NAVIGATING THROUGH ACADEMIA: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER ON THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE STUDENTS

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B.A., California State University, Sacramento, 2005

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

EDUCATION
(Behavioral Sciences/Gender Equity Studies)

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

SUMMER
2010
NAVIGATING THROUGH ACADEMIA: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER ON THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE STUDENTS

A Thesis

by

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Abstract

NAVIGATING THROUGH ACADEMIA: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS OF RACE, CLASS AND GENDER ON THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE STUDENTS

by

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Statement of Problem

This study examines the effects of intersection of race, class, and gender on the educational experiences of African American female students. Many community forces affect the academic achievement of African American female students. For example, racial identity has been documented as contributing to the educational environment of African American students. African Americans are part of a racially stratified group in which their membership is permanent. Because of the historical implications of institutional racism controlled by the dominant culture, African Americans have learned to be skeptical of anything associated with the dominant culture. According to Ogbu (1992), African Americans are involuntary minorities, who are skeptical about the means of advancing in a society that is controlled by the dominant culture.
Class also has a strong impact on the educational experience of African American students. For students who are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, parent involvement is often low and educational resources are scarce. According to Slaughter and Epps (1987), “parents influence their children’s academic achievement directly by their impact on the schools their children attend. Low SES and Black Families often lack the human and material resources needed for a positive academic environment in the house” (p.19).

Lastly, gender bias in the classroom can also affect the academic success of African American female students in the classroom. In early education, when compared to their white counterparts, African American female students receive more instructional communication from their teacher, but are gradually socialized by instructors to be passive (Lips, 1989). The intersecting systems of oppression from racism, classism and sexism make the educational experience of African American female students unique in comparison to their peers of other ethnicities.

Sources of Data

The researcher sought to understand how factors such as race, class, and gender impact the educational experiences of African American female students. Using the constructivist design, the study attempts to explain the participants’ feelings and experiences as African American female students navigating through academia. Eight African American female students, ages 14-18, participated in this study as well as two Dunlap High Staff members. The methodology employed for this study is
based on a qualitative and quantitative research design using a mixed method triangulation approach. Student participants were asked a predetermined set of 17 open-ended questions about their experiences with race, class, and gender within their learning environment. In addition to student participants being interviewed, a 31-question Likert scale survey was used to measure the participants’ levels of agreement to statements addressing race, class, and gender in education. Staff participants were also interviewed regarding their experiences in educating African American female students, and how race, class, and gender impact this particular demographic of students at Dunlap High. All interviews were digitally recorded for later transcription, and surveys were coded, entered, and analyzed using a SPSS (Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences) database. Participants’ responses were then divided into major themes and sub-themes.

Conclusions Reached

The participants in this study confirm most of the theories found in the literature review, with the exception of the level of gender bias experienced in the school setting. When student participants were asked questions regarding gender bias, female student participants stated that they were comfortable working with male students and they felt they were treated equally to their male counterparts. A majority of the student participants stated that they did not experience racial discrimination in the learning environment, but did express their awareness of racial barriers they will encounter once leaving Dunlap High. Staff and student participants also conveyed the
need for an increase in ethnic diversity of school administrators. Both students and staff discussed how parent involvement was important for academic success and the limitations parents from low and middle class households have when participating in the students’ educational process. All participants agreed that racism, classism, and sexism exist in society as a whole, but feel that these intersecting systems of oppression are not within their learning environment.

_____________________, Committee Chair
Kim Bancroft, Ph.D.

_____________________
Date
DEDICATION

I would first like to acknowledge and thank God for continuously blessing me exceedingly and abundantly above all that I have asked for.

Mom and Dad: Thank you for always supporting me throughout my academic career. You provided me with examples of how hard work, determination and diligence can open numerous doors to being successful.

Mia: You are truly my best friend and the greatest sister in the whole world. All the times I wanted to give up writing my thesis, you were always there encouraging me to continue. You helped me recognize that I can do and be anything. You truly inspire me to be a better person.

Dr. Bancroft: You were so many things to me throughout my time in the grad studies program… professor, mentor, reader and therapist (LOL!). If it was not for you providing me with the opportunity to share my experiences in education, I do not think that my thesis and research would have been done. So thank you for teaching me to be a critical thinker and making me feel that I can be the “change agent” that the American education system needs.

Dr. Lilly: Thank you for taking the time to be my second reader. You also inspired me to one-day focus on educational research as a profession. Your humor and easygoing personality mixed with intelligence and expertise has made this process enlightening and enjoyable.

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Dr. Carinci: The things that I have learned from you are too numerous to list, but I admire your passion for education. You are the epitome of how professors should teach their students. Thank you for pushing me to complete my thesis regardless of the obstacles I encountered.

Friends and Family: Thank you for all of your support and best wishes through not only my academic career, but also my life in general. You all played a role in helping me achieve my master’s degree and for that, I am grateful.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

As she sits in her advanced placement course, Che’von cannot help but notice that she is in a classroom in which the majority of her peers do not resemble her ethnic identity or gender. She feels alone in the classroom; it is difficult to identify with both her male and female Caucasian peers because she is an African American female. As the bell rings and she enters the halls with her African American peers, Che’von adopts her other identity, which helps her “fit in” with her African American peers. After school, Che’von and her younger siblings come home to an empty house because her single mother must work to provide for the family. As Che’von finishes her homework and helps her younger siblings, she knows that tomorrow the cycle begins again when she awakes. This tale is a common one across America for African American female students learning to navigate through the educational system while dealing with issues of race, class and gender.

African American female students have a unique educational experience in comparison to their white counterparts. African American female students not only encounter gender bias in the learning environment, but they also experience racial discrimination. When race, class, and gender problems intersect in the lives of African American female students, they must develop methods to navigate through these intersecting systems of oppression both internal and external to the academic environment. This study seeks to examine how factors such as race, class and gender affect the educational experience of African American female students.
Statement of the Problem

Many community forces affect the academic achievement of African American female students. In studies conducted by cultural anthropologist John Ogbu (1992), community forces focus on the perceptions of the value of schooling, the quality of relationships within the academic context (trust of school personnel), and the impact of school curriculum on the cultural identity and beliefs of minority students. For example, racial identity has been documented as contributing both positively and negatively to the educational environment of African American students (Ogbu). Because of the historical implications of institutional racism controlled by the dominant culture, some African Americans have learned to be skeptical of anything associated with the dominant culture, especially skeptical of the value of education as a tool to gain upward mobility. According to Ogbu, African Americans are involuntary minorities, meaning they are a part of a minority population whose ancestors were enslaved, conquered, and brought to the United States against their will (Ogbu). As a result, though many believe that hard work is necessary to succeed in the educational system, African Americans are also aware of the institutionalized discrimination that increases the difficulty in attaining quality education and future job wages.

Class also has a strong impact on the educational experience of African American students. For students from a low socioeconomic background, parent involvement is often low and educational resources are scarce, according to Slaughter and Epps (1987): “parents influence their children’s academic achievement directly by
their impact on the schools their children attend. Low SES (socioeconomic status) black families often lack the human and material resources needed for a positive academic environment in the house” (p. 19). Parents living in poor urban neighborhoods may often lack the transportation to send their children to schools in affluent areas or may not have the monetary resources to purchase school materials.

Lastly, gender bias in the classroom can also affect the academic success of African American female students. In early education, when compared to their white counterparts, African American female students receive more instructional communication from their teachers but are gradually socialized by instructors to be passive (Lips, 1989). As African American female students are taught that their assertive behavior is seen as aggressive, a negative student attribute, they slowly become “voiceless” in the classroom in order to maintain good grades. Studies conducted by Signithia Fordham (1993) illustrate further the impact of gender and race on the academic achievement of African American female students. All of these factors previously stated should be carefully examined in order to understand the educational atmosphere of the African American female student.

Over the past two decades, educational researchers have sought to understand the educational experiences of African American students and have published literature regarding the academic achievement among African American male students. There has been minimal research literature regarding the educational experiences specific to African American female students. The nature of this study is to research how factors of race, class and gender intersect in an academic setting and
evaluate how these factors influenced the educational experiences of African American female students. The researcher and participants addressed topics of racial identity, racial discrimination, gender bias, socioeconomic status, and levels of parent involvement.

Significance of the Study

In comparison to their African American male counterparts, the population of African American female students graduating from high school and attending college has increased. Though more African American female students are attending college, their ability to navigate through the world of academia is unique when compared to their Caucasian counterparts. In society, African American women encounter intersecting systems of oppression, and for African American female students, these systems of oppression can be prevalent in the schools through the practice of institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism by other students, teachers, and school administration. By researchers evaluating the experiences of African American female students, the findings from research studies can help aide the pedagogical practices of those educating the African American student population, as well as create an appropriate educational environment for all students regardless of race, class, and gender. For example, conducting research studies on African American female students’ educational experiences that bring to light the unique experiences of this population of students can, in turn, help improve educational practices, develop new educational policies and programs, and lead to more studies of different minority groups now marginalized in the field of educational research.
Methodology

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how factors such as race, class, and gender affect the educational attainment of African American female students. Over a two-day period, the researcher interviewed eight African American students and two staff members at Dunlap High School in Sacramento, California. Prior to collecting data from students and staff, the student participants were given letters of consent to be signed by their parents and returned to the researcher. The letter of consent stated the nature of the study, types of questions and topics that were addressed, as well as the researcher’s contact information in case participants had any questions. The research study used a sample size of 10 participants: eight African American female students and two staff members. A female counselor at Dunlap High selected two African American female students from each class level (freshman, sophomore, junior and senior). The selections of staff were random, based upon availability. For the purpose of this study, *academic success* is defined as a student’s level of proficiency and competence to master the curriculum in an educational setting. *Educational attainment* is defined as the accomplishment of receiving education that will help students to gain upward mobility. Of special interest to the researcher was how race, class and gender intersect in the academic environment to create a unique educational experience for African American female students.

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, better known as a mixed design. All participants had an opportunity to seek clarification regarding survey and interview questions, as well as to address concerns regarding
confidentiality and concept definitions with the researcher prior to data collection. The survey was used as a quantitative measure. The survey instrument used in this study involved 31 five-point Likert scale questions, regarding race (discrimination, peer relations, staff diversity); gender (bias in the classroom, gender of instructors, and level of comfort working with male students); class (parent involvement and economic resources in the classroom). Students had the option to select their level of agreement to statements listed on the survey, which included “strongly agree,” “agree,” “undecided,” “disagree” and “strongly disagree.”

In addition to using the survey as a quantitative measure, the researcher also used interview questions as a qualitative method, which consisted of interviewing both student and staff participants. Similar to the nature of the survey questions, the interview questions also addressed the impact of race, class and gender on the educational experiences of African American female students. With the researcher conducting interviews in addition to the surveys, student participants were able to elaborate on questions asked on the survey and provide more narratives regarding their personal experiences as African American female students at Dunlap High. The interview posed 17 open-ended questions to the student participants and 15 open-ended questions to two staff members at Dunlap High School.

As to the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the research design, the approach used in this study employed constructivism as a design concept. Constructivist design seeks to understand how human beings construct meaning based upon their engagement with the world through their experiences (Creswell, 2003).
Because the study’s purpose was to convey the experiences of African American female students in education, the constructivist design allows for a narrative that shows how participants construct meaning from their educational experiences.

Limitations

There were several limitations of this study that included the following: the time of academic year students were interviewed, limited access to school staff, demographics of student populations, and student participants being unfamiliar with concepts presented in the interview questions. First, participants were interviewed in mid-May during a time in which Dunlap High was completing exit exams and STAR testing. Prior to conducting interviews, when the researcher inquired about how participants were feeling, a lot of the responses consisted of “tired” and “stressed,” both attributed to testing. Because participants were in the middle of testing, interviews may have been slightly rushed. This time of the year was also busy for staff due to final exams and submission deadlines for student academic reports. Interviewing only two staff members did not allow the researcher an opportunity to get more staff feedback regarding the academic success of African American female students.

Another limitation was the demographic of the student population. When students were asked about racial discrimination in the academic environment, student participants stated in their interviews that they never experienced racial discrimination at Dunlap High. Because the study yielded a finding of the absence of racism in the academic environment, the researcher found that due to the demographics at Dunlap
being majority African American, student participants stated that they had not experienced discrimination or racism from their peers. As will be noted in the findings, racial discrimination was not an issue for majority of student participants of this study because they were the majority in the academic setting. Another limitation found was the student’s unfamiliarity with the concepts of socioeconomic status. Though the researcher explained the concepts to the student participants, there was minimal time allotted to further elaborate on the meaning of the concepts and their relevance to the study. When the researcher addressed issues of socioeconomic factors, student participants were unfamiliar with what the concept entailed. Lack of knowledge regarding these concepts may have affected the responses on the survey as well as interview questions. The researcher attempted to define concepts in the best way possible to help participants understand the questions they were being asked. The design of the qualitative questions also was a limitation due to there being no questions regarding gender bias in the academic setting. Though questions referencing gender were not specifically asked in the interviews, participants addressed the ways in which gender affected their learning environment. Such questions were on the survey instead. Questions regarding gender not being stated in the interviews lead to limited findings regarding gender from the qualitative aspect of the study.

*Theoretical Basis for Study*

Because African Americans have a rich history marked with racial discrimination, oppression, and sociopolitical activism, the researcher conveyed how these historical implications have influenced the values and beliefs held by African
Americans in today’s society. Since being brought to America in the 1600s, African Americans have been conditioned by the dominant culture to believe that they were inferior mentally. Race as a socially constructed category was utilized to justify the separation of African Americans from their white counterparts, even though there are no biological indicators separating African Americans and Caucasians. Citizens of European descent saw African Americans as an inferior people and the belief of inferiority was used by the dominant culture as justification for enslaving African Americans. Even after the end of slavery, African Americans were still treated unequally compared to their white counterparts.

Because African Americans were valued by the dominant culture as not being citizens in American society, African Americans were not allowed to attend school, dine, or use public transit with other white citizens. Though African American students were not allowed to attend school with white students, they were educated by African American instructors that viewed education as a sociopolitical tool to fight racism and discrimination. Brown versus Board of Education changed the educational landscape for African American students by allowing both African American and white students to attend school together. As a result, African American students found themselves in educational systems in which instructors perpetuated racial stereotypes through instructional practices.

Through experiences with institutional racism, some African Americans have learned that individual merit may not be enough to navigate through barriers in education. In addition to race being seen as a system of oppression, African American
female students encounter the intersection of race and gender in education, thus creating a unique educational experience. Black Feminist Thought was developed out of the need to address the intersection of race and gender that was missing from traditional feminist literature and theory.

Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought addresses the issues of the intersection of race and gender and how specialized knowledge and meaning are created from the standpoint of African American women. Though literature has been published regarding sexism and its social implication for women, feminist theory literature has a deficit of the thoughts and experiences of African American women. According to Collins (2000), “Black feminist thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (p. 22). African American feminists, such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Ana Julia Cooper (in Lemert & Bhan, 1998), have all contributed literature, which addresses the need for the presence of African American standpoint in feminist literature.

In regards to feminist research, standpoint theory seeks to collect data that centralizes the standpoint of women. For example, in the literature published by Patricia Hill-Collins (1991, 2000), African American women define their own experiences, which are the focal point in sociopolitical change. Historically, African American women were viewed as the antithesis of how society believed women should be. Women were thought to possess characteristics such as being passive, docile, and pious, only focusing on their family’s needs. However, African American
womanhood differed from that of white womanhood. In addition to taking care of their own children, African American women also worked in the fields alongside African American slave men, whereas white women were expected to stay within the home and not work or engage in manual labor. In addition to an African American woman being focused on her family, she was often the only provider and played the dual roles of mother and father when her husband was sold off into bondage. African Americans women have been exposed to unique experiences shaped by racism and sexism.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory evaluates the historical implications of race and how the practice of racial discrimination and institutional racism affects members of society. African Americans have had a long history of oppression in the United States. Because race is a socially constructed concept, critical race theory consists of a body of knowledge, which focuses on how racial and institutional practices shape the experiences of racially oppressed groups. Similar to black feminist thought, critical race theory also evaluates the intersection of racism, sexism, classism and their impact on social practices. Ogbu (1992), a cultural anthropologist, included critical race theory in his literature regarding racial stratification and the adaptation of different kinds of minority groups to social institutions. Ogbu claimed that “involuntary minorities” might reject values associated with the dominant culture, such as academic achievement. According to Ogbu, some African American students typically reject academic achievement due to fear of being accused of “acting white,” thus feeling as if they are losing their membership within the African American culture. As a result,
African American students may perform poorly in order to acquire acceptance by peer groups.

Theorists such as bell hooks (1999), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) and Beverly Tatum (1997) have all used critical race theory in a broad range of disciplines, including education and feminism, to illustrate the unique experiences of African Americans in the United States. For the purpose of this research paper, critical race theory as it relates to education was the primary foundation of this research project. The researcher collected qualitative and quantitative data regarding how race as well as class and gender affected the educational experience of African American female students.

Definition of Terms

*Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*. Pedagogy that focuses on connecting with the students’ lives through their culture and interests (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

*Gender Bias*. Favoring one gender over the other based on assumptions about talents and capabilities (Streitmatter, 1994).

*Involuntary Minority*. Ethnic groups that are a part of U.S. society due to historical colonization, conquest and slavery rather than voluntary migration (Ogbu, 1992).

*Racial Centrality*. The extent to which being Black is seen as normative to an individual’s identity (Scott, 2003).

*Racial Saliency*. The importance placed on being black depending on context or situation (Scott, 2003).
Self-Efficacy. An individual belief in the capability to execute a required action or desired outcome (Boardman & Robert, 2000).

Vicarious Learning. Learning through observation of another individual (Pajares & Usher, 2006).

