researcher's log. I recognized how all this builds rapport and creates a feeling of real involvement, which could in turn affect the quality of data, collected.

Next Steps

My next step as a practitioner scholar is to take action based upon the knowledge gained from conducting this research. As the principal of an elementary school with a professional mission of promoting equitable educational opportunities for all students, I feel that my newly found knowledge has created a direction that will help focus my thoughts and actions.

I hope to use the knowledge gained through this research to increase my capacity to influence the academic achievement of African American students,

particularly boys in the school I lead. What strikes me most is that the three participants all identified as students based on behavior, specifically behavior their teachers viewed as negative. I am concerned that this is counterproductive to their academic success and may even help explain the achievement gap between Black and White students. That is, if African American boys base their identity as students on behavior, it may become challenging for them to excel in a system that measures success based on academic achievement.

To address this problem, we as educators must explicitly and implicitly promote an academic identity attached to academic learning. My first action will be to share my findings about the boys' academic identity with my staff during our Professional Learning Community (PLC). Understanding how the participants identified as students and what factors influenced their connection to learning is important for the staff to know if we are truly committed to facilitating the success of all of our students.

The Professional Learning Community is a regularly scheduled weekly meeting in which we study our practice. This will be the venue in which my research is shared. After explaining the research and findings, follow up activities will be scheduled on a monthly basis. One will be to examine interview transcripts for implications. I usually have cross-grade-level teams working together on this type of activity to promote inclusivity of perspectives. All groups report back to the large group in a variety of ways. This could be by verbal sharing, or via written work passed through the groups, or by drawings that depict the particular scenario. I would ask each group to identify a specific part of the transcript that may have important implications for their work, our school or our community. All groups would share their PLC work at the end of the

session. This process will continue monthly throughout the school year. Additional discussions might focus on the preferred learning styles of students, alternative instructional designs, and how to foster a connection to learning based on academic progress. I believe there is enough information that can be gleaned from this research to guide our PLC throughout the year.

In addition to sharing the knowledge learned about the academic identities of the African American boys in this study, I propose that attention to the students' connection to learning become a part of the educators' lesson planning process. It is my intention to initiate these discussions by guiding teachers' attention to the practices that marginalize some students while providing an advantage to others. I intend to include in my monthly team leader agenda an item that explores ways to include more hands-on/project-based instruction. This will help to meet the needs of African American boys as well as other populations who may benefit from such active hands-on and project-based learning opportunities. Rethinking instructional methods in this manner will require that educators shift their understanding of learning environments from teacher-centered and passive to student-centered and active. I believe this is a natural consequence of project-based learning. Teachers structure the projects, but student learning is derived from hands-on experience rather than being told and shown.

Similarly, we must shift our understanding of student behavioral attributes from deficits that interfere with learning to assets that promote learning. Examining the lenses from which we as educators view our students and families as well as their behaviors is important if we are going to teach all children with equal emphasis. Being a white, middle-class female working with primarily white, middle-class female

educators, we must understand that our values and beliefs can inadvertently be imposed upon the students and families we serve. One method we can use to improve understanding is to facilitate discussions regarding these lenses and how they can lead to practices that marginalize some students and provide an advantage to others. These collegial discussions will serve to deepen my own understanding and that of others, with the goal of improving academic success for African American students and other students who may feel marginalized.

Conducting this research has provided me the procedural framework to expand upon my findings and develop other areas of research that can be explored less formally within my school setting. I believe the experience with this research has motivated me to systematically work with educators to better understand how children identify as students and how we as educators impact this identification. This may lead to studying the educational experiences of other student groups whose academic success lags behind the dominant group as well.

I have access to educators who work with a diverse group of students on a daily basis. We discuss student achievement regularly and know that there are particular groups of students who perform better than others. I plan to use this research to expand the discussion about how to meet the educational needs of African American students as well as students with disabilities and English Language Learners. By sharing what I have learned in reference to academic identity, how it was formed and remained constant throughout the elementary school years and the factors that may have influenced it, I move forward with a deeper understanding. Sharing the findings of this research with my staff would allow us to better understand our influences on

students and to provide more choices in planning how our students connect to learning and possibly improving how the students perceive their own abilities.