Organization of the Remaining Chapters

The literature review in Chapter 2 begins with a brief introduction to the problem, followed by the history of African Americans in the United States. After a historical overview, the topics of education and racial ideology in America as they relate to African Americans will be addressed. The next section consists of a historical overview of women in education. The rest of Chapter 2 discusses factors such as gender, class and self-efficacy beliefs and their influences on the educational experience of African American female students. Chapter 3 includes the methodology used to study the research question. The methodology section provides information regarding participants, research methods used and the interview setting. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the qualitative and quantitative data collected from survey and interviews. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the findings and the conclusions that were drawn from the data collected by the researcher. Chapter 5 also includes further analysis of limitations and recommendations proposed by the researcher based on the outcomes of the study.

Background of the Researcher

Shanell Brumfield was born and raised in Oakland, California, and graduated from Galileo High School in San Francisco, California, in 2001. During her primary
education in the Bay Area, Shanell was exposed to racial discrimination and the impact of socioeconomic factors on the education of students attending school in urban neighborhoods. Through the lack of economic funding, discriminatory instructional practices, and the tracking system of African American students and other students of color, Shanell was able to evaluate the deficits in education of students in poor urban neighborhoods in comparison to schools in affluent neighborhoods. Being one of a few African American students in honors classes throughout her education, Shanell was also exposed to racial discrimination and negative teacher perceptions while in advanced placement courses, which impaired her level of self-efficacy. It was not until her junior year of high school that she met an African American female instructor who helped Shanell regain a newfound passion for education through culturally relevant pedagogy and introduced her to the many possibilities offered through a college education.

Shanell Brumfield received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication Studies from California State University, Sacramento in 2005. After graduating from Sacramento State in 2005, Shanell began to work as research technician in the field of mental health. After taking two years off from school, Shanell decided to enroll in the Teacher Education, Gender Equity program at Sacramento State in 2007. Shanell decided to focus her curriculum selection on race, class and gender. Within her urban education course, Shanell had the opportunity to read case studies about schools in her local neighborhood and was exposed again to the inequalities in education faced by African American students, especially African American female students. After
reading the case studies of schools in the Bay Area, Shanell decided that her educational focus would be on the academic achievement of African American female students from poor urban neighborhoods. By doing so, Shanell hoped to not only tell the story of the educational experiences of African American female students, but also be an example for future African American female students thinking of furthering their education. The last three years have been a journey to give voice to a population that is commonly marginalized if not invisible in educational research literature.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The academic journey of African American students is currently in the forefront of educational research. This is due in part to educational policy makers’ need to understand why this particular demographic is falling behind their counterparts. Through the lenses of the fields of sociology, cultural anthropology, education, and even economics, various theories and solutions have been presented to help African Americans have access to an equal education. However, the educational experiences of African American students are not homogenous. Factors such as race, class, and gender all intersect to produce a unique educational experience. For example, African American female students have to confront both race and gender barriers.

The following literature review examines how factors such as race, class, and gender affect the educational attainment of African American female students. The first section will give an historical overview of African Americans in the United States; this section includes an historical examination of the social construction of race and its impact on African Americans. The second section focuses on the journey of African Americans in education. This section includes discussion of segregation versus desegregation and racial identity development. The third section covers the gender bias encountered by women through pedagogical practices. The fourth section of the literature review covers African American women’s educational experiences. The fifth section reviews how socioeconomic factors can produce barriers for African
American female students as well as for their families when parents try to develop a productive educational environment for their children. Some barriers noted include parent involvement, economic resources for educational material, as well as pedagogical practices in poor urban schools. Finally, the last section discusses factors contributing to the self-efficacy of students as well as the role the academic environment plays on the self-efficacy of African American female students.

Origins of the Concept of Race in the United States

As Europe experienced political and economic stability in the 1400s, imperialism was viewed by the Europeans as being the key to world dominance. With the rise of seaport towns and shipbuilding, various European countries began to explore different parts of the world, in hopes of developing their economies through the trading of both goods and foreign slave labor (Winant, 2000). Britain specifically had an interest in the New World, known today as North America. From the indigenous people already in the Americas, Europeans were able to acquire knowledge about the land, as well as the natural resources that could be used for trading with other countries. With the beginning of the colonization of the Americas, Europeans began to bring African slaves for the purposes of free labor and economic gain. Enslavement of Africans was profitable to Europeans because slave labor could be sold to land owners, and slaves had the ability to produce agricultural goods lucrative to the economic development of what would become the United States (Karenga, 1993).
Race as a Biological Concept

African American enslavement was justified through theories based in the physical sciences, such as biology and anthropology. Dominated by European thought and ideologies, the physical sciences initiated classification of all creatures into genus and species in a very rational way during the Age of Reason; in human beings, this process emphasized differentiation according to the most superficial characteristics, such as facial features and skin pigmentation. When referring to the justification of the racial taxonomy of people in America, Europeans referred to the supposedly differing physiognomic characteristics of Africans compared to Europeans, ignoring the essential sameness in human biology. According to Hunter (2005), “Because Europeans and European Americans used their power to culturally, politically, and economically dominate Africans, they created a ‘white is right’ culture that served to support their colonial and slave society endeavors” (p. 1). From their skin pigmentation to the texture of their hair, African slaves were seen as barbaric beings that needed to be controlled. Racial categorization was used by Europeans to demarcate Africans and ensure that the system of oppression and the exploitation of labor remained unchallenged. In contrast to these colonial perspectives on race, contemporary scientists view race as a social invention developed during early European imperialism. Smedley (1993) states that “‘race’ is nothing more and nothing less than a social invention… it has nothing to do with the intrinsic or potential qualities of the physically different population” (p. 48).
With the expansion of the American colonies, immigrants from other European countries came to America and served in the colonies as workers. Within the colonies, a class system developed in which the lower class consisted of poor whites and African Americans, while the wealthy whites were in the upper and middle classes. To discourage the unification of poor whites and African American slaves, leaders strategically developed laws to give poor whites more power than African American slaves. By doing so, upper class citizens not only maintained their wealth and status within the colonies, but also diminished any possibility of a collective rebellion by the poor whites and African slaves. Smedley (1993) states,

Colonial leaders consciously formulated policies that would separate poor whites from Indians, blacks, and mulattoes. It was not long before the various European groups coalesced into a white ‘racial’ category whose high status identity gave them access to wealth, power, opportunity and privilege. (p. 45)

With the development of Caucasian as a superior racial category, individuals who lacked the European physical characteristics were seen as inferior. Because of their dark pigmented skin and wool-like hair, African Americans were seen as being the antithesis of the phenotype, purity, and civility possessed by Europeans. The justification for enslaving Africans and for their supposed inferiority to all other races was further enforced and extended through research in the field of anthropology and other physical sciences (Blakely, 2001).

The belief in African American inferiority led to many African Americans being denied access to education, land ownership and other rights of American
citizens. Though the Emancipation Proclamation sought to free slaves, many systematic forms of oppression hindered the upward mobility of African Americans in society. One profound barrier was the institutional racism within education. By controlling the supply of knowledge to African Americans, the dominant culture had the ability to control the extent of their actions. The struggle for equal education for African Americans was marked by legislation and key court cases that are often referenced as events that ultimately altered the academic climate for African American students. In order to evaluate the current state of education of African Americans, an analysis of the historical implications of institutional racism as it relates to education is necessary.

African Americans in Education

After slavery was abolished in 1863, the 1865 Freedman’s Bureau was established to aid the transition of newly freed slaves in society. The 1865 Freedman’s Bureau Act allowed African Americans to attain employment, food, jobs and medical attention. Historically, African Americans were the only group to be denied education. Slave owners felt that educating African Americans would lead to the enlightenment of slaves and the raising of their status as educated members of society (Jackson, 2007). Though this act was developed to help former African American slaves, it did not alter the racial discrimination faced by many newly freed slaves. “Separate but equal” was introduced to society through the Plessey v. Ferguson case which set the tone for legalizing segregation amongst whites and people of color by having designated facilities according to race (Dorsey, 2008). As long as African Americans
had the same facilities as whites, many states in the U.S. that practiced legal segregation contended that no constitutional laws were violated. Though educational facilities existed for both black and white children, the education resources and materials provided to African American children was certainly not equal. Material educational resources as well as educational facilities for African Americans were not nearly as comparable as that of white students. For example, *Brown v. Board of Education* illustrated the effects of legalized racial segregation and its application in an educational setting. Not until after the 1950s did the Supreme Court rectify the detrimental effect of separate-but-equal on black children (Dorsey, 2008). Some historians argue that desegregation was a milestone in fighting racial oppression within the field of education; however, African American historians and educational theorists have argued that there were drawbacks for black children attending school with white children.

*Impact of Desegregation*

When black children were in all black schools, black educators typically viewed education as a political tool that was used to help transform students into enlightened thinkers, an act of transgression against white supremacy. Hooks (1999) states, “When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate black children rightly would require a political commitment…now we were taught mainly by white teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes” (p. 180). Black students were now in integrated educational settings in which the pedagogical practices did not seek to empower them but instead
reinforced societal notions of inferiority. From years of being exposed to a curriculum that further reinforces discrimination and oppression, these occurrences have shaped how African Americans have viewed the educational system, as well as their racial identity.

Racial Identity

Development of Racial Identity

During the developmental stages from childhood to adolescence, African American children acquire knowledge regarding their identity from relationships with individuals within their community. When African American children enter pre-adolescence at ages 10-13, they begin to be more aware of race and discrimination as they encounter negative stereotypes and images of African Americans (Scott, 2003). In early childhood, African American children begin to absorb cues that reinforce the superiority of the dominant culture. For example, teacher expectations, reflective social appraisal and vicarious learning all help shape a child’s racial identity. By the time the pre-teen African American reaches middle school and high school, society often reflects their race back to them negatively, conveying messages which they might absorb in conscious and unconscious ways. At the same time, they enter the “encounter stage” in which they typically experience some form of racism (Tatum, 1997). The family is central to the development of racial socialization. According to Scott,

Racial socialization that emphasizes racial issues and prejudice, whether tacitly or explicitly is argued to be of critical importance for African American
adolescence…the type of racial socialization received and emotional and stress reaction to discriminatory experiences may directly relate to adjustment outcomes or may moderate the effects of discrimination distress. (pp. 523-524)

By introducing concepts such as racial equality as well as discrimination, African American parents racially socialize African American children to understand the role that race plays within their community, specifically in education. Parents are one of the key components in a child’s socialization process, influencing how they will perceive the world. African American parents educate their children on how to combat the racial oppression that they will face within their community. Community is often considered the place where an individual lives, but in actuality a student’s community can be multiple places. Within these various communities, African American students encounter forces that also shape their racial identity. Cultural anthropologist John Ogbu (1992) produced literature from his findings when studying factors that contribute to the disparities in education between minority groups and the dominant culture. Ogbu’s research consisted of evaluating how community forces affected the perception of education by involuntary minorities.

Involuntary Minorities

An African American student’s experiences in an academic setting with institutional racism, poverty, and other community forces affect their perception of education. According to John Ogbu (1992), African Americans are “involuntary minorities,” referring to “those groups that are a part of the United States society because of slavery, conquest, or colonization, rather than by choice because of
expectations of a better future” (p. 290). Involuntary minorities tend to be skeptical of mainstream institutions because of their history of oppression by the dominant culture (Ogbu). Furthermore, involuntary minorities desire to do well in education, but do not believe that hard work alone will lead to success in educational institutions. Ogbu found that involuntary minorities sometimes resist what the mainstream dominant culture finds valuable. Rejecting the dominant culture’s social norms is a form of resistance exercised by involuntary minorities. In order to gain trust from involuntary minorities within the field of education, educators must develop a curriculum centered on the teaching and learning styles of the students’ culture (Ogbu). Harmon (2002) states, “Culturally competent teachers develop meaningful relationships with their students that extend beyond the classroom, reaching out to include the students’ families in the education process” (p. 68). Though African American parents view education as a tool to help their children succeed academically, they are also aware that their children will encounter barriers that will keep them from succeeding academically.

Women in Education

In addition to race, gender is cited as another influential factor in obtaining an equal education. Gender has also been at the forefront of educational research. Though more women are graduating from college and universities, the journey to get to higher learning institutions are marked by gender bias within the classroom. The educational experiences of male and female students differ as soon as they enter the classroom. Historically, girls were not only allowed to attend school during the school day before
boys and did not have the option of taking courses that challenged their intellectual abilities. In today’s society, of course, boys and girls share classrooms and are allowed to take the same curriculum. However, despite major strides made in educating women, gender bias is still prevalent within the classroom. Gender bias can sometimes be covert if not oblivious to individuals in the classroom environment.

**History of Women in Education**

During the 1700s in colonial America, boys were allowed to attend school, while young girls were confined to the home, shadowing their mothers while doing domestic work. It was not until 1767, that girls were allowed to get an education. A school in Providence, Rhode Island, began to advertise teaching girls. Families that wanted their daughters to be educated had to pay a lump sum of money to teachers for additional hours of educational instruction. Education was only accessible to female students from wealthy families, which led to the exclusion of female students that did not come from an upper class background. When girls were allowed to enter an educational institution, they not only were separated from the boys, but also were only permitted to attend school before and after male students attended during the day. Though girls were now allowed to attend school, their lessons differed drastically from their male peers. Some of the educational lessons young girls were taught consisted of piety, moral values, proper manners, and other skills needed to become a proper wife and mother (Sadker & Sadker, 1995).

As the American Revolution was underway in the late 1700s, the intellectual development of future leaders was seen as the key to a strong country. The first
exposure to education took place within the household by mothers, so the need for women to become educated was on the agenda of leaders in society. According to Sadker and Sadker (1995), women “were the nation’s first teachers…before women can enlighten children, she had to be enlightened” (p. 17). Once girls were allowed to attend school, there was a need for further education and out of this need seminaries were developed. Female seminaries were seen as a solution to allow women their own separate educational institution that would provide academic curriculum, as well as encompass courses that reinforced what society deemed as the appropriate role of women. Sadker and Sadker state that “these institutions provided protected educational environments, safe havens for high-school-age girls to learn to become fit companions for their husbands, the first teachers of their children, and the moral and spiritual corner stone of the family” (p. 19). After the opening of Troy Seminary in 1821, Mount Holyoke opened in 1837. Mt. Holyoke allowed women to take courses that were comparable to male courses. More seminaries began to develop across the country for women, as well as for women of color. During the mid 1800s, 80% of women graduating from seminaries would go on to become teachers (Sadker & Sadker). With the feminization of the field of education, more women began to become instructors, while the men moved to more administrative roles such as deans, principals and headmasters. According to Roby (1972), “Hiring women was a logical way to meet the need for teachers not only because they had become accustomed to teaching their own and neighbors’ young children, but because taxpayers wanted to pay the cheapest possible wages” (p. 122). By the late 1800s, more girls were going to
school and getting an education, but curriculum and classrooms were separate for boys and girls. Once male and female students were allowed to attend school together, it was clear that there was an emphasis placed on the education of males in comparison to females.

In 1833 Oberlin College in Ohio was the first college to admit women including African American women (Sadker & Sadker, 1995). Though Oberlin paved the way for other institutions in co-education, women were restricted to only taking “women’s courses.” According to Sadker and Sadker, Oberlin’s women students’ tasks included “washing the men’s clothes, caring for their rooms, and serving them at table” (p. 21). In addition to a biased curriculum, women were not granted an academic degree, but a degree of “Mistress” in a specialty area emphasizing duties performed in the women’s courses (Sadker & Sadker). As women began to excel academically, the issue of the educational advancement of women in a co-educational setting became a topic of discussion amongst institutions of higher learning.

Around the beginning of Civil War in the mid 1800s, as more male students were being drafted to fight in the Civil War, many colleges and universities experienced a decrease in male student enrollment. With the decrease of enrollment in colleges and universities, the economic dilemma faced by many institutions forced schools such as the University of Michigan (1870) and University of Rochester (1900) to open its doors to women. In an effort to increase revenue, more colleges became co-educational, which led to more women applying to colleges. Once women were admitted to these institutions, they were met with great opposition from their male
peers as well as faculty who felt women attending college would lead to male students feeling emasculated. By the mid to late 1800s, all female colleges such as Smith, Vassar, Bryn Mawr, Radcliff, and Mount Holyoke were developed by advocates who believed that women should be exposed to curriculum that was equivalent to that of male students. With the development of institutions for women, oppositions were strong. The first attack was on the state of the American family. Similar to the arguments of the inferiority of African Americans, the biological sciences were also used to illustrate how further education of women can lead to inability to reproduce as well as women being less intelligent due to the size of the female brain.

As time progressed into the mid 1900s, a new form of education referred to as vocational education allowed students to take courses in which they can learn skills in various professions. These courses tended to track female students into professions that reflected the roles which society felt women should play. Sadker and Sadker (1995) state that “even college bound girls who were not enrolled in vocational curriculum were required to take domestic science and home economics while boys took manual training or industrial arts” (p. 32). In 1972, as part of the Education Amendment Act, Title IX was passed, which states “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.” Since the enactment of Title IX, there has been examination of gender bias within the classroom. Educational researchers have not only researched gender bias in the classroom, but also how knowledge and self-
identity are developed through female student’s experiences with gender bias in an academic setting.

*Gender Equity in the Classroom*

Lack of gender equity in the classroom has led to educational research that focuses on the educational experience of female students. According to Streitmatter (1994), gender bias is defined as “the underlying network of assumptions and beliefs held by a person that males and females differ in systematic ways other than physically, that is, in talents, behaviors, or interest” (p. 2). The goal of the conscientious educator of young women is to eliminate gender bias within the classroom, which can be done by developing a curriculum in which the instructors exhibit equity in their pedagogical style. Gender equity has varying definitions due to different perspectives brought to the field of education. According to Grossman and Grossman (1994), some define equity in terms of fairness or sameness. Educators use gender equity and educational equity interchangeably. Educational equity is “achieved when both genders have an opportunity to participate in whichever courses and activities they prefer to achieve up to their different potentials, when they are treated in accordance with their needs, and when they are prepared for different societal roles” (p. 119). Over the past 35 years since the passing of Title IX, educational researchers are finding that gender bias is being practiced in the following general ways: under-representation of a specific gender in curriculum material, discriminatory teacher expectations of female students, pedagogical teaching practices in favor of males over
females, and unbalanced interaction between teachers and male students versus female students.