Concluding Thoughts

In closing, I believe what I learned most from this investigation about academic identity is that I and other educators have the capacity to identify factors that shape the education of African American elementary school students. By understanding the students' connection to learning, we gain the knowledge that is necessary to engage students in learning that supports achievement. What struck me from this research was insight the study participants shared about the types of activities that most engage them. They know how they learn best and what they needed their teachers to do to help them learn. Is this not the knowledge educators are seeking?

The process of this inquiry has helped me learn to research current bodies of literature in order to become better informed about significant issues of teaching and learning, to question my own assumptions and beliefs about how educators teach and students learn, and finally, to expand my perceptions of educational practices that marginalize some students. I do not believe I would have gained this knowledge had I not completed this research. The challenge before us is to take the steps necessary to intervene in the academic identity development of young African American boys.

As stated earlier, the theoretical perspective of Critical Social Justice informed my study. As a Principal and leader for social justice, I feel a tremendous responsibility to continue growing in my practice and leading others to an awareness of the practices that are found to marginalize students. Through this work, we may all become promoters of social justice. As Hytten (2006) states, the central goals of educational curriculum and practices must be democratic issues. It is imperative that we serve the

needs of all learners, in order to empower those who may currently feel marginalized.
By doing so, we can promote the equality of educational experiences for all students.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW ONE: BACKGROUND, GENERAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCES (45 MIN.)

1. How old are you?
2. Who do you live with? Tell me about them.
3. What do you like to do outside of school? When do you do that? With whom?
4. When you grow up what do you want to do? Have you always wanted to do this? Why this?
5. How long have you been attending this school? Where were you before this?
6. What is something in school that you do well? Tell me about it.
7. What is something in school that you not do well? Tell me about that.
8. How would you describe yourself as a student? Tell me more about that.
9. How would your friends describe you as a student?
10. How would your teacher describe you as a student?
11. What was your favorite grade? Why? Least favorite? Why?
12. Who was your favorite teacher? Why? Least favorite? Why?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW TWO: KINDERGARTEN THROUGH SECOND GRADES (45 MIN.)

1. Tell me about your earliest school memory. How did that make you feel about school?
2. What did you like about kindergarten? Tell me about that.
3. What did you not like about kindergarten? Tell me more about that. How did you feel as a kindergartener?
4. Tell me about something that happened in kindergarten, first or second grade that you most remember.
5. Why do you think you remember this so well?
6. Tell me about a great experience from kindergarten, first or second grade. What made the experience so good? Why do you think it felt good?
7. Tell me about a bad experience from kindergarten, first or second grade. What made the experience a bad one?
8. Tell me about your teacher in kindergarten; first grade; second grade? What do you remember most about each of them?
9. Were you a good student in kindergarten? How do you know? How about first grade? How do you know you were/weren't a good student? Second grade? How do you know?
10. What did you like best about school in kindergarten? In first grade? In second grade? Tell me about these things you liked.

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW THREE: THIRD AND FOURTH GRADES (45 MIN.)

1. Tell me about a good experience from third or fourth grade. How did this make you feel about school?
2. Tell me about a bad experience from third or fourth grade. How did this make you feel about school?
3. In which subjects did you get the best grades? Why did you make the best grades in this/these subject/s?
4. Which subjects did you not do so well in? Why do you think this happens?
5. Can you remember a time in third or fourth grade when you felt really smart? Tell me about this. What happened that made you feel so smart?
6. Can you remember a time in third or fourth grade when you didn't like school? Why do you think this happened? What could someone have done to help you feel better about school?
7. Did you like your teachers in third and fourth grade? Tell me about them.
8. Who or what has helped you feel successful in school?
9. What was the best thing that happened in third or fourth grade? Tell me more about it.
10. Tell me about a teacher that helped you feel like a good student.

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP – DISCUSSION ABOUT THEMSELVES AS STUDENTS (45 MIN.)