**Female Students in Male Dominated Classrooms**

Seeing the classroom as a positive environment in which all students are influential is the goal of educators, but female students in male dominated classrooms have voices that are often silenced by their male peers. There have been studies conducted on the learning styles of female versus male students. When females are in a male dominated classroom, their voices are silenced by males dominating not only classroom discussion, but also by male students monopolizing the instructor’s time. These occurrences lead female students to disengage from the curriculum, which can ultimately lead to low academic achievement.

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) (1992) provided an examination of the academic journey of girls K-12 and issues they face in a gender-biased curriculum. The AAWU (1992) reports that boys receive more teacher attention; specifically, “when boys called out, the typical teacher reaction was to listen to the comment” (p. 68). Research has shown that female students prefer to work in all girl groups in contrast to working in groups in which they are the minority. In a study conducted by Parker and Rennie (2002), male and female students were enrolled in two types of science curriculums, consisting of a same-sex and mixed-sex demographic. The purpose of the study was to enhance the understanding of gender-inclusive instructional strategies while being mindful of the gender differences in educational learning styles. Parker and Rennie defined gender-inclusive as “strategies
which incorporate value and extend both boys and girls learning experiences and learning; current interests, needs and concerns; and preferred learning and assessment styles” (p. 882). Both boys and girls were able to participate in a single-sex science class as well as a mixed-sex science class. At the conclusion of the study, researchers found the following: Girls preferred a single sex learning environment; girls took more risks in the single-sex science course; boys were unaffected by the course change and preferred the same sex course; some boys preferred the mixed class environment; teachers preferred the all girl course in comparison to the all boy course. By exposing female students to different forms of pedagogy and making classroom structural changes, instructors can develop a classroom in which female students have an opportunity to be active participants in their educational environment. Studies have also found that when females are the majority in the classroom, the competitiveness and anxiety they felt decreased.

Females do well in classrooms in which they see their fellow classmates as contributors to the discussion rather than academic adversaries. Parker and Rennie (2002) also found that teachers had more difficulty maintaining behavioral order in the all-male classroom. One teacher stated that, though the boys benefited by the end of the year, “it was a lot slower [than for the girls] before we’d start to see any advantage in it” (p. 891). The study concluded boys’ and girls’ communication skills and classroom needs differ, which requires different teaching strategies dedicated to each gender difference. More importantly, Parker and Rennie’s study suggested that the issue of tailoring curriculum to gender could be elusive, due to other factors in the
learning environment. These findings lay the foundation to understanding the events that take place in early childhood education. Young girls learn at an early age that submissive behavior equates to the perfect student, while young boys learn that being outspoken is key to being an educated individual.

**Teacher Student Interaction**

Though the male-female interaction within the classroom is important when studying gender bias in the classroom, teacher interaction also plays an important role in educational equity within the classroom. Parents are the primary socialization agents followed by instructors within a child’s community. When children enter into pre-adolescence, most of their time is spent in a classroom with their instructor, thus shifting the primary socializing agency to their teacher. Lips (1989) reports on researchers who studied how gender socialization in the classroom has helped contribute to gender bias. When focusing on teachers as a factor of gender socialization, Lips found that teachers reinforce gender roles through often unconscious pedagogical practices. One example provided by Lips discusses how teachers respond differently to boys than to girls. Lips states, “Teachers, apparently unaware of the differential treatment they are handing out, pay more attention to boys, and responded more to boys who act aggressive and to girls that act dependent” (p. 203). When female students evaluate what is deemed by the authoritative figure in the classroom (teacher) as appropriate behavior, females internalize the concept of compliance and dependence as a form of being a “good student.” Lips states, “That more feedback to male students indicated to female students that “male concerns take
As female students navigate their way through academia, they are confronted by signals within the classroom that tell them their education is secondary. Within the classroom, instructors now must reevaluate their own pedagogical practices in order to understand how to best provide students with an equitable education.

*Lack of Representation of Women in Curriculum*

Having representation of females in literature and other curriculum material is a pedagogical practice that can help diminish bias in the classroom. In primary school, young girls read stories with males as the main character, while female characters are not the primary source of strength and heroism. When learning about American history and literature, female students rarely have an example of how women have shaped history or the literary world. If the female voice or representation is not present in the course material, the curriculum does not reflect the demographic of the classroom, which can lead the female student to become disinterested in the curriculum. More representation of women in nontraditional stereotypical roles in the classroom material can help aid the elimination of gender bias within the classroom (Grossman & Grossman, 1994). The research regarding gender bias addresses how to improve the educational experience of female students; however, the educational experiences of all female students are not universal. For example, African American female students not only have to deal with gender inequality in education, but also racial inequality, thus making their experience unique in comparison to that of their white counterparts.
African American Women in America

When comparing the gender roles of males and females in the African American culture versus the dominant culture, distinct differences appear. Historically, women were expected to work within the home, while the men were the providers for the family. From a history of oppression, African American women have been socialized to learn to be independent in various circumstances. For example, during slavery African American women had to work in the fields doing manual labor as well as doing work within the home. Women also served as head of the household when their husbands were sold to a different plantation. From these historical events, African American women have had a long history of hardships in which they had to take on what society deems as masculine behaviors in order to survive. Through generations, the concept and connotation of what strength is have evolved to be very different amongst African American women in comparison to their counterparts.

African American women were depicted as the antithesis of the dominant culture’s definition of a woman and “womanhood.” African American women were denied true womanhood because true womanhood was inherently defined as being white. Under this quality, African American women were excluded because of racial stereotypes. The depiction of African American women as being sexually promiscuous, exotic, and evil helped reinforce the purity of white womanhood (Johnson-Bailey, 2003). Women were to be bystanders in society rather than play active roles in the public sphere, while men were allowed to be active participants in life. However, African American women did not play a passive role in society; they...
worked alongside men in the fields, and had active roles in both the private sphere as well as the public sphere. Due to African American women being active participants in both spheres, they were seen by society to be masculine. According to Hunter (2005), “Black women were dominated by patriarchy, experiencing a second-class status to black men and to white women…sexism and racism interact to create an additional form of oppression” (p. 10). Because African American females typically deviate from the norm of being passive and silent members of society, they are often stigmatized. When an African American woman is assertive, members of the dominant culture see her as overly aggressive.

African American Women in Education

The African American female student is often seen as an aggressive learner rather than a student that is passionate about being an active participant in her own education. Another reason why African American female students may struggle more in school is because of cultural qualities they may have developed as a result of this history and that can be in conflict with the expectations of women in general. The concept of race in addition to gender makes African American female students’ educational experiences differ from that of her white male and female counterparts.

In contrast to their white female peers who are typically characterized as passive, African American females are stereotyped as being difficult and aggressive students who “challenge” authority. According to Fordham (1993), “African American women bring to the academy broadly defined—a history of womanhood that differs from that of white or any other American woman” (p. 8). According to Lips (1989),
Because black girls are not socialized to the passive and submissive behaviors encouraged in white girls, they receive more teacher attention than do white girls in the early grades… black female students in the classroom may be more likely to be seen as ‘assertive and bossy’ rather than as fitting the white-female student image of ‘submissive and cuddly’. (p. 204)

Currently in education, students are expected to store and regurgitate information provided by instructors and not question information presented or the quality of pedagogical practices. Because the African American female student usually is not silenced in the classroom, the labels placed on them affect their perception of education.

In today’s educational system, an assertive and direct style of learning is correlated to male students, while female students are characterized as being docile. Though African American female students are socialized to be assertive, a characteristic that they exemplify in their early childhood education, in later grades these girls’ active participation within the classroom decreases. According to Lips (1989), “Black female students present an active, interacting and initiating profile in the early grades but join their white female counterparts in the later grades in what appears to be traditional female sex role behaviors” (p. 204). The decrease in assertiveness in the academic setting is due in part to the silencing of female students in the classroom. In her ethnographic study of a predominately African American populated high school in Washington, DC, Fordham analyzed the level of recognition
of gender diversity and its impact on the academic achievement of African American female students. Fordham (1993) found that

academically successful black girls achieved academic success in the following ways: (1) becoming and remaining voiceless or silent or alternatively, (2) impersonating a male image including voice, thinking, speech pattern, and writing style, in the formal school context when formally interacting with their teachers in classrooms. (p. 10)

In the same study at Capital High School, Fordham discovered that African American females that opted not to be silenced in the academic setting were viewed my school staff to be underachieving African American female students. Fordham suggests that African American females that choose not to conform to being a passive participant in their education are deemed as “loud,” which has a negative connotation to instructors and other school faculty.

Intersectionality in Educational Research

The need to study the different variables that affect the academic achievement of African American women has been addressed in the writings of educational theorist such as bell hooks (1999), Patricia Hill-Collins (1991, 2000), and Ana Julia Cooper (in Lemert & Bhan, 1998). By viewing race, class, and gender as intersecting concepts, researchers will be aware of the barriers faced by this specific minority group. All three of their philosophies exemplify the importance of using education as a tool to obtain power and to challenge gender and racial inequality in various institutions. When educators discuss gender bias and inequality in education, it is imperative to
identify all intersecting forms of oppression. Collins (2000) states, “Instead of starting with gender and then adding other variables such as race and social class, Black Feminist Thought view these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination” (p. 372).

The foundation of Black Feminist Thought can easily be applied when studying the current generation of African American women. Many black feminist thinkers have adopted “standpoint theory” as the foundation for studying minority groups that are commonly marginalized. Standpoint theory takes into account circumstances and life events from the individual as the primary focus of study to get an accurate perspective into the experiences of women. For example, Collins (1991, 2000), Cooper (in Lemert & Bhan, 1998), and hooks (1999) note that education is more than sharing of information, but also a political tool used by African Americans to challenge racial and gender inequality. All three women illustrate the importance of educating women and decentralizing the curriculum from the instructor’s standpoint—especially if the instructor stands from a place of advantage. Understanding and applying this theory creates a pedagogical approach that provides a more individualistic educational experience for female African American students.

Ana Julia Cooper (in Lemert & Bhan, 1998) shared the same sentiment regarding the importance of valuing the role of educating all women, regardless of race. Cooper believed that, from education, all women begin to expect more from themselves as well as from the world around them. Cooper’s platform was to convey to political figures as well as the masses not only why providing equal and non-
oppressive education to all women is important, but also the benefits of educating African American women. Similar to Cooper, hooks also believe that education can lead to power not only through the information provided, but also through an engaged pedagogical style that removes the oppressed nature experienced by African American female students in the classroom.

**Oppressed Pedagogy**

Paulo Freire (1968), who believed that the lack of exchanged narrative between student and instructor leads to an oppressive educational environment in which the students’ experience and voice do not contribute to the learning process, coined the concept of oppressive pedagogy. Similar to Freire, hooks (1999) believed that all students, especially women of color, experience oppressive pedagogy. Hooks states, “To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn” (p. 186). African American female students who rejected being voiceless in the classroom not only suffered poor academic achievement, but were also stereotyped. Oppression through pedagogical practice is exhibited when an instructor does not allow the role of student and teacher to be interchangeable. When the African American female student is taught to absorb information without adding individual meaning, she not only lacks the ability to identify with the presented material, but can also have low expectations from the curriculum offered to her. According to Cooper (in Lemert & Bhan, 1998), African American girls should “expect something more of them than that they merely look pretty and appear well in society” (p. 86). Decentralization must take place for the curriculum to transform, meaning rather than
forcing African American female students to view the dominant culture’s ideas and understandings as the norm, African American female students can now create knowledge that represents their experiences. According to Collins (1991), “Decentering a curriculum that presents the ideas and experiences of elite white men as being normative and universal challenges this link between knowledge that presents dominant group interest and the power to rule” (p. 368). A decentered curriculum can take the form of inclusion of African American female voices and perspectives in literature and representation of African American women throughout the curriculum. Though expressed in different ways, all three of these theorizing women (Collins, hooks and Cooper) advocated for an educational environment in which African American female students are able to be inquisitive about the knowledge being presented and address any issues they have with the information they are being taught. Instructors also have the opportunity to learn about their students and adjust pedagogical styles to suit their needs. By doing so, the role of student and teacher are interchangeable.

African American students are still facing barriers when attempting to attain a quality education. African American children are still too often in classrooms where their intellectual growth is paralyzed by oppressive pedagogy that does not take into account how the intersection of race, class and gender affect their educational environment. Hooks’ (1999) concept emphasizes an engaged pedagogy, in which the roles of students and teachers are interchangeable, but this vision is overshadowed by policies of social promotion and curriculums in which the student is nothing more than
a depository. Another aspect of understanding the intersection of gender, race and class is curriculum transformation, which focuses on studying the intersectionality of race, gender, and class as it relates to education, is currently missing from scholarly educational research. This approach would mean moving away from a curriculum focused on Eurocentric ideals. Most importantly, the lack of literature regarding the effect of race and gender on the educational experience of preadolescent and transitional age African American female students is a testament to the importance of studying the interconnected variables of race, class and gender.

Socioeconomic Factors and Their Effects on Education

Along with an understanding of race in the United States, socioeconomic factors have also been in the forefront of educational research. A focus on socioeconomic factors is crucial because it contributes to the access to educational resources, level of parent involvement, as well as the quality of education a student receives. For example, the single African American mother who has to work long hours to provide for her family may not be able to be involved in her child’s school activities. Another example would be an inner city school that does not have enough monetary funds to provide educational materials for students to use in the classroom. Socioeconomic factors interconnect with race and gender to shape the academic experience of African American female students.

Limits in Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is one of the key components in determining the success of students in the field of academia. Collins (2000) states, “African American women
have long realized that ignorance doomed black people to powerless…many black mothers continue to take their roles as educators seriously” (pp. 210-211). Though parents have the intention to provide the best for their child, in actuality for some parents it has become increasingly difficult to make their intentions a reality. Collins (2000) adds, “Black women’s support for education illustrates the important dimension of Black women’s political activism” (p. 210). The value of black women as educators is increasingly important because there is an increase within the African American community of women who are head of single-parent households. Economic factors such as employment and availability of monetary funds to support the family have shifted parents’ focus from the child as an individual to focusing on the needs of the whole family. For example, parents living in poverty commonly have less time to spend at a child’s school due to the arduous process of seeking employment or working hours that limit their availability to be present at school events. Such parents may have limited time to help cultivate their child’s interest in education. According to Lareau’s (2003) study of parents at two schools, middle-class and low-income, cultivation of a child outside of the school setting through organized activity can be equally beneficial to the activities experienced in school. Lareau states, “Teachers want parent involvement in schooling, especially parental supervision of homework…teachers interpret a failure to show up for a parent-teacher conference as a sign that parents do not value schooling” (p. 26). Though parents are not present at a school event that does not mean that they do not value their child’s education. According to Slaughter and Epps (1987), “Parents influence their children’s academic
achievement directly by their impact on the schools their children attend. Low SES and Black families often lack the human and material resources needed for a positive academic environment in the house” (p. 19).

Another factor influencing parent involvement is the level of education attained by the parent. Guadalupe Valdes (1996) author of Con Respeto: Bridging the Distances Between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools conducted a study in which she evaluated how culture affects the perception of the role of education in the household. In her study, she found that the Mexican-American parents in the study expressed the desire for their children to surpass the often low educational level attained by them. Valdes states, “Parents expressed very positive views of education. Parents in Valdes’ study felt that education was important and that it was their duty as parents to send their children to school” (p. 153). Lack of confidence in their own education forces parents to feel a sense of helplessness when trying to contribute to their children’s education. Parents that have not attained a post secondary education may shy away from interacting with school faculty because they feel they lack the qualifications to determine what is best academically for their child. The lack of confidence in one’s own education makes parents feel irrelevant in the process of developing an educational plan for their child. There can also be cultural barriers in understanding academic expectations of the education system and the family’s role in the educational process. For example, the education system in the United States may differ dramatically in comparison to that of Japan and India. According to Valdes, lack of familiarity with the educational system can lead immigrant parents to view
involvement differently from parents in the dominant culture. In discussing how Mexican immigrant parents viewed American schooling, Valdes states, “In spite of their good intentions, there was much that the families did not understand about American schools” (p. 155). Some cultures believe that it is the teacher’s job to educate the students, while the parents raise the child to become a contributing member of society.

By respecting cultural differences of the students and their families, teachers can come closer to closing the cultural barrier between student’s family and their academic setting. In order for parents from different cultures to become involved with their child’s education, the school must provide an element of multicultural material reflective of the various cultures within the classroom. Multicultural material can consist of more representation of people of color or other groups that are underrepresented. According to Sonia Nieto (2003), author of *Affirming Diversity: Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, the curriculum must be redeveloped to fit multicultural needs. Nieto states, “Teacher education programs for example, need to be re-conceptualized to include awareness of the influence of culture and language on the learning… and instructional and curricular strategies that encourage learning among a wide variety of students” (p. 315). Lack of education, race and cultural differences, and parent occupations all affect parent interaction and involvement in the cultivation of a child’s academic journey.
Instructional Practices

As much of this review demonstrates, pedagogical practices affect the learning environment within the classroom. The types of responses used to engage student inquiry, as well as the different classroom structures, can all affect how a student perceives their role in the education process. Pedagogical practices have been studied to determine how instructional methods can further perpetuate the social structure and social classes within society. For example, according to Jean Anyon (1997), author of “Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work,” schools in wealthier areas prepare their students for more desirable jobs in comparison to schools in poor communities.

Monetary funds are not the biggest contributing factor to differences between schools in poor and wealthy communities, but rather the instructional methods employed to engage the student within the classroom. For instance, in poor communities, schools do not have the basic essential materials needed to conduct science experiments and find solutions to math problems. Children educated in poor urban environments are taught in a way that does not prepare them for academia, but rather for jobs dealing with manual labor. In the 20th century, continuing industrialization fostered a change in the workforce and education began to be viewed as essential to upward mobility in the social classes. According to Bowles and Gintis (1996), “The role of education in capitalist expansion and the integration of new workers into the wage-labor system came to dominate the potential role of schooling as the equalizer and the instrument of full human development” (p. 181). The correlation of society’s class system and the type of educational settings depending on
income is evident when comparing wealthier neighborhood schools with schools located in poverty/urban areas. Schools that lack educational resources tend to track children into occupational roles similar to blue collar/manual labor jobs.

Another characteristic of urban education is the nature of oppressive pedagogy that takes place within working class and lower income schools. Paulo Freire's, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), addresses the issue of students being passive participants in the classroom by stating, “a careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character… this relationship involves a narrating subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students)” (p. 52). Similar to hooks (1999), Freire opposed an educational environment in which the students absorbed info, rather than being able to critically evaluate the narrative provided by the instructor. The narrative described by Freire is similar to the type of education discussed by Anyon (1997) in her description of the “working-class schools.” Anyon’s research focuses on the correlation of the different type of curriculums and the various social classes. Anyon describes the “working-class school” as classrooms filled with activities consisting of:

Work following the steps of a procedure…usually mechanical, involving remote behavior and very little decision making or choice. The teacher rarely explains why the work is being assigned, how it might connect to other assignments, or what the idea lies behind the procedure or gives it coherence and perhaps meaning or significance. (p. 48)
For working class students, this kind of pedagogy means that rather than be prepared to be critical thinkers, students are being taught to be compliant. For African American female students, the theme of compliance and mechanical thinking contribute to the oppressive nature they experience in the classroom. In what Anyon calls the “elite executive school,” the work and instructional style prepare students to be the elite leaders of society. Anyon explains, “In the executive elite school, work is developing one’s analytical intellectual powers. Children are continually asked to reason through a problem, to produce intellectual products that are both logically sound…schoolwork helps one to achieve, to excel, to prepare for life” (p. 56). Both of these curriculums mirror the difference between the expectations of America’s social class system. Though all students receive an education, what sets them apart is the quality and type of education they receive as well as what the education exposed to them is preparing them for.

Limitations to Accessing Community Resources to Supporting Education

Communities that are lacking in material resources may find the task of providing students with the essential educational tools quite difficult. For example, poor urban educational settings may not be able to afford science material for experiments or calculators for basic arithmetic. Joyce Epstein (1995), author of “School/Family/Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share,” emphasizes the importance of instructors creating a partnership with the students’ community. According to Epstein, community is defined as “all who are interested in and affected by the quality of education…not only the neighborhoods where students’
homes and schools are located but also any neighborhoods that influence their learning and development” (p. 178). Instructors can collaborate with the community by providing the students and their families with information on cultural and social supports. By doing so, the instructor not only exemplifies that they are invested in the student’s education, but the instructor also engages the family in the education process. Due to the inflexible schedule of parents, school staff must make an effort to engage all within the students’ community in order to create a thriving learning environment in the home. Parents would like to be more active in their child’s education, but have a limited amount of time outside of the home. By teachers making a conscious effort to collaborate with parents and provide them with the materials needed to create an additional learning environment, parents will feel as if they are active participants in their child’s education.

One problem the schools have with involving the community is that the school administration wants to hold the local community accountable for the passing/failing of students rather than working collaboratively with school and local communities. Some communities foster a hope to provide a quality education to students, but lack the monetary funds to do so. Communities may rely heavily on school administrators to utilize and allocate monetary resources to the educational programs that will improve the education of children. Noguera (2003) provides readers with examples of how race and class are correlated with education by stating:

In most cases, poor communities lack the resources necessary to monitor the quality of education provided to students…concentrated poverty and racial
segregation limit the ability of parents to exert control over the schools that serve their children, and educational leaders in such communities often lack the resources to take on the task themselves. (p. 83)

The people who are suffering the most in the war of accountability are the students who are subjected to these harsh educational learning environments. Students attending schools in impoverished areas are segregated from students that are attending school in affluent areas. This segregation is evident in the quality and access to education. Collins and Williams (1999) found:

Segregation affects socioeconomic mobility in multiple ways. First, because residence determines access to schools, residing in undesirable neighborhoods translates into access to schools of inferior quality. Compared to whites, blacks have higher dropout rates; those who do complete high school are exposed to a less demanding curriculum, lower teacher expectations, and lower levels of skills and knowledge compared to their white peers. (p. 498)

As previously addressed, race, class, gender, and other socioeconomic factors interconnect to affect the educational experience of African American female students. If the educational environment is not tailored to the African American female demographic, over time the level of perceived self-efficacy of African American female student’s decreases, diminishing their desire to learn, thus promoting a sense of helplessness regarding their academic journey. In an age when education is viewed as the essential key to a successful and fulfilling life, it is necessary to study the obstacles faced by a group that is often marginalized in society.
Self-Efficacy

There are many factors within a student’s social structure that can affect the academic success of a student. At the macro-level, socioeconomics structure and forces that include parental occupation or the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood a student lives can determine access to educational resources. Within the meso-level, which includes the education institution can affect the student through pedagogical practices, student-teacher interaction and academic curriculum. The micro-level, which encompasses the individual and cultural identity, can influence the student through their relationships with other students and other individuals that they may meet. All three of these social structures have elements that affect the level of self-efficacy of a female African American student.

Self-Efficacy Defined

According to Albert Bandura (1994), self-efficacy is one’s belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations. Bandura theorized that if someone believes that he or she will succeed in a specific area, the level of belief would determine how the individual would approach various goals and situations throughout life. The higher an individual’s self-efficacy, the more likely he/she will attempt to master difficult tasks rather than avoiding them. Individuals with low levels of self-efficacy, tend to avoid situations in fear that their attempts will produce an undesired outcome. According to Pajares (1996), “Efficacy beliefs help determine how much effort people will expand on an activity, how long they will persevere when confronting obstacles, and how resilient they will prove in the face of adverse situations” (p. 544). When
studying self-efficacy in education the most common sources studied were mastery
experience, vicarious experience and social persuasion. According to Pajares and
Usher (2006), students form their self-efficacy beliefs as they interpret information
from four principal sources: mastery experience, modeling/vicarious experience,
social persuasions, and emotional/physiological indexes (pp. 7-8).

*Self-Efficacy and the African American Female Student*

When evaluating self-efficacy in an educational context for African American
female students, factors such as race, class and gender all have an impact on
efficacious behavior in an academic setting. For example, vicarious experience has
been of great importance when developing the self-efficacy of African American
female students. Because African Americans have had a long history of discrimination
and oppression within education, there have been few models for African American
youth to model their behaviors after. Pajares (2006) states, “students are most likely to
alter their beliefs following a model’s success or failure to the degree that they feel
similar to the model in the area of question” (p. 7). As previously stated by Ogbu
(1992), involuntary minorities are skeptics of education being a tool of upward
mobility. This skepticism can be passed down from generation to generation, which will
in turn decrease adequate models of African American students in educational
institutions. Once African Americans attained the right to higher education, there were
barriers in place that kept African Americans from educational institutions. Lack of
African American representation in higher education made them seem invisible in
academia to future generations. Vicarious experience can take place through an
African American female student seeing other African American students succeed, having mentors, and other images of African American women engaging in efficacious behavior.

Social Persuasion is another important aspect of self-efficacy beliefs. Social persuasion refers to the messages received by external sources such as teachers, peers and other factors in a student’s community. African American female students receive messages regarding their race, gender and socioeconomic status in the educational system on an everyday basis. From early education, African American girls are socialized in the educational environment that being assertive is not desirable, and that their male counterpart’s education is a primary focus to instructors. The message that African American female students receive regarding her race is that because she is African American, that the instructor’s perception of her as a student is determined prior to knowing her capabilities. The message conveyed regarding socioeconomic status is that depending on a student’s class level and access to economic resource will determine the likelihood of attending college. According to Pajares (2006), “positive invitations convey the message that people are able, valuable, responsible, and forgiving; negative invitations suggest that people are not valued and that they are incapable of participating positively in their own development” (p. 8). In order to understand how self-efficacy of African American female students are developed, an analysis of the history of African Americans, gender in education, as well as socioeconomics must take place.
As previously addressed, race, class, gender, and other socioeconomic factors interconnect to affect the educational experience of African American female students. If the educational environment is not tailored to the African American female demographic, over time the level of perceived self-efficacy of African American female student’s decreases, diminishing their desire to learn and promoting a sense of helplessness regarding their academic journey. In an age when education is viewed as the essential key to a successful and fulfilling life, it is necessary to study the obstacles faced by a group that is often marginalized in society. Currently the United States has accomplished a historic milestone of having their first African American President Barack Obama. One of the key components of President Obama’s platform is to improve the American educational system through allocating money to schools in low socioeconomic neighborhoods, as well as addressing the issue of racial inequality. Similar to President Obama’s view of education, Michelle Obama, the first African American First Lady has become the epitome of a strong, assertive African American woman. The representation of a strong, assertive, and educated African American woman in power has inspired me as an African American female graduate student to conduct research regarding the impact of race, class and gender on the educational experience of African American female student’s. The goal of conducting this research project is to evaluate how race, class, and gender intersect in the learning environment and impact African American female learners.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how factors such as race, class, and gender affect the educational attainment of African American female students. The research study used a sample size of 10 participants: eight African American female students and two staff members. A female counselor at Dunlap High School selected two African American female students from each class level (freshman, sophomore, junior and senior). The selections of staff were random, based upon availability. For the purpose of this study, academic success is defined as a student’s level of proficiency and competence to master the curriculum in an educational setting. Educational attainment is defined as the accomplishment of receiving education that will help students to gain upward mobility.

Research Design

To explore my research question that is focused on the educational experiences of African American female students, I chose to use both qualitative and quantitative research design (mixed methodology). Commonly used in qualitative research, triangulation is the convergence of multiple sources of data collection to support a hypothesis or theory (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), methodological triangulation is “the use of multiple methods to solve a single problem.” (p. 46). A mixed methodology design was chosen because I wanted to enrich my qualitative data findings with quantitative data collected from surveys completed by participants, and illustrate the experiences of African American female
students through narrative. With the knowledge that using a single method of research can have its limitations, a mixed method approach was used as a strategy of inquiry for my research questions.

As to the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the research design, the approach used in this study employed constructivism as a design concept. Constructivist design seeks to understand how human beings construct meaning based upon their engagement with the world through their experiences (Creswell, 2003). Because the study sought to convey the experiences of African American female students in education, the constructivist design allows for narrative that shows how meaning was constructed through educational experiences.

For the quantitative approach, I chose to develop an interval scale of measurement. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), “interval scales of measurement allow statistical analyses that are not possible with nominal or ordinal data.” (p. 27). One common interval scale used in social science research is the five-point Likert scale. I drafted a Likert style questionnaire in which participants were asked their level of agreement with a closed statement regarding their experiences with race, class, and gender at Dunlap High. The survey as a quantitative measure was used because it allowed for participants to rate each statement according to their level of agreement, which gave the researcher a better understanding of how each student felt about the stated question. The five point Likert scale allowed student participants a range of responses when answering questions regarding race, class, and gender in the academic environment (see Appendix C).
In conjunction with the quantitative portion of the design, I also wanted a narrative approach to the design, so I drafted open-ended interview research questions so participants more richly reflect upon their experience of race, class, and gender in an educational environment (see Appendix D). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), qualitative research focuses “on phenomena that occur in natural settings…and involve studying those phenomena in all their complexity” (p. 133). This study followed the procedures described by Creswell (2003) in which mixed methodology is completed concurrently and “the investigator collects both forms of data at the same time during the study and then integrates the information in the interpretation of the overall results” (p.16). Similar to the ethnographic study conducted by Signithia Fordham (1993) regarding the educational experiences of African American female students, I also chose to model my qualitative design after her study because Fordham sought to research the impact of the intersection of race and gender in the academic environment. Fordham also evaluated the behaviors and attitudes African American female students adopted in order to be academically successful. Fordham interviewed not only African American female students but also staff, as well as observed the behaviors of the students and staff in the academic environment. This study was an excellent model because past research focusing on female students in education treated gender and race as isolated variables that were independent from each other, whereas Fordham researched both race and gender as interdependent variables that create a unique educational experience for not only African American students, but also those educating the African American female population. Fordham also provides historical
background of African American women in society that provides readers with an understanding of how behaviors seen as masculine have been adopted by African American women.

Research Question

The questions used in this study’s survey reflected key issues addressed in past educational research regarding race, class, gender and other socioeconomic barriers that affect the educational attainment of African American female students. The qualitative research of Beverly Tatum (1997) and Signithia Fordham (1993) helped shape my research questions regarding the place of race, class, and gender in an academic setting. For example, Tatum’s primary focus in a lot of her written work focuses on how concepts of race and racial identity are developed in the academic setting, while Fordham combined both race and gender as intersecting variables that affect the educational experience of African American female students. Students in my study had the opportunity to evaluate how the following areas of their lives affect their academic achievement:

- Race: relationships with peers, presence of African American instructors on Dunlap High campus, exposure to racism/discrimination.
- Gender: sexism and gender bias in the classroom, as well as ratio of male/female instructors
- Socioeconomic status: monetary resources, parent involvement, socioeconomic environment of home and school.
Students had the opportunity to select a response on the survey that best expressed their opinions regarding the barriers they felt they faced in their educational environment. In addition to both student participants answering the closed questions on the survey, the qualitative questions in the interview portion of the study allowed student and staff participants to further elaborate on their experiences of race, class, gender and other socioeconomic factors in the school setting. Specifically, the qualitative questions served as a way to provide students with a voice when addressing internal and external factors that affect the academic achievement of African American female students.

Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study involved a 31 five-point Likert scale questions and 15 open-ended interview questions. Respondents were asked their level of agreement with the statement; options offered were “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Statements included topics such as race, gender, parent involvement, academic setting evaluation and teacher/student interactions. All participants had an opportunity to seek clarification regarding survey and interview questions as well as to address concerns regarding confidentiality and concept definitions with the researcher because the researcher was within the room when the informant was completing the survey.

A letter of consent was provided to the student participants and school staff. The primary point of contact at Dunlap High, a school counselor, administered the consent form to students to be returned with parent and student signatures prior to student interviews (see Appendix A). Most student participants stated that they would
like to keep their interviews confidential and inquired as to whether their responses would affect their grades. Within the letter of consent, participants were told that all identifying information would be kept confidential.

Students were asked a set of 17 questions inquiring about their experiences as students at Dunlap High School. Staff were also asked 15 open-ended questions regarding how race, gender, and class affect the African American students they interact with at Dunlap High (see Appendix E). Open-ended questions were used for both students and staff to enrich the quantitative data collected from the student participants. Examples of questions posed to participants were the hindrances of parent involvement, importance of staff diversity, the role of peer support on academic achievement, and the influence of race, class and gender in the learning environment.

In addition to open-ended questions, students were asked if they had questions for the researcher. These questions and responses were also recorded. Some of the questions asked by student participants included difficulties the researcher had as an African American female student, as well as how to succeed academically when faced with racism and sexism. Though the impromptu questions asked by the student participants were not a part of the original open-ended questions, the researcher was able to take notes regarding the level of interest students had in speaking with someone who was similar to themselves and was able to overcome barriers and succeed academically. Some written notes were also taken regarding non-verbal communication of the respondents. For example, lack of eye contact, excessive movement, and clearing of the throat were some of the commonly noted nonverbal
cues expressed by research participants. The most prevalent nonverbal communication was evasive eye contact, which the researcher interpreted as nervousness. The nervousness conveyed through evasive eye contact can be an indication that participants were nervous and unsure as to how much information to convey to the researcher as well as how comfortable participants were with answering the researcher’s questions. Interviews lasted no more than 15 minutes for students due to student respondents not being able to miss majority of their study hall period; however, staff interviews lasted roughly 20 minutes because interviews were conducted during periods in which staff did not have to teach nor counsel students.

Participants

Over a two-day period, African American female students were interviewed in vacant rooms at the school site during their designated study periods. Staff interviews were scheduled around rest periods in which staff did not have to teach nor counsel any students.

All participants initially inquired about the nature of the study as well as the purpose it would serve in the field of education. Because the research question is centered on the academic experiences of African American female students, it was fitting that the criteria would be developed around distinct academic and social characteristics that each participant would possess. Excluded from the study were students not of African American descent and male students. While there were no distinct criteria for selecting administrative staff for my study, I determined that the student participants must meet the following criteria:
• Two female students from each class level (freshman, sophomore, junior and senior).

• Be of African American descent (bi-racial included).

• Female.

• Between the ages of 14-18.

Two female students were chosen from each grade because I wanted equal representation for the quantitative and qualitative results of the data.

I also sought to have a counselor participate as an informant because of their constant interaction with students and parents. This counselor was chosen in particular due to her being an African American and a woman. This particular counselor also had a working relationship with a staff member in the teacher education department at California State University, Sacramento, and expressed a strong interest in the researchers study. After corresponding with the African American female counselor at Dunlap High School, the counselor agreed to participate in the research study as well as help identify students that met the research criteria. After two brief meetings with the staff at Dunlap High School, African American female students were chosen to be participants in my thesis research. In addition to the selection of the African American female students and the counselor, after hearing about the research project from another staff member, an English teacher voluntarily wanted to be part of the research project because majority of her students were African American and female, as well as her interest in women’s issues and gender bias in education. The English teacher was of Caucasian descent. Due to lack of timing in the academic year when the research
study was conducted, there was minimal staff available to partake in further interviews with the researcher.

Setting

The Oak Park Community

The community of Oak Park, the first suburb of Sacramento, California, serves the school chosen for this study, Dunlap Charter High School. Originally thought to one day become its own separate city from Sacramento, Oak Park was home to many western immigrants and farmers in the first 20 years of its existence (Simpson, 2004). In 1911, rather than Oak Park becoming a separate city, the area became the residential community for commuters working in the downtown Sacramento area. With technological advances as well as the development in transportation to and from downtown Sacramento, more working-class and lower-middle class families found it favorable to move to the Oak Park community because of its location, as well as the relatively lower cost of living.