1. How would you describe a great teacher?
2. How would you describe a great student?
3. How would you describe yourself as a student?
4. What could we do differently here to be sure that all kids like school?
5. How would these changes help kids like school? How would the changes help you?
6. If you could change one thing about school, what would it be?
7. Can you think of something you have learned in school that you got really excited about? What was it and why was it exciting for you?
8. Can you think of something you learned about or worked on in school that you really didn't like? What was it and why didn't you like it?
9. Describe how you like to learn new things. What can the teacher do to help you learn? What can you do to help yourself learn?
10. What do you think teachers need to do to help you feel great about school? Do you think teachers will do that? Why or Why not?
11. What do you wish your teachers knew about you? Why this?

APPENDIX E
EXCERPTS FROM INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS FOR EACH PARTICIPANT

From interview with Brandon:

Interviewer: That felt cool, yeah, I bet it did. Why do you think something like that felt good?

Brandon: Because I don't know how to build it and when you look back at it, it's really fun to see what you can do, because like when you decide tracing something and then when you get to look at the whole picture and then you can really see the shape. If you really didn't do it, but kinda like it was 50/50.

Interviewer: 50/50. What does that mean?

Brandon: Yeah, she would show us how to do first and then we just copy that. It's still cool because I could do it.

Interviewer: So you didn't know what you could do?

Brandon: Yeah.

Interviewer: And that made you feel good?

Brandon: I never built anything.

Interviewer: Ok. Can you tell me about a bad experience from kindergarten first or second?

Brandon: I didn't get to be in the spelling bee.

Interviewer: What grade was that?

Brandon: Maybe second or first.

Interviewer: What did you remember about that?

From interview with Dante:

Interviewer: Okay. Tell me something that happened in kindergarten, first, or second grade, that you remember most.

Dante: I'd say second, because when I first went to second, um I was nervous, because I didn't know a lot of people in the class, so like when we go to know each other we got to be friends and not fight each other.

Interviewer: And you were nervous because?

Dante: I didn't know anybody in the class.

Interviewer: Because you didn't know anybody. And did you get to know people?

Dante: Yeah like I got to know everybody in the class, and what's their name and what's their favorite sport.

Interviewer: Okay. So out of all of your memories when you think about it, that's the one that you really remember, being scared to go to second grade?

Dante: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Good. Why do you think you remember that so well?

Dante: Well, because like right now, I'm not nervous anymore, because we keep on moving. It doesn't matter anymore, so I won't be scared anymore. Like when I go to middle school or high school or college, I won't be scared.

Interviewer: Because you already did that in second grade, right?

Dante: Yes.

From interview with Franklin:

Interviewer: Can you remember a time in 3rd or 4th grade when you felt really, really smart?

Franklin: No, not really.

Interviewer: Stop a minute and think about that a little more. Think about a time where you felt like you did a good job in 3rd or 4th grade.

Franklin: Well I don't really even remember if I felt really smart or anything like that.

Interviewer: Do you feel smart now?

Franklin: Probably, I don't really know.

Interviewer: Franklin, do you think you're a good student?

Franklin: Yes.

Interviewer: Why do you think you're a good student?

Franklin: Because I always try to obey the rules and I always try to do my work.

Interviewer: Okay, if you're a good student, does that mean you're smart?

Franklin: Not technically.

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about that?

Franklin: If you're good it doesn't mean your smart.

Interviewer: Okay. What does good mean?

Franklin: It's when you do good behavior.

Interviewer: Okay, and what does smart mean?

Franklin: It means that you know a lot of things.

APPENDIX F
EXCERPT FROM THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

Interviewer: This is our focus group interview. I've got Brandon, Franklin, and Dante with me today.

Interviewer: Our first question, boys, is "How would you describe a great teacher?"

Brandon: They're fun. And they really will do the right thing. Well they, well they're kind of strict too. They're fun and strict but they can be fun and strict.

Franklin: They do fun things like if they do a science experiment about helium, we could have balloons and we could suck up the helium, something like that. Do fun experiments.

Dante: A fun teacher is how they like to play with you. Like go outside and play and another teacher will help you with your goal.

Interviewer: OK. So you all agree that a great teacher is fun?

Brandon: Yes.

Franklin: Oh I thought we were talking about a fun teacher.