Though the Oak Park area was a thriving working class community, in the 1930s, the Great Depression hit hardest those communities that were most vulnerable, including the working-class Oak Park area. After the Great Depression, Oak Park residents found it difficult to economically recover from its local businesses financial loses, which ultimately set the stage for other socioeconomic changes to come in the 1940s. Further debilitating to Oak Park was the fact that by the 1940s street cars were replaced by buses and cars, which led to the development of Highway 99, directly through the Oak Park neighborhood, thus separating the community in half (Simpson,
2004). With the development of Highway 99, more middle-class families relocated to other areas in Sacramento, such as East Sacramento and the Land Park area, raising the cost of living as well as causing more low-income families to move to the Oak Park community. Family owned businesses in the Oak Park community began to move to different locations or were forced to close their doors due to lack of business. The community landscape began to change as well. Historically a predominantly white suburb in the early 20th century, by the mid 20th century Oak Park demographic reflected a predominantly African American community. What was once a community which prided itself on family, community and collaboration, was now a community that had little community businesses and community funding to support revitalization and academic resource endeavors.

As early as 1990, one notable Oak Park resident, a professional athlete, started a nonprofit development company, which sought to revitalize all components of the Oak Park community, including bringing in businesses as well as improving the schools and parks in the community. One school in jeopardy of closing was Dunlap High School, one of a few high schools in the Oak Park Community. Due to poor student performance, Dunlap High school was due to be closed by the Sacramento Unified School District, but with the help of the nonprofit development company, Dunlap High School was turned into a charter school, thus becoming Dunlap Charter High in 2003. Problems that plagued Dunlap High school were under performance of students, lack of educational funding for academic resources, as well as low levels of parent involvement and community involvement in the improvement of Dunlap’s
academic environment. Since becoming a charter school, Dunlap High has seen a tremendous improvement in student performance.

*Dunlap Charter High School*

Dunlap High School is home to an estimated 1,000 students and 50 staff (Ed-Data, 2009). With a student population of predominantly African American (55.8%) and Hispanic (24.1%), Dunlap High is a reflection of the demographics within the community. Students from neighboring areas of Sacramento, such as Del Paso Heights, Valley High, and South Sacramento, also travel to the Oak Park area to attend Dunlap High School. Dunlap High School has an estimated 43 teachers predominately Caucasian (70.7%) with a minority of Hispanic and African American (7.3%) teachers. With an overall API score of 731 out of a total 800 possible, Dunlap High has at least a 98% graduation rate with a 2% dropout rate (Ed-Data, 2009). When entering the Dunlap High School building, students are expected to wear the proper school uniform, which includes polo shirts with the Dunlap High logo and khaki or denim jeans. Students frequently pass the “Wall of Fame” which lists all of the colleges that the high school alumni attend after graduating. The “Wall” was created for Dunlap High students as a form of encouragement. Prior to Dunlap becoming a charter school, the numbers of students graduating from high school as well as scoring high API scores were relatively low. Since establishing emphasis on academic improvement, and encouraging parents and community to be accountable for the success of students at Dunlap High School, students have exceeded academic expectations and have continued to maintain a relationship with Dunlap High by
returning to the school to speak to and mentor students. The significance of illustrating students academic improvement serves to remind students who were currently attending Dunlap High as well as students considering attending Dunlap the importance to succeed academically and seeing other students like themselves go on to higher education institutions. Having an academic setting that stresses academic excellent and praises students for their accomplishments develops student’s self-efficacy, an element that is important in the academic success of African American female students.

Procedures

*Letter of Consent*

Prior to meeting with students and staff, all participants were given a letter of consent describing the nature of the research as well as the anonymity of participants filling out the survey. Due to the students being minors, a letter of consent was drafted describing the nature of the project, and the confidentiality of all data obtained from the project. The letter of consent was to be signed by participants and their guardians (see Appendix A).

*Analysis of Quantitative Data and Qualitative Data*

After surveys were administered and returned to the researcher, data was coded and entered into the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) database. The SPSS database allows data to be compiled and analyzed in multiple ways. Because of the small sample size, the researcher was unable to use t-tests and correlation models to analyze data. Instead, the researcher analyzed the responses to the quantitative data
by reviewing the percentages of each point on the Likert Scale according to the question. The researcher analyzed the data in the following three ways: Aggregated to get an idea of how the participants answered statements as a whole group; grade level of student participants and parent education level. By doing so, the researcher was able to evaluate how these factors may have influenced the responses to the experiences of race, class and gender in an academic setting. This database would also provide the mean scores for each statement on the surveys.

Qualitative data was evaluated by having all audiotapes transcribed. After interviews were fully transcribed, themes present in the interview were listed as well as key quotes that the researcher felt was relevant in addressing the research question. To get a better understanding of the themes that were addressed through the qualitative data, the researcher listened to all interviews a total of three times, and utilized Microsoft Excel to track themes of each listening session. After the researcher listened to each interview at least three times, as well as categorized themes, the researcher compiled a list of major findings that were evident from the interviews. Once both the qualitative and quantitative data was thoroughly evaluated, the researcher then compared both forms of data and consolidated the findings to illustrate if indeed factors of race, class, and gender impacted the educational advancement of African American female students.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this mixed methodology study was to explore the unique challenges faced by African American female high school students when encountering the intersection of race, gender and class in an educational environment. This study reflects the experiences of eight African American female students ranging from ages 15-18 and two school staff employed at Dunlap High School in the Oak Park neighborhood located in the city of Sacramento. Of special interest to the researcher were the impact of race, class and gender on the academic achievement of these particular African American female students. In addition, the researcher was particularly interested in how these girls navigate through academia when confronted with barriers caused by socioeconomic factors.

Over a two-day period, eight African American female students and two Dunlap High School staff were interviewed regarding the impact of race, class, and gender on the academic achievement of African American female students. Data collected from the interviews and surveys indicated that participants were aware of the educational barriers due to race and gender, but because the demographic of Dunlap High School was predominantly African American, there were low levels of racial saliency. Many student participants stated that though they have not experienced racial discrimination at Dunlap High School, there is a minimal amount of discourse on issues of race, gender and class in their academic environment. Race and gender did
not become central to participants until they began reflecting on the need for African American teachers and counselors in leadership positions at Dunlap.

In addition to the findings surrounding race, participants conveyed that they have not experienced gender bias in their educational environment, but revealed that, in comparison to male instructors they have not had many African American female instructors. Similar to findings regarding African Americans in leadership positions, in this study participants conveyed that there were not many African American women in leadership positions at Dunlap High School; they were only able to list at least three African American women within their academic environment of at least 43 instructors.

Lastly, in comparison to the findings on race and gender, this study shows that class was an important barrier to parent involvement and access to educational resources. Both female students and staff conveyed that parent involvement was vital to helping African American students succeed academically. Reasons for limited parent involvement included: parents’ employment hours, parents’ dedication to other siblings, and parents’ lack of access to technology to stay abreast of school changes. Student participants coming from a single parent household addressed how unstable economic factors (such as employment, housing, etc.,) affected their parents’ ability to participate in the student’s education, but rely on peer and staff support to motivate them to succeed.

This chapter is divided into six sections: The first section consists of a brief description of participants, such as their ethnicity, age, and current grade level. Because the nature of the study reflects the experiences of African American female
students and staff at Dunlap High, it is necessary to provide character information of participants in order to enrich the research findings as well as understand how their individual identities shaped their understanding of their educational environment. By providing character information of each participant, the researcher sought to illustrate the similarities and differences amongst participants as well as value how these differences contribute to each of their unique experiences when navigating through academia. In addition to race, age and grade level, information regarding parents’ educational level, the researcher collected family demographics and personality traits via interviews and observation. The first section also includes a description of the two staff interviewed at Dunlap High School.

The second section focuses on factors that contribute to the motivation for the students to succeed academically. As the researcher began to isolate themes from factors that contribute to the motivation for students to succeed, smaller, yet significant themes that emerged for this second section included the following: upward mobility, diminishing racial stereotypes of African Americans, and closing the achievement gap. Upward mobility as a theme dealt with the student’s use of education as a means of improving their current socioeconomic status, such as moving from a lower class level to middle class. Using education as a tool to diminish racial stereotypes was described by participants as breaking societies pre-conceived notions of African Americans as being un-educated though increasing more African American students graduating from high school and attending higher learning institutions. Lastly, closing the achievement gap was described by participants to be an important
motivator in succeeding academically to also prove that African Americans are as educated as their Caucasian counterparts are.

The third section of the chapter examines the development of racial identity and ideology in an academic environment. The themes that emerged in the third section were perception of “acting white,” importance of race to student identity, and lack of African American instructors in leadership positions in an academic setting. In the fourth section, student participants discuss their parents’ involvement in their educational process. In this, section students reflected on factors that hinder their parent’s level of involvement including work schedules, obligation to other relatives and lack of access to material resources.

In addition to sections one through four, section five consists of the role gender plays in the educational environment of African American female students. Education research regarding gender bias in the classroom treats all female students as if they are a homogenous population, when in fact, race can be an additional barrier faced by female students in the academic environment. When the researcher addressed questions in regards to gender bias in the classroom, participants not only addressed themselves as female students, but also addressed how race and gender have impacted them internally and externally to the academic setting. Lastly, section six concerns how student and staff participants conveyed the ways in which Dunlap High could improve the educational environment for its African American female population. Sub-themes that emerged from section six included students’ desire for more options of different types of curriculum, as well as the need for cultural competence training
for teaching staff. In addition, the findings indicate students’ concern about the discourse surrounding race and gender and increasing communication with parents of students.

Summary of Participants

This section describes the participants according to grade level and aims to provide a short description that highlights how they viewed education, as well as their current and future educational aspirations. Prior to beginning the interview and at the conclusion of the interview, participants had a chance to introduce themselves to the researcher and ask questions regarding college. From the preliminary conversations with participants, the researcher had the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the participant’s lives internal and external to experiences at school. The eight student participants were asked their age, ethnicity, and grade levels. They were also asked about their parents’ education level and the number of siblings in the household. Seven of the eight student participants were of African descent with an additional participant identifying herself as of both African American and Polynesian descent. Prior to the formal interview, participants were asked if they had a desire to further their education past high school. Some student participants expressed that they planned to be the first in their family to go to college. All the students expressed a desire to attend college in order to gain a better chance of having a good career.

Participants also discussed the impact of having school age siblings living in the household and the impact that had on parent involvement in the educational environment. For the purpose of this study, parent involvement is defined as the level
of engagement in which a parent participates in various school activities both internal and external to the school environment. Activities included helping students with homework, communicating with staff regarding student academic progress, and school events and assemblies. Seven of the eight student participants stated that they had at least one to two siblings living within the household, while one participant stated they had at least three siblings living in the household.

In addition to parent involvement as being a factor that affected the academic achievement of the students, the cultural diversity of staff at Dunlap High was described by both student and staff participants as being of great importance. All students claimed that there were few African American instructors at Dunlap High School; one student stated that besides one African American female counselor, the only other African American staff members she had met were security guards and janitors. Later in this chapter, some of these views and concepts will be further explored. In addition to interviewing students, two staff members were interviewed in order to understand the educational barrier faced by African American female students from the vantage point of individuals in a leadership position. One staff member interviewed was an English teacher of Caucasian descent, while the other staff participant was of African descent and an academic advisor to all of the student participants in this study. Pseudonyms have been used in this study in order to keep the actual names of the participants confidential.

The following section introduces the individual students, relating their ethnic identification and grade level, in addition to parent educational level and each
participant’s self-perception. First, Mia is a 15-year-old bi-racial student of African American and Polynesian descent. Mia is a high school freshman and expresses herself openly about her experiences internal and external to school. Mia considers herself creative, emphasizing her love for art, skating and rock music. Mia stated that her peer circle is ethnically diverse. She expresses interest in attending college at a school with a good arts program. Mia stated that she does not have the best study habits due to her inability to concentrate in the classroom. One of the distractions Mia addressed in her interview was her family concerns. Mia has been raised in a single-parent household in which her mother is the breadwinner. Mia states that her mom’s involvement in school is limited due to long work hours, but she stresses to Mia that academic success will lead to a good future.

In addition to interviewing freshman Mia, the researcher also interviewed a 14-year-old African American female student in her freshman year of high school named Zhane. Zhane described herself as sociable, yet able to balance her social life and academic grades. Sometimes considered a “nerd” for being focused in class, Zhane stated that she is comfortable with being intelligent and tends to surround herself with peers who want to excel in school. She stated that she vicariously learns the importance of education from her brother and sister, who both attended college. Her mother has a high school education level, and her father received some college education. Zhane’s desire is to join the ranks of her siblings by graduating from college. She has an interest in interning at U.C. Davis in a biomedical program. Zhane
chose to come to Dunlap High because of its connections to internships with local colleges as well as the demanding academic curriculum offered to its students.

Two sophomore students were interviewed named Leana and Beyonca. Leana is a 16-year-old African American female student, in her sophomore year of high school. She is actively involved in sports and relies heavily on the support of her family when it comes to succeeding academically in school. She expressed her interest in going to college, but also had anxiety about how she will be able to afford higher education. Leana stated that her parents have a close relationship with the staff at Dunlap High School and are actively involved in fostering a strong educational environment in the home. Both of Leana’s parents had some college education, but did not complete the course work to attain a college degree.

The second sophomore interviewed named Beyonca was a 16-year-old African American female student who described herself as self-motivated, focused, and intelligent. Beyonca stated that she surrounds herself with students who want to do well in school and who have goals of furthering their education. Both of Beyonca’s parents graduated from college, and she conveyed that they expected the same of her. She revealed that her parents are actively involved in her education and her parents have strong relationships with her instructors at Dunlap High School. Beyonca also has two siblings. Described by her counselor as a “go-getter,” Beyonca is ambitious, evident in her description of why education is important. Though in her sophomore year, Beyonca is actively searching for internships that would give her a better idea of
what her major will be in college as well as possible career options she will have after completing college.

A 16-year-old African American female student in her junior year of high school, Niecie considered herself highly efficacious and motivated to succeed academically. Being involved in programs such as MESA and advanced placement courses, Niecie states that her peers come to her for academic help in the classroom. Niecie’s mom had some college courses but did not attain a college degree. Being raised by a single-mother, Niecie addressed the challenges her mother faced when trying to be involved in her education. “My mom is a single mom, so I help my brother and sister… my mom is my everything.” Religion is something that Niecie feels helped her become mentally focused in school when external factors influence her mindset. One of the main concerns that Niecie had when it came to her academic environment is that she feels she is only praised when she is at her best academically, but when she is at her lowest point in school, she feels that she loses the support of the staff at Dunlap High School.

Nala is an African American 17-year-old female student in her junior year of high school. Since she was young, Nala expressed a desire to go to college. She considered herself to have a strong plan on how to accomplish that goal. Nala believes that all of the minority students at Dunlap High encounter the same racial stereotypes and depictions developed by society, which affect how they are perceived by society, but Nala chooses to ignore the stereotypes to succeed. Nala does not get much help with her homework from her parents, but she cites her self-motivation and sports as
key factors that help her do well in school. Due to her mother having her at a young age, Nala described her own desire not to become a teen mother and instead to go to college and get a degree. Nala also revealed that she has anxiety of how the lack of economic resources will affect attending college. Despite these anxieties, Nala is still hopeful and ambitious when it comes to attending college.

A senior in high school, Shantrice is an African American female student with confidence when describing her academic progress. Shantrice was a sophomore when Dunlap High School became a charter school in an effort to improve the educational outcomes for its students. Shantrice states that the Sacramento Unified School District’s plan of changing Dunlap into a charter school improved her educational experience by giving her access to more challenging curriculum and external educational programs. Shantrice is actively involved in sports and described her peers as being supportive of her education. She states that both her parents are involved in her education. Both of Shantrice’s parents had some college level education, but wanted Shantrice to graduate from college. Shantrice has plans on furthering her education after graduating from Dunlap High School.

The last of the student participants is a senior in high school named Maxine. An 18-year-old African American female student, Maxine stated that she had a supportive group of peers and family. Though she has no access to educational resources outside of school, Maxine utilizes tutoring offered by Dunlap High. Both her mother and father had a high school education. Both of her parents communicate with Maxine’s teachers, as well as lookup her grades on the Dunlap educational website.
Like the other participants, Maxine notices that the staff does not reflect the cultural demographic of students at Dunlap High School. In addition to commenting on the lack of African American staff, Maxine also made suggestions on the need for more discourse regarding issues of race and gender. Maxine prefers to focus on how the courses will prepare her for furthering her education.

In addition to interviewing student participants, the researcher selected two staff members, Jean and Faye, to provide insight regarding their experiences with African American female students and their parents when trying to help students succeed academically. Jean is a young, Caucasian, 10th grade English teacher and advisor at Dunlap High School. Due to the high school’s educational reform centered on improving educational outcome for its students, Jean decided to teach at Dunlap High School. Jean conveyed that working at Dunlap High had given her the opportunity to make a difference in the education of all students. Jean believes that in her classroom, the students begin to develop a trusting relationship in which they can address educational concerns. In addition to teaching, Jean is also an advisor and describes herself as being a role model for some of her female students. Jean is an advocate in making a connection between the students’ academic environments at school as well their home environment. Jean stated that one of the primary barriers to the connection could be the fact that “a lot of parents work during the hours that school events take place.” The second staff member in the study was Faye, a young African American counselor, who advises all of the female participants of this research project. Often referenced as a part of the support system of the students
interviewed, Faye observes firsthand the impact of race, gender and class in the educational environment of African American female students. Faye, who has both an undergraduate and graduate degree, viewed education as being the key to setting “them [students] up for being successful in their future.” Determined to make sure that all of the students that she advises graduate from both high school and college, Faye is one of a few African American staff members in a leadership position at Dunlap High School, which concerns not only her, but also many of the participants of the study.
Table 1

Profile of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Names</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Grade/Education Level</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Father Education Level</th>
<th>Mother Education Level</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
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<td>Some College</td>
<td>GED</td>
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<td>Student</td>
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<td>Some College</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Senior</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
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</table>
The Importance of Succeeding Academically

*Upward Mobility*

In order to understand the impact of education in the lives of the students and staff participants, one of the first questions asked was why succeeding academically was important. All participants cited that one of the main reasons to succeed academically is to have a better future, that is, to gain upward mobility. Nala stated that she wants to further her education in order to get a good job. “I think that everybody’s education is important, so in the future you have a good job, and everything will be set for you, because it’s hard now with our economy to get a job.” Nala understands the importance of having a higher level of education in order to compete in the future job market.

Similar to Nala, Mia also shared sentiments that her mother conveyed the importance of education as a means of improving her future quality of life. “My mom always says that if you do well in school, it will help you with life…you have to learn stuff to get you places.” Although Mia is only a freshman in high school, she is already thinking about her future career and the role that education will play in helping her make money so that she does not have to struggle later in life. As the researcher interviewed participants regarding academic success, the notion of “struggling” was often conveyed to the researcher. Just as Mia’s mom stressed the importance of her daughter getting an education, Mia’s mom also stated that it is important for her daughter to be the first to go to college in her family to set an example for her younger
cousins. Similar to Mia being the first to go to college, the majority of the student participants stated that they would be the first generation to go to college as well.

Out of the eight student participants, only one participant stated that both of her parents had attained a B.A. or B.S. college degree. According to Faye, the counselor, some of her African American female students would be the first in their family to attend college. Faye acknowledged that the additional pressure to be the first to attain a college degree motivates students to succeed but can also be stressful for students. “These kids are the first to even graduate from high school, the majority of our students are the first to go to college, so just imagine how you would feel if you went to college campuses and saw people that looked like you.”

At the time of the interview, Maxine was one month from graduating from high school. When asked the importance of succeeding academically, Maxine confidently stated that education is important because “you have to achieve things to get places in life, so you won’t have to struggle when you get older, so it’s important.” While reinforcing Maxine’s point of the importance of education, Niecie noted the difficult reality of attending school in a poor urban neighborhood where wealth is not present. Niecie lives in an urban neighborhood and believes that education is “important for us in order to succeed in life because a lot of us are not given the money to do well in other places.”

Similar to the ideas of Ana Julia Cooper (in Lemert & Bhan, 1998) regarding the education of not only African American men, but also African American women, the young women seem to be echoing that tradition or concern of the importance of
educating African Americans. When referencing the importance of education, all participants spoke of education not only for themselves but also for African American women in general. Beyoncé stated that she is aware that she has “two-strikes” against her being African American and a woman, but states that those same odds against her serves as motivation towards her goal of attending college. Participants conveyed that by more African Americans going to college, they are helping diminish society’s stereotypes of African Americans being un-educated.

Eliminating Stereotypes

Participants also conveyed viewing the importance of education as an upward mobility tool for all African American women as a means of eliminating societal stereotypes. By the time pre-teens enter middle school and high school; African American children encounter racial stereotypes that reflect society’s perceptions of African Americans (Tatum, 1997). Racial stereotypes of the intellectual inferiority of African Americans can be traced back to the early 1600s when slaves were brought from Africa to the Americas. These stereotypes have shaped the perceptions of individuals within society and have entered into the academic setting. African Americans such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Ana Julia Cooper all conveyed the notion of educating African Americans as a means of eliminating social injustice and improving the lives of all African Americans. Academic success as a means of eliminating stereotypes was discussed by Beyoncé, who stated, “I know a lot of times society...especially in Sacramento, really looks down on us at Dunlap High...they think we are not up to par academically wise compared to other students,
so it’s important to succeed academically because it shows them that, yeah, we can do just as well as other students.” Because of the historical implications of these stereotypes, society has labeled students from low-income neighborhoods as being incapable of keeping up academically with students from middle and upper-income neighborhoods. According to Shaffer, Ortman, and Denbo (2002), “The view that achievement is not a ‘black thing’ is reinforced by Eurocentric curriculum and a color coded tracking system” (p. 21).

Leana and Zhane expressed the benefits of African American female students achieving academically, which included eliminating racial and gender stereotypes, as well as closing the achievement gap. Leana believed that academic achievement would eliminate racial stereotypes and gender stereotypes of women in education. Leana noted, “Guys really put us down. They feel like we can’t really achieve stuff …they usually think that we can’t do that many things because we’re women.” Freshman Zhane also addresses how academic achievement will improve the perception of Dunlap High School, as well as of the African American student body. Zhane states that the academic achievement of African American students is important because “it would make our school look like we are doing something, as well as [close] the achievement gap.” In fact, the concept of academic success as a means of closing the achievement gap is a notion introduced to Latino and African American students when they first begin attending Dunlap High.
Closing the Achievement Gap

For the past 20 years, there have been numerous research studies conducted and published regarding the academic achievement gap between African American and Latino students in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts. As more research has been conducted on the achievement gap and new policies developed such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), educational researchers are now evaluating how the intersecting systems of oppression create a different educational environment for students of color. Some of the institutional practices include the following: unequal funding, inaccurate educational measurements and assessments, under-qualified teachers, low teacher expectations, lack of parent involvement, and racial segregation (Denbo, 2002a). The achievement gap was mentioned often by both students and staff participants as being an important focus of instructors at Dunlap High School.

According to all student participants, when first beginning as freshmen at Dunlap High, students and families were asked to attend a mandatory assembly regarding the achievement gap between minority students and Caucasian students. Participants stated that the purpose of the assembly was to convey the importance of academic achievement in order to reduce the achievement gap between ethnic minorities and their Caucasian and Asian counterparts. Dunlap High has also encouraged parent participation in school programs, increased communication with instructors and college tours. As educational policy makers evaluate different factors within the learning environment, sociologists and educational researchers have also
dedicated time to evaluating how external factors such as race impact the educational experience of African American female students.

Development of Racial Identity and Ideology in Academic Environment Race

The concept of race is a social construction used to classify individual members in society. The importance placed on race in an academic setting can be dependent upon the majority demographic of staff and students in the educational environment. At Dunlap High School, African Americans make up over half of the student population, whereas the African American staff consists of less than one-third of the teaching faculty and administrative staff. Scott (2003) has developed the term “racial centrality” in order to explain the impact of being in an environment in which individuals specific race is the majority, thus making the environment feel normative. According to Scott, “Racial centrality refers to the extent to which being Black is a normative aspect of one’s self conception and identity” (p. 522). When participants in this study were asked questions about their interactions with peers of the same race as well as about experiencing racism while attending Dunlap High, student participants stated in their interview that they have not experienced racism at Dunlap High, however when the researcher reviewed the quantitative data less than 50% stated that they have never experienced racism at Dunlap High. This is an example of how in a homogenous environment, race is less salient (Moore & Rowley, 2002). A few student participants stated that although they had never experienced racism at Dunlap High, they were fully aware that racism and sexism exist outside of school. One example of
this awareness was when student participants in academic extra-curricular activities experience the saliency of race due to being one of a few African Americans in a given setting. According to Scott (2003), “Racial saliency refers to the extent to which being Black is meaningful in a particular context or situation”. (p. 522). For students who participated in honors classes or external academic activities, there was an increase of racial saliency, because they were in an academic environment in which they were one of only a few African Americans present. Race also became a central concept in this study when a few of the female student participants reflected on their educational experiences in which they were accused of “acting white” by their peers. Though in the interview over half of the student participants stated that they did not experience name calling for succeeding academically, data collected from the administered survey reflected that 75% stated they have been called names for succeeding academically. Although some of these events pre-dated their attendance at Dunlap High, these incidences had shaped their perception of academic success.

*Acting White*

Researchers such as Jon Ogbu (1992) and Signithia Fordham (1993) had produced literature regarding the concept of “acting white” within the African American community. Because African Americans have been conditioned to believe that academic success is only reserved for the dominant culture, some African Americans feel that striving towards academic excellence is seen as conforming to the norms and values of the dominant culture. According to Fordham (1993), “For many African Americans, acting white implies acceptance of an ethic that is normed and
nurtured by the dominant society” (p. 147). Similar to the experiences of participants in Fordham’s study, the researcher found that female participants that excelled academically also experienced name-calling due to achieving academic success. When student participants were asked on the survey if they had peers the same race as them that supported them succeeding academically, at least 37% stated they agreed that peers of their own race supported their academic success, while 63% stated that they were undecided or disagreed that their peers are supportive of them excelling in school. In pursuing evidence of this trend for students in this study, student participants were asked if they were called names by their African American peers for achieving academically in school. While five out of the eight participants stated that their African American peers were supportive academically, three participants stated that they had been accused of “acting white” and called names such as “Oreo” and “nerd.” In their study Shaffer, Ortman, and Denbo (2002) found that, “Black girls who take school seriously are accused of ‘acting white’” (p. 21). In the same way Mia shared her experience of being called names for succeeding academically; however, she took this experience as a lesson in which she learned to accept who she was: an academically oriented young woman. Mia admitted that when she was called names, it was hurtful because she felt like she had to choose to act out what her peers considered “black.” Mia admitted that she did not conform to the “black” stereotypical girl that society has developed, and because of not conforming, she has been called an Oreo because she “is more of a skater, rocker-type girl.” Rather than Mia subscribing to racial stereotypes, she describes herself not according to her race, but according to
her individual interest, which serves as another identity for her. Describing her interest as “listening to rock music and metal and stuff like that,” Mia stated that she is considered by many of her peers as an Oreo; nevertheless, she has become more confident in being herself. Mia has learned to cope with the name calling by developing an identity that did not involve race, while her peers such as Niece and Beyonca have tried different approaches.

In addition to Mia experiencing being called names by her African American peers, Niecie and Beyonca, both of whom were in advanced classes, had similar experiences of being called names for excelling in school. Niecie stated that for as long as she could remember being in school, she had been called an Oreo for being in honors classes and after school academic programs. Recalling some of her experiences, Niecie stated that she had been called a nerd and Oreo since I was in elementary school, because, like, I’ve gone to school in Oak Park my entire like, so, like when it comes to like honors programs or programs like MESA and stuff, I’m typically the only black kid in the program…so I’ve always been called the Oreo black on the outside, white on the inside.

Beyonca had a diverse group of friends and stated that although she was called names for being smart, she learned how to disregard comments and remain focused in school. Beyonca stated, “It’s just that I feel like why you are going to down me because I’m smart, like because I want to do better… It’s not my problem if you don’t want to do better.” Beyonca, Mia, and Niecie have learned to deal with the critique from peers
about their academic progress; in contrast, the other participants stated that their relationships with other African American peers have been generally positive.

Peers are viewed as being one of the most influential factors in an adolescent’s life. Peers are not only part of a student’s support system, but also have the ability to influence other individuals. According to Maxine, her peers are supportive of her succeeding academically. When asked how peers affected her academic achievement, Maxine stated, the peers “affected it [academic performance] in a good way, because, like the school and all of my friends, family, they’re all supportive; they all want me to achieve.” Nala acknowledged that she had to change some behaviors to be accepted by some of her peers, but felt that it was necessary because “you just have to, like, get along with people.” Niecie also shared how she had to change her behavior in order to be accepted by peers by “putting on different faces for two different groups of friends…you know, kind of be like them in order to be in with them.” Niecie and Maxine’s experiences with peers illustrated how African American female students can sometimes have to modify behaviors in order to maintain peer relationships. All participants expressed the influence peers had on decision making in the learning environment. In addition, peer relationships being an important factor in the learning environment, peers also expressed concern regarding African Americans in leadership positions at Dunlap High School.

*African Americans in School Leadership Positions*

The importance of race amongst peers was not as significant as the finding of a lack of African Americans in leadership positions that participants in the study all
commented on. Participants were also asked if they felt that the school staff at Dunlap High School consisted of the same cultural diversity of the student population and whether that mattered to them. When asked if the cultural diversity amongst staff at Dunlap High mattered to student participants, both staff and student participants revealed that not only were there not a lot of African American instructors, but they also felt that it is important to have instructors that reflected the same cultural diversity as the student population. According to data collected from the surveys administered to student participants, 75% stated that they have not had more than three African American female teachers while attending Dunlap High School. Faye was referenced by the student participants as being one of the only few African American staff members at Dunlap High. When asked if she felt that the staff at Dunlap was reflective of the student population, she stated that she hoped that one day it would be, but currently it was not. Faye stated, “We have more African American teachers than a lot of other high schools, but it’s not reflective of the population as the majority of the student population is African American.” Jean also agreed with Faye, stating that there are only a few African American instructors. Jean noted the importance of having on staff “Denise Lee or Faye, who are African American, young and very successful, and it isn’t because they had things handed to them, but because they’ve worked hard and pushed through barriers, and now they’re giving back to the same people that they maybe once were.” Jean named these specific women because they come from similar backgrounds as some of the African American female student participants.
The importance of the visibility of African American staff is evident in the students’ frequent reference to Faye as being a supportive guide for African American female students. According to Niecie, Faye was there when her “grades started slipping, and Faye called my mom, like every day, and calling me every day.” Nala acknowledged Faye as being one of the staff that was accessible when she was on the verge of not doing well academically. All of the participants reported Faye as a support system when things such as family issues, economic stress, and stress from school threatened to affect their academic grades.

When the students were asked if they have taken classes with an African American instructor, participants could not recall having any African American instructors while attending Dunlap High, but stated that there were African American school staff such as security and janitorial. “There’s a few African American teachers here…two or three, but the rest are white.” When asked to recall how many African American staff are in leadership positions at Dunlap High, Maxine stated that there were few Hispanic and African American instructors or counselors besides her advisor Faye. According to Denbo (2002a), “Although student diversity in the United States is increasing, diversity within the ranks of the teaching workforce is declining” (p. 55). Vicarious learning through an African American female role model in a leadership position at Dunlap High was considered by Jean to be of utmost importance for the African American student population. However, Jean noted that most of the instructors at Dunlap were Caucasian and a few Hispanic. Both Jean and Faye, stated that having positive role models who happen to be the same race as the African American student
body would benefit the students by allowing them to feel as if they have individuals that can relate to their experiences dealing with racism, sexism and classism.

\*

**Parent Involvement**

As soon as a child is born, parents become the informal teachers until children become school age. Education takes place within the home as well as within the school. Parent involvement has been cited by researchers as being vital to academic success. According to Denbo (2002a),

Greater levels of family stress, less available time, fewer social and economic resources, and fewer positive memories with their own public education experiences inhibit African American parents from being involved in their own children’s educational experiences at home and in school. (p. 17)

Participants were asked the level of involvement their parents have in their educational process. Though all student participants stated that their parents stressed the importance of furthering their education, some student participants stated that their parents could not be as involved as other parents could since their work schedules and other family obligations interfered. When student participants were asked if they were helped by their parents with schoolwork, 25% of students stated that they received assistance from their parents with their schoolwork. According to Witherspoon (2002), “parent involvement has been found not only to improve student achievement but also to produce significant long-term benefits” (p. 181). All student participants noted parent involvement as one of the primary factors affecting student academic achievement. While six of the eight student participants come from a two-parent
household, two participants coming from single-parent households stated that their parents were not as involved as other parents due to working to support the family. Mia said that she rarely had the opportunity to see her mom because by the time she got out of school, her mother was already off to work. In the last year, Mia and her mom had economic hardships, prompting her mom to work even more hours to support her family. “Being away from my mom, kind of does make me feel bad. It’s the only way that we can like—live where we live now, like get things, like clothes and school uniform and stuff, so you know it’s only for my own good I guess.” Though Mia rarely saw her mom after school, when she and her mother had a chance to interact and discuss school, Mia stated that her mother stressed the importance of succeeding academically in order to get a good job. Mia’s sentiments of her mom’s emphasis on the importance of education were similar to the findings of the quantitative data. When participants were asked if their parents were concerned about their academic success, 75% strongly agreed that their parents were concerned about their academic achievement. As previously stated, all female participants conveyed that education was perceived within the household as being a tool that would provide students with a better life. When student participants were asked if their parents actively participated in school functions at Dunlap High, only half of the participants stated that their parents are involved with the different events that take place at the school. Witherspoon (2002) states, “A study of low-income high achieving African American students found that their parents stress the value of education for their futures” (p. 181). Although Mia’s mom was not able to be as involved in her education
as she would like, Mia stated that she had the additional support of her mom’s friends to help her with her schoolwork. “I barely see my mom, so basically I am on my own, but I do have, like, my mom’s friends or like my neighbor they support me.”

When the researcher interviewed Niecie, she also addressed the issue of her mom being “stretched” when trying to participate in parent activities at Dunlap High. Niecie stated that after the passing of her stepfather, her family only consisted of herself, mom and two siblings. “She’s a single parent, so my sister and brother go to school far away, so my mom, she has to drive them to school and pick them up, and my brother plays football and my sister softball, so she has to be at their games just as much as mine, she has to basically equal herself out…give everybody a little bit of mom.” This common occurrence of “equaling-out” the single parent amongst siblings makes parent involvement nearly impossible. According to Dearing et al. (2003), “Work may be particularly challenging for educational involvement among low income families…Time appears to be a central aspect of employment that creates a barrier to educational involvement for low-income mothers” (p. 881). Although Niecie’s mom had limitations when trying to be involved at Dunlap High, Niecie cited her mom and her faith as the main support systems and motivations to succeed academically. Niecie and Mia’s experiences of parent involvement in their education echoed that of many African American students from single-parent households headed by mothers. Although Dunlap High encourages parent participation, school staff members are aware of the limitations of some of the students’ families.
Jean, an English teacher and counselor, encountered parents on an everyday basis and had experienced firsthand factors that hinder parents from school participation. “From what I’ve seen a lot of parents, they work the same hours as the kids are in school or maybe even past when the kids get out of school.” In addition to work as a barrier, Jean conveyed that some families lack the access to computers, which made accessing student grades from Dunlap’s database increasingly difficult. “If you [parents] want to check the Power School online, if you don’t have internet, you’re sort of out of luck, definitely.” Faye stated that parent is who have minimal time to be involved in their students education fully utilized the time they had by communicating with teachers via telephone and in-school visits. Faye noted, “I think that we do have parent participation here at Dunlap High; we encourage a lot of parental involvement, but I do find that when parents are actively involved in their child’s education, that’s when kids are really successful.”