Interviewer: No, the question was how do you describe a great teacher?

Franklin: A great teacher could help you with your work too. And explain things slowly for you if you need it.

Brandon: And if you, like what he said, and if you don't understand still, you can, she'll still explain it to me and you can ask a student to help you if they understand.

Dante: Like Franklin said, how she could help you read and do stuff that you don't understand.

Interviewer: OK so great teachers help you and they're fun.

Brandon: Yes.

Interviewer: One of you also said they're strict, what does that mean? Brandon?

Brandon: I said that and well because they're, you can learn better from that.

Interviewer: Tell me more about that.

Brandon: Because strict teachers are teachers that makes you do work and then you have to, and then they get a little grumpy when you don't do what you're supposed to do but still a fun teacher can be that way, but if you don't do

anything wrong then they won't be so mean and they can, they would just be nice.

Dante: Like what Brandon just said how she'd be a little grumpy if you don't do your work. If you keep playing and talking, if you go back playing and talking she'll come make you get out of the room or something. If that happen, the next day you can still respect her because she's your teacher and an adult.

Interviewer: OK. So when you say get out of the room, she sends you to timeout or something?

Brandon: Yeah, like a chill pill.

Interviewer: And that's OK?

Franklin: Yes because it gets the other kids off task.

Interviewer: OK, so a great teacher might send you out to keep other kids on task?

Brandon: Yeah, but basically it's your fault, because you're the one that did the action to make yourself go outside the room to another classroom.

Interviewer: OK, so a great teacher is fun, makes you accountable or keeps you on track, and sometimes is strict with you. Next question, "How would you describe a great student?"

Dante: How I can describe a great student is how they get their work done. Like how they stare into their book, pay attention to the teacher.

Franklin: A great student, they always turn in their work. They don't back sass the teacher. They don't play around when they're not supposed to and they do their work.

Brandon: I'd say what Dante and Franklin say and also they give their best effort in what they always do. They don't get in trouble that much because they're respecting the teacher and doing what they say to do. And also, they're really more than that. That's what a great student is to me.

Interviewer: OK. So I heard several things. They do their work, their behavior is good, they are, put a lot of effort into their work so they do their best work.

Franklin: That's probably how they can do better in school. Because you're good well your habits, that habit gets bigger and bigger so your best is getting better and better so you can be awesome.

APPENDIX G
EXCERPT FROM MY RESEARCHER'S LOG

February 12, 2014

"I interviewed Brandon today and was surprised about his response to the question about being smart. I asked him to describe a time he felt really smart in school. Brandon thought for a second and then told me about a math fact game they played in third grade. "I knew my facts and I can think quickly, so I was able to sometimes beat the smart kids." He felt smart because he beat the smart kids! It surprised that he did not feel smart just from knowing his facts so well. Why did this surprise me? I wonder if this is the only time he felt smart? Does he have to beat other kids to feel smart? I need to see what Dante and Brandon day about this question."

February 14, 2014

"Today I interview Dante and he talked about feeling smart when he got an A on a test and the other students got Bs or Cs. This is the same feeling Brandon described about being smart. I know there is something to this, but I have not figured it out yet. Questions in my mind pertain to grading and the competitiveness of that. Would it make a difference if we only graded as students met criterion. I do not see how this would be less competitive? Do all students only feel smart when they beat others? Am I forgetting the barriers that Black students face in the classroom? What more can I discover about this? Need to keep this in mind as I continue."

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Cara Walsh was born in Greenfield, Indiana and spent her childhood in the nearby small town of Fortville, Indiana. After graduating high school, she moved to Indianapolis, Indiana where she began working and pursuing a business degree in accounting. In 1987 she moved to Florida and continued her education, earning a bachelor's degree in exceptional student education. She taught students with learning disabilities for seven years and earned a master's degree in educational leadership before becoming a school administrator in 2000.

Currently she is a school principal in Pinellas County Florida, having lead three different Title I schools over the past 14 years. In 2010, she continued her studies at the University of Florida, in pursuit of a Doctor of Education. Cara currently resides in Saint Petersburg, Florida and is dedicated to improving life opportunities for the underprivileged of this world.