Student participants from a two-parent headed household stated that their parents are actively involved in their education by communicating with their instructors, checking their grades using the schools grade database, and even coming to Dunlap’s campus to meet with their counselors. In fact, according to Beyonca, both of her parents are “too much” involved in her educational process. Beyonca stated that her mom is a teacher and is familiar with the educational environment and the academic expectations at Dunlap High School. Beyonca stated about her parents, “They won’t go away…they’re, like encouraging me, like they make sure I’m always doing my homework, eating breakfast, all that stuff, and bad grades are unacceptable.”
Shantrice expresses that her parents came to Dunlap events and were consistently checking her grades on the school’s electronic database. “My mom does quick look-ups here every day or every week, and my mom finds [my grades] and makes sure my absences are correct and my grade is correct…she talks to teachers and both of my parents are supportive.”

Impact of Gender on Academic Achievement

After the researcher interviewed the students regarding their experiences with race in the learning environment, student and staff participants were also asked questions about gender bias at Dunlap High School. According to student participants, when asked if they felt being female was a disadvantage succeeding academically, 50% disagreed and 25% strongly agreed. Because past research conducted by researchers such as Sadker and Sadker (1995), Fordham (1993), and hooks (1999) all suggest that girls are experiencing gender bias in the classroom in the following forms: male dominated classrooms, minimal teacher interaction, underrepresentation of women in literature, and minimal women in educational leadership positions. However, African American female theorists evaluate how the concept of race and gender intersect and creates a unique experience for female students of color. In studies conducted by Lips (1989), Fordham (1993), and Collins (2000), African American female students do not always conform being silent and passive in the classroom like their white counterparts, which minimizes some of the levels of gender bias experienced in the classroom.
In fact, according to the data collected by the researcher regarding gender, data shows that participants did not experience gender bias in the classroom. When student participants were asked if male students received more teacher-student interaction within the classroom, over half of the participants responded that they strongly disagreed (25%) or disagreed (25%). In addition to not feeling that males dominated the classroom, 63% of participants also stated that they had never experienced gender bias while attending Dunlap High. Although participants stated that they had not experienced gender bias, when asked if they would like to work with females rather than male students, 63% stated that they would rather work with females than male students. This finding is similar to researcher finding of Sadker in regards to females preferring to work with females. Sadker stated in her research that female students and male students have different communication and learning styles. For example, male students tend to have an individualistic work style, while female student’s work well in a collectivistic setting in which group harmony and helping others benefits all students. This finding could possibly be due to the fact that female students out number male students at Dunlap High School.

Synopsis of Findings

After conducting qualitative and quantitative research through a mixed method consisting of a survey and interviews, the finding of this study illustrate that race, class and gender intersect in the learning environment to create a unique educational experience for African American female students. In regards to race, the researcher found that students are aware of the stereotypes of African American in education, as
well as the importance of closing the achievement gap and increasing the number of
African Americans furthering their education. Participants also addressed the
importance of having African Americans in leadership positions at Dunlap High in
order to have more positive role models for the African American student population.

In addition to the findings regarding race, class was also a topic addressed by
participants. Gaining upward mobility through academic success was one of the most
cited motivators for student academic success. Participants that lived in a single parent
household or in a poor urban neighborhood discussed how education could help
improve their class status when they get older and begin their careers. A few
participants reflected on their past economic hardships, and how their lack of
monetary funds will affect their future education. In addition to discussing upward
mobility through academic achievement, participants residing in neighborhoods that
are low socioeconomic status discussed how lack of educational resources in their
community was a reason for commuting to Dunlap high for a more advanced
curriculum. Parent involvement was also discussed in regards to the limitations faced
by parents with students attending Dunlap. Work hours and family obligations were
two frequent hindrances to parent involvement mentioned by both student and staff
participants. Student that lived in a single parent household stated that lack of parent
involvement sometimes negatively influenced their academic success.

In addition to the findings of race and class, participants also discussed the
impact of gender on academic achievement. Although staff and student participants
were not asked interview questions regarding gender, the concept of gender was
intertwined in the responses to interview questions regarding race and class. This finding illustrates how race, class, and gender are not viewed by African American female students as being isolated variables, but rather interconnected concepts that create a unique experience for the student participants. Though female participants stated that they had not experienced gender bias at Dunlap High, they also conveyed to the researcher that they were aware that externally and in the future, gender will affect their ability to advance in their career. When participants were asked their level of comfort communicating in a class that was male dominated and if being a female student placed them at a disadvantage academically, student participants stated that being a female student at Dunlap High did not make them feel they were less academically capable than their male counterparts were. In conclusion, the research findings from this study not only illustrated the impact of race, class, and gender on African American female students, but also shed light on deficits within the field of education when trying to educate the African American female student population.
Chapter 5
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS,
AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the unique challenges faced by African American female high school students when encountering the intersection of race, gender and class in an educational environment. This study reflects the experiences of eight African American female students ranging from ages 14-18 and two school staff employed at Dunlap High School in the Oak Park neighborhood located in the city of Sacramento. Of special interest to the researcher were the impact of race, class and gender on the academic achievement of African American female students. In addition, the researcher was particularly interested in how the female participants in this study navigated through academia when confronted with barriers caused by socioeconomic factors. By conducting this study, the researcher sought to add to the limited body of literature regarding the academic experiences of African American female students between the ages of 14-18.

Conclusions

All of the participants in this study confirmed most of the theories presented in the literature review. One exception to the literature review was the level of gender bias experienced in the educational environment. The student participants in this study seemed to have no issues with gender bias in the classroom. Quantitative data collected reflected that participants felt that male and female students received equal
teacher-student interaction, did not experience anxiety when working with male students, and did not feel that they were at a disadvantage academically because they are female. Though gender bias was not seen as an issue in the academic setting at Dunlap High School, participants did address how gender was an issue external to school, as well as how gender can be a possible barrier when seeking future employment.

Both student and staff participants cited academic achievement as important for their future success. When student participants were asked questions regarding factors that hinder academic success, a few participants stated that individual merit and self could be a hindrance, meaning that a student’s willingness to invest time in excelling in school will determine the progress made toward reaching their educational goals. This notion of merit lies at the foundation of American society and is stressed in today’s schools. “Meritocracy” refers to a system of belief, which implies that the harder an individual works, the more it will lead to a desired outcome (Shaffer, Ortman, & Denbo, 2002). The participants stated that they work hard to achieve academically, which will help them attain a college degree and eventually lead to a successful career.

Another hindrance to academic success that students addressed was the level of parent involvement. Most student participants stated that their parents are involved in their education, while a few noted that their parent’s level of participation was minimal due to employment and other family obligations, such as caring for other relatives. The importance of parent involvement in education was a sentiment shared
by various student participants, as well as staff. Past educational research regarding the academic achievement of African American students indicates that parent involvement is correlated to improved academic achievement (Witherspoon, 2002).

In addition to parent involvement, students noted how race affected their educational environment. Some of the issues referenced in regards to race included the concept of “acting white,” peer relations, and African Americans in school leadership positions. African American female students that considered themselves as high achieving stated that they had been called names such as “Oreo” or “Nerd.” Student participants that were called names also conveyed that they had learned to disregard the name-calling and chose to surround themselves with peers who valued academic success. In addition to coping with the name-calling, other participants stated that they had learned to adopt a dual identity, which they adopt depending on their peer group. Peers were cited often by student and staff participants as being an important support system, as well as influential factors in the academic environment. When participants were asked if they had peers that were the same race as them and who supported academic success, some of the participants stated that their peers were supportive. Staff participants acknowledged that students being surrounded by peers that wanted to succeed academically could help provide additional support in the academic environment that can be missing externally to Dunlap High School. For example, students that stated their parents were not involved in their education also stated that extended family and their peer groups were additional sources of academic support.
Student and staff participants also addressed the importance of having African American staff in leadership positions at Dunlap High School. Students stated that they had not had more than three African American instructors while attending Dunlap High School. When asked to recall if they felt the staff at Dunlap was ethnically reflective of the student population, student and staff participants stated that the staff was not ethnically diverse. Staff participants conveyed that there was a need for more African American female staff in leadership positions, as a means to have more role models of successful African American women in the academic environment. Jean, a teacher at Dunlap stated that the few African American female faculties come from similar backgrounds of the female participants and are good examples of overcoming barriers due to race, class, and gender.

*The Importance of Succeeding Academically*

*Upward mobility.* Staff and student participants discussed education as a means of improving social class status. Student participants who experienced economic hardships at the time of this research study expressed a strong desire to succeed academically to get a good job, which will lead to more of a sustainable lifestyle. Nala and Mia’s parents both expressed the importance of education as a means of having a better future. The correlation between education, job market and financial capital all influenced the importance placed on succeeding academically.

As some student participants stated that their parents had a college education, a few participants stated that they would be the first in their family to attend college. Student participants also went on to note that because their parents did not attend
college, their parents had to work harder in contrast to someone with a college degree. Student participants who had parents that did not attend college also conveyed that their parents stressed the importance of attending college to improve class status. According to Sirin (2005), “parents’ location in the socioeconomic structure has a strong impact on students’ academic achievement…family SES sets the stage for students’ academic performance both by directly providing resources at home and by indirectly providing the social capital that is necessary to succeed in school” (p. 438). Students from low-income backgrounds conveyed to the researcher the limitations of economic resources and the need to not have the cycle of poverty repeat itself. Education was a means of breaking the cycle of poverty and class status.

*Eliminating stereotypes.* Both student and staff participants agreed that the presence of African Americans, specifically African American women in the educational arena was an important tool in eliminating the negative stereotypes of African Americans in education. Though the majority of the student participants expressed that they have not experienced racism at Dunlap High, students also stated that they were aware of the negative stereotypes in society in regards to African Americans’ ability to succeed academically. The concept of African Americans being intellectually inferior had a profound effect on African American students. The stereotypes of African American students as being loud, un-educated and troubled has filtered into the classroom and can affect instructors’ perceptions of African American students. Student participants stated that by “leading by example” and succeeding
academically, more students would follow suit, thus diminishing the negative stereotypes of African American students.

Closing the achievement gap. In addition to eliminating stereotypes, student participants stated that they hoped to show that African American students could succeed academically and close the academic achievement gap. Student participants stated that when first attending Dunlap High freshman year, they were required to learn about the achievement gap and factors that can help lessen the gap between African American students and their white peers. According to staff participants interviewed, lessening the achievement gap and making sure that students attend college were two of the primary focuses of the staff at Dunlap High. Staff participants stated that through providing students with a quality education, as well as increasing parent involvement in the students’ education, the achievement gap would decrease, thus showing that African American students are academically up to par with their white counterparts.

Race, Class and Gender as Factors Impacting the Educational Experience of African American Female Students

Race. Student and staff participants were asked questions regarding race and its impact on the learning environment. Student participants reflected on their experiences with racism, both internal and external to the learning environment. In addition to discussing the participants’ experiences with racism, African American staff in leadership positions at Dunlap High School and peer relations and racial
identity was addressed by participants. Staff participants also reflected on issues of race in the learning environment and the need for cultural diversity amongst the staff.

According to student participants, they had no experiences of racism at Dunlap High School. This finding was attributed to the fact that the student population at Dunlap High School is majority African American. Although the majority of student participants stated they had never experienced racism, African American students that were in gifted or advanced placement courses stated that they have experienced harassment in the form of name-calling by their African American peers. “Oreo” and “Nerd” were cited as the most commonly used terms to define students whom their peers considered to be “acting white.” Student participants that experienced name-calling also stated that they have learned to cope with taunts by peers by either adopting a dual-identity depending on their surroundings or becoming accepting of themselves, regardless of the pressure to conform to the racial stereotype of African Americans. Staff participants also confirmed the importance of peer influence on academic achievement. Staff participants stated the importance of having a supportive peer circle that agrees with striving towards academic excellence. Faye, a counselor at Dunlap High, stated that students who are efficacious had a tendency to surround themselves with peers who were equally academically ambitious.

In addition to addressing peer race relations in the learning environment, students also addressed a need to have more African American instructors in leadership positions at Dunlap High School. The researcher asked student participants if the staff at Dunlap was reflective of the student populations at Dunlap.
Overwhelmingly, the students stated there were very few African American instructors at Dunlap. Staff participants agree that it is important for students to learn vicariously through staff in leadership positions who embody the racial diversity of the student body. Staff participants saw the link between having more African Americans in academic leadership positions and breaking the stereotypes of African Americans not being academically successful.

*Parent involvement.* Both student and staff participants were asked the importance of parent involvement, as well as factors that hinder parents from being involved in the student participants’ educational process. Student participants who had parents with low levels of involvement in the educational environment stated that work hours, commitment to other siblings, and living in a single-parent household were the main obstacles which kept parents from being more involved in school activities. Staff participants also concurred with student statements when addressing parent involvement. Staff participants stated that students who succeed academically also have parents that are actively engaged in school activities, as well as have relationships with their child’s instructor and other school staff. Student participants who stated their parents were involved in their education also conveyed the importance of their parents being involved and how the additional support at home in regards to education was a motivation for them to succeed.

*Gender.* In addition to student and staff participants being interviewed regarding race and class, student participants were also asked questions regarding gender bias in the learning environment. Although female student participants stated
they have not experienced gender bias in the learning environment, they are fully aware that sexism exists external to the learning environment. For example, student participants stated that the stigma of women being unable to academically achieve in comparison to their male counterparts was one factor that motivates them to succeed academically. Over half of the student participants stated they are comfortable working on group projects in their learning environment, as well as having equal contributions to classroom discussions in comparison to male students. Similar to statements in regards to African Americans in leadership positions, staff participants also stated that having African American women in leadership positions had the ability to be influential in the learning environment because it would provide the African American female students with strong female role models in positions that are commonly dominated by males.

Recommendations

From collecting data in regards to race, class, gender and their impact on the learning environment, the researcher presents the following recommendations that will help African American female students effectively and efficiently navigate through academia and achieve academic success.

African American Staff in Leadership Positions

According to both student and staff participants, Dunlap High has a small population of African American staff in leadership positions. When participants were asked if they felt that the teaching and counseling staff was reflective of the student population, all of the respondents stated that Dunlap did not have many African
American instructors in their courses. This situation at Dunlap High is typical of what Crawford and Smith (2005) have found in other areas of American life: “African Americans not only have low status in society … African American women are more underrepresented in leadership positions than any other group” (pp. 54-55). As indicated in this study’s findings, most female students stated that when needing academic support as well as emotional support, Faye, an African American counselor was a major contributor to the academic success of many of the female participants. Increasing the African American staff population at Dunlap High will allow students to not only learn vicariously from successful African American adults, but also connect with someone that may have lived the same experiences as the students.

         Studies have shown that as African American students grow up and become professionals, they often are able to identify African American teachers and administrators as being vital role models in their academic environment (Crawford & Smith, 2005). Vicarious learning is one factor that can shape the self-efficacy of a student. By having more African American staff, particularly African American women, female students will have the opportunity to see an individual similar to them that is successful and has overcome educational barriers due to racism and sexism. Findings from this research study illustrated the impact of having African American women in leadership positions, as well as how African American women at Dunlap High School also serve as mentors to young African American girls. As stated by student participants, academic success was an important factor in determining their future success. By having more African American female staff members to serve as
mentors at Dunlap, female students will also have the additional guidance needed that they may not receive at home. According to Crawford and Smith, “The task of the mentor is to afford the protégé with opportunities to learn and practice, and to reward him or her so that acquired knowledge, performance, and motivation increase” (p. 64).

Cultural Competence Training

In addition to increasing African American female staff at Dunlap, the researcher also recommends that all staff at Dunlap High receive cultural competence and multicultural educational training. Cultural competence training will allow staff to learn about educating diverse ethnic populations whose lifestyles, customs, and educational learning styles are different from their own. At the time of the study, the Dunlap High student population was predominantly African American and Latino, but staff were primarily of Caucasian descent. One staff member interviewed suggested that there was a need for staff to receive cultural competence training in order to learn how to communicate with the students and their families. According to Beaulieu and Denbo (2002), “To become more effective at meeting the learning needs of Africa American students, educators must commit to becoming more culturally knowledgeable and aware and specifically to gaining authentic knowledge of the African American experience in America and the life experiences of their African American students” (p. 50). The cultural competence training should cover topics including but not limited to intercultural communication and culturally relevant pedagogy.
According to Liao (2001), intercultural communication “focuses on the study of interactions between people of different cultures” (p. 5). Students of different cultures may have a different perspective on their role as a participant in education, as well as how to communicate effectively with the instructor and their peers. Educational experiences differ from student to student, and factors such as race, class, and gender play an important role in instructional practices and curriculum. In order for a teacher to effectively communicate with a student from a different culture, the instructor must evaluate the student’s community and culture, and provide the student and family with a learning environment that is an extension of their home life. The communication and learning styles of African Americans may differ from that of their white counterparts. For example, in Fordham’s study of African American girls in education, Fordham found that instructors saw the girls that were assertive and vocal in the classroom as “loud” and “aggressive.” Becoming knowledgeable about the communication style of different students will increase communication in the classroom, thus making the learning environment less oppressive. According to Denbo (2002a), “Specific teacher’s behaviors that demonstrate high expectations for students can have a positive effect on classroom climate and student achievement” (p. 56).

In addition to training staff on intercultural communication, instructors should also be trained on creating culturally relevant pedagogy. According to Ladson-Billings (2001), culturally relevant pedagogy “describes an approach to teaching that promotes academic and cultural success in settings where student alienation and hostility characterize the school experience … the propositions on which this theory is based
are academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness” (p. 78). Developing a culturally relevant pedagogy places student learning, cultural identification, and students’ social awareness at the center of all classroom activities. Though culturally relevant pedagogy is concerned with the success of students, it also focused on the emotional, physical and mental well-being of students. Because of the racism, academic setting, the additional support from school staff provides a caring learning environment. By training instructors to use culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom, students are exposed to a less oppressive classroom. The interchangeable roles of students and teachers emphasize the exchange of knowledge between all participants in the classroom. Introducing material that is relevant to the diverse population through the curriculum and literature would also create an environment in which students can connect to what they are learning. By using course material to connect the student’s community to school, African American female students will view education as being tailored to them.

More Discourse Surrounding Race and Gender

When student participants and staff participants in this study were asked if issues of race and gender were discussed at Dunlap, all participants conveyed that classroom talk of race and gender was minimal unless a discussion occurred regarding the achievement gap or a multicultural assembly. Student participants suggested that there was a need for more activities that celebrate cultural diversity at Dunlap High. Because of the rigorous standards of the American education system, which seeks to produce academically successful students, students have few opportunities to engage
in a curriculum in which they learn about race and gender. For example, most
courses of race are discussed in multicultural assemblies or during designated months
such as Black History or Latin Heritage Months. Even during these times, students are
not exposed to in-depth information regarding social injustice and discrimination due
to race and gender. According to Nieto (2003), “teacher education programs for
example, need to be re-conceptualized to include awareness of the influence of culture
and language on the learning … and instructional and curricular strategies that
encourage learning among a wide variety of students” (p. 315). Commonly, school
administrators consider celebrating cultural holidays and learning about iconic cultural
figures as an effective means of educating students on different cultures. Nieto’s
approach to addressing culture in the classroom is centered on reconstruction of
curriculum in order to discuss issues not commonly discussed. Concepts of race and
gender can be introduced in social science courses, literacy, and history through
course material.

Increasing Parent Involvement

The significant role of parent involvement was also a major finding when
discussing factors that affect the academic achievement of African American students.
At least three student participants stated their parent’s level of involvement in school
was limited due to work schedule and time available. According to Bogenschneider
(1997), “Single parent families are less apt to interact with the school and the teacher,
but are interested in their children’s education and is likely to work with their
children” (p. 720). To increase parent involvement, schools must work with other
networks that influence the student and parent participation in education. Methods of increasing parent involvement can include working with extended family in the event that the student’s parent cannot be present, as well as viewing the process of increasing parent participation as an on-going process. In addition to having an extended family member to represent parents during school sponsored events and educational progress meetings, school staff can also designate new staff to be parent advocates or liaisons. These individuals would only work part-time and would meet with the parents outside of the school setting to update parents regarding their children’s academic progress, as well as keep parents abreast of school events such as college tours, academic testing dates and other important deadlines. Through developing options for parents to connect with their child’s educational environment, the parent will still feel involved, though he or she may not often be physically present at the school. According to Witherspoon (2002), if parent meeting times are inconvenient, one solution may be to “send home a brief questionnaire asking parents to specify meeting times; provide multiple options for when parents can participate” (p. 185). In addition to providing parents with a parent advocate and options of meeting times, schools can also provide parents with information regarding ways to participate outside of the educational setting. Some of the information provided can include but not be limited to academic standards of the school and parent courses on how to help students succeed academically. According to Witherspoon (2002), “Teachers need to reach out and make the parent a partner…building such
relationships and remembering that the common goal is the success of the child’s education may require perseverance” (p. 190).

**Limitations**

Although this research study yielded many great findings, there were also limitations the researcher experienced when collecting data and analyzing findings. As to the research methods, the researcher was fully aware that some of the questions regarding racial and gender discrimination, as well as class, would evoke some painful memories for participants. The researcher was careful to stress to participants that answering questions was optional, and they did not have to answer questions that made them feel uncomfortable. By not forcing participants to answer questions that made them feel uncomfortable, the researcher created an interview environment in which participants were relaxed and open to answer questions as they deemed fit. When asking participants questions regarding their educational experiences, the researcher was also attempting to be objective and not ask leading questions nor reflecting points of view regarding race, class, and gender in the learning environment.

In addition to seeking to be objective when interviewing participants, the researcher sought not to allow her own biases and experiences with race, gender, and class influence the responses of the participants. Prior to conducting the interview, as well as at the conclusion of the interview, the female student participants were allowed to ask the researcher questions regarding the nature of the research project and the role they played as participants in the study. By having an open flow of communication
with participants, the researcher attempted to achieve a higher level of comfort, as well as build rapport with all of the student participants.

There were several limitations of this study which include the following: time of academic year students were interviewed, limited access to school staff, the demographic of student populations, and student participants being unfamiliar with concepts presented in the interview questions.

First, participants were interviewed in mid-May during a time in which Dunlap High was completing exit exams and STAR testing. This time of the year for staff was also busy because of exams as well as preparing academic reports for the end of year. Interviewing only two staff members did not allow the researchers an opportunity to get more staff feedback regarding the academic success of African American female students.

Another limitation was the demographic of the student population. When students were asked about racial discrimination in the academic environment, majority of the student participants stated that they never experienced racial discrimination at Dunlap High. The purported lack of experience with racism can be due to most of the other students being African American as well. As stated in the findings, race was not an issue to students because they were the majority in the academic setting. When the researcher addressed issues of socioeconomic factors, student participants were unfamiliar with what the concept entailed. The researcher attempted to define concepts in the best way possible to help participants understand the questions they were being asked. Unfamiliarity with the research concepts may have affected the participants
comfort with answering the question and may have been reluctant to answer some of
the interview and survey questions. The design of the qualitative questions also was a
limitation due to there being no questions regarding gender. This lead to limited
findings regarding gender. However, the written survey did provide questions
regarding gender bias in the classroom. Though there were no interview questions
regarding gender, participants addressed gender in their responses.

Recommendations for Further Study

While the purpose of this study was to examine how race, class, and gender
impact the academic achievement of African American female students, the researcher
realizes that the viewpoints of the participants are not representative of all African
American female students between the ages of 14-18. Further research on this topic
should also include bi-racial African American female students, as well as female
students that attend schools in which there is a small African American student
population. Once widening the demographic population of the students in the research
agenda, a comparative analysis should be incorporated in which researchers study
whether female students at a predominantly African American high school experience
less racism, sexism, and classism than African American female students at
predominantly white educational institutions.

In addition, due to gender not fully being treated by this study, further research
should be conducted regarding how African American female students deal with
gender in an academic setting. Previous research studies conducted by David and
Myra Sadker discussed gender bias in the classroom, but did not differentiate how race
influences perception of gender bias in the classroom. Further research in regards to African American female students and gender bias should include communication and learning styles, male dominated student-teacher interaction, as well as preference for male or female instructors.

Reflections

This research study grew out of the experience with racism, sexism, and classism faced by the researcher. Because there is minimal literature on the educational experience of adolescent African American female students, the researcher felt that it was necessary to address issues of race, class, and gender in the academic environment, and how these factors create a unique educational experience for African American female students. The student participants that were interviewed were highly efficacious and ambitious and will fare very well in the future. The staff interviewed during this study also expressed high levels of commitment to helping the student participants succeed academically. Education should provide students with the opportunity to grow into adults that have the ability to critically think and evaluate the world around them. By educators evaluating how race, class, and gender intersect and impact the educational experiences of African American female students, they are creating an educational environment, which fosters educational support and optimism for this marginalized student population.
APPENDIX A

Student Participant Consent Form
Student Participant Consent Form

My name is Shanell Brumfield. I am a graduate student at California State University, Sacramento. I would like to invite you to take part in my research, which will focus on community factors that enable or disable the academic achievement of African American female students. I am interested in your experience as a student at Sacramento High School, as well as your interaction with parents and faculty as relates to your academic progress. My questions will pertain to the nature of how socioeconomic (race, class, and gender) factors shape the educational experience of African American female students.

For two days, I would like to hold one individual interview with you and other African American female students. If you agree to take part in my research, I will collect information in several ways.

1) I will ask you questions about how you feel about learning in your school. For example, I will ask you about your educational goals, interactions with your peers and teachers, as well as factors within your community that shape your educational experience. Each interview should last about 30-45 minutes and will be in private. With your permission, I will audiotape the interview.

2) I will also be conducting private interviews with your student advocate. I will mostly be discussing his/her experiences as a student advocate.

I will not discuss anything that you tell me in our private meetings with anyone from the school or outside the school. This privacy also includes information I get about your schoolwork or grades. I will keep all of our conversations completely private.
There are no known risks to you from participating in this research. There is no clear benefit to you from the research, though I do hope you would benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your experiences as a Sacramento High School student. I hope that the research will benefit society by showing how African American female students perceive their educational environment as well as academic success.

All the information that I get from you during the research will be kept private. I will store each tape recording and my notes about it in a locked cabinet. I will use a code number to identify your tape and my notes about it, and I will keep your name and code number in a separate file. I will not use your name or identifying information in any reports of my research. I will not reveal what you say during our conversation to your parents, teachers or principal.

After this research is completed, I may save the tapes and my notes for use in future research by others or myself. However, the same confidentiality guarantees given here will apply to future storage and use of the materials.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, and you may refuse to answer any questions or may stop taking part at anytime. Whether or not you participate will have no influence on your standing or grades in your class or at school.

If you have any questions about the research, you may call me, Shanell Brumfield, at (916) 847-3546. If you agree to take part in the research, please sign the form attached. I will provide you with a copy of this agreement for your future reference.
• I have read this consent form and agree to take part in the research.

______________________________________ Date ___________
Student’s Signature

• I agree to the audio taping of interviews with me.

______________________________________ Date ___________
Student’s Signature

• I have read this consent form and agree to have my child take part in the research.

______________________________________ Date ___________
Parent’s signature
APPENDIX B

School Staff Participants Consent Form
School Staff Participants Consent Form

My name is Shanell Brumfield. I am a graduate student at California State University, Sacramento. I would like to invite you to take part in my research, which will focus on factors that enable or disable the academic achievement of African American female students. I am interested in your experience as a student advocate at Sacramento High School, as well as your interaction with attending students. My questions will pertain to the nature of how socioeconomic factors shape the educational experience of African American female students.

If you agree to take part in my research, I will conduct one interview with you during the school year at the time and location of your choice. The interview will involve questions about your interactions with student’s parents and school staff, including both the challenges and the opportunities in creating a positive educational environment for Sacramento High School students. The interview should last about 30-45 minutes. With your permission, I will audiotape the interview.

All of the information that I obtain from you during the research will be kept confidential. I will store the tape recording and notes about it in a locked cabinet in my home. I will use a code number to identify your tape and my notes about it, and I will keep your name and code number in a file separate from the other material. I will not use your name or other identifying information in any reports of the research without your additional consent on this form.

I will primarily be interviewing and observing African American female students. I will also seek to interview Sacramento High School principal regarding various experiences working with this particular population, again asking how they perceive community factors that enable or disable the academic achievement of African American female students. All of these interviews will be confidential.
The fact that I am conducting research and that you, the students, and the principal, will be openly known to the school community. I will not discuss the information I receive from any participant with any other participant or non-participant at the site; and any discussions off site will not refer to the school in any identifiable way.

There are no foreseeable risks to you from participating in this research. There is no direct benefit to you, though I hope you will benefit indirectly from the opportunity to reflect on your work. Ultimately, we hope that the research will benefit society by gaining a better understanding of the academic experience of African American female high school students. There will be no costs to you, other than your time involved.

After this research is completed, I may save the tape and my notes for use in future research by others, or myself with your permission. However, the same confidentiality guarantees given here will apply to future storage and use of the materials.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part. You may refuse to answer any questions and may stop taking part in the study at any time. Whether or not you participate in this research will have no bearing on your standing in your class/school/job. If you have any questions about the research, you may call me, Shanell Brumfield, at (916) 847-3546. If you agree to take part in the research, please sign the form attached. I will provide you with a copy of this agreement for your future reference.
I have read this consent form and agree to take part in this research.

___________________________ Date ______________ Phone number ____________
Signature

I agree to the audio taping of interviews with me.

______________________________ Date __________
Signature
APPENDIX C

Student Survey
STUDENT SURVEY

Name : ____________________________________________________________ Date : ______

Ethnicity: ________________________________________________ Age: ______

*Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability:*

**Grade level:**  Freshman   Sophomore   Junior   Senior

**Highest Education Level Attained by Parent:**

**Mother:**  H.S. Diploma   Some College   Undergrad Degree (BA)
Masters Degree (MA)   Ph.D.  

**Father:**  H.S. Diploma   Some College   Undergrad Degree (BA)
Masters Degree (MA)   Ph.D.  

**How many siblings currently live with you:**  0-2   3-5   5+
Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Male students in my classroom get called on more than female students to participate in class discussions.</td>
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<td>2. I have had an experience of gender bias while attending Sacramento High School.</td>
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<td>3. I feel that being a female student is a disadvantage when trying to succeed academically.</td>
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<td>4. I prefer working with female students rather than male students.</td>
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<td>5. I experience anxiety in a male dominated classroom.</td>
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<td>6. My classes typically have an equal amount of male and female students</td>
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<td>7. I have had female science and/or math teachers while attending Sacramento high</td>
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<td>8. I feel more comfortable doing school projects with students that are the same race as me</td>
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<td>9. People of my own race are very supportive in relation to me succeeding academically</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. I have had more than 3 African American female teachers while attending school at Sacramento high</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. I have not been called names by peers of my own race because I succeed academically.</td>
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<td>12. I have never experienced racial discrimination here at Sacramento High School.</td>
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<td>13. I prefer to have an instructor that is the same race as me</td>
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<td>14. I am typically one of a few African American students in my classroom.</td>
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<td>Number</td>
<td>Statement</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>My parent/caregiver helps me with my homework often.</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>My parent/caregiver actively participates in school functions at</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sacramento High School.</td>
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<td>17.</td>
<td>My parent/caregivers are concerned about my academic success.</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>My parent/caregiver awards me for good grades.</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>My parent/caregiver communicates with my teachers regarding my</td>
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<td></td>
<td>academic progress.</td>
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<td>20.</td>
<td>My classrooms are not over crowded</td>
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<td>21.</td>
<td>My textbooks are in good condition</td>
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<td>22.</td>
<td>My classes are challenging.</td>
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<td>23.</td>
<td>The classes I am taking will prepare me for college.</td>
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<td>24.</td>
<td>I would like to be in more academically challenging classes</td>
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<td>25.</td>
<td>In my classroom, I am provided all of the necessary resources to complete</td>
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<td></td>
<td>classroom assignments</td>
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<td>26.</td>
<td>The staff at Sacramento High shows interest in me succeeding academically.</td>
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<td>27.</td>
<td>My teachers are patient when answering my questions.</td>
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<td>28.</td>
<td>My teachers foster a comfortable learning environment.</td>
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<td>29.</td>
<td>I am able to discuss class assignments with my teacher.</td>
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<td>30.</td>
<td>My teachers have don’t have negative perceptions of me.</td>
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<td>31.</td>
<td>I get along with a lot of the faculty at Sacramento High School.</td>
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APPENDIX D

Student Interview Questions
Student Interview Questions

1. Why do you feel achieving academically is important for students at Sacramento High School?
2. What are some factors that you feel may hinder you from achieving academically?
3. Do you have peers that are supportive of you achieving academically? Are these peers also African American?
4. Do peers who are the same race as yourself call you names (such as nerd, “acting white,” stupid) because you succeed or do not succeed academically?
5. Are there behaviors you feel you have had to change (or need to change) in order to be accepted by peers? Great question
6. As an African American student, do you feel that you have to work harder to succeed academically than students of another race? Please explain.
7. How do you think factors such as the school environment, peer relations, the home, and community affect your own academic achievement? Please explain.
8. Do you have outside support (family, community)/resources that you can utilize to help aide you with your schoolwork? Please explain how you utilize these resources.
9. What do you think are some factors that help you do well in school? Please explain.
10. Are your parents typically involved in your educational process? If so, in what ways? Please explain.
11. What are factors that hinder your parent(s) from being more involved in your education? Please explain.
12. From your experience as a student at Sacramento High School, you interact with staff members on a daily basis. What are some of the concerns you have as a student regarding your academic progress and future? How are these concerns addressed by your counselor and/or teacher? Please explain.
13. To what extent does Sacramento High School have strong relationships with organizations that serve your community? Please explain.
14. Do you feel that the staff at Sacramento High School is reflective of the diverse ethnic population at Sacramento High School? Please explain.
15. Have you learned about concepts of race and gender within any of your classes, cultural assemblies or clubs at Sacramento High School? Please explain.
16. Do you feel that Sacramento High addresses issues of race and gender equality as it relates to academic achievement?
17. How do you feel Sacramento High School can help aid in your academic success? Please explain.
APPENDIX E

Staff Interview Questions
Staff Interview Questions

1. Why do you feel achieving academically is important for students at Sacramento High School?
2. What practices/procedures are taken when a student is identified as not succeeding academically?
3. How do you think factors such as the school environment, peer relations, the home, and community affect the academic achievement of African American students? Please explain.
4. What do you think are some factors that help African American female students do well in school?
5. How are relationships developed between the parents/caregivers of students attending Sacramento High School and the staff at Sacramento high School?
6. What types of communication are utilized in order to convey information to parents at Sacramento High regarding their child’s academic progress? How often does this communication occur between staff and parents?
7. Are parents of African American females students typically involved in their child’s educational process? Please explain.
8. What are factors that hinder parents from being more involved in their child’s education? Please explain.
9. From your experience as a staff member at Sacramento High School, you interact with students on a daily basis. What are some of the concerns that African American female students express regarding their academic progress and future? How are these concerns addressed?
10. To what extent does Sacramento High School have strong relationships with organizations that serve the community of African American female students and that will aide in the students achieving academically? Please explain.
11. Do you feel that race affects the academic achievement of African American female students? Please explain.
12. Do you feel that the staff at Sacramento High School is reflective of the diverse ethnic population at Sacramento High School? Please explain.
13. Have you received training regarding cultural competence and gender equity within the classroom? If so, what concepts did the training consist of? Please explain.
14. How do you feel that Sacramento High address issues of race and gender equality as it relates to academic achievement?
15. How do you feel Sacramento High School can help aid in the success of African American female students?
REFERENCES

Washington, DC: Author.

Cullen, & B. Lisle (Eds.), *Rereading American* (pp. 45-60). New York:
Bedford/St. Martin’s.


