An Exploration of the Educational Experiences of African American Female High School Students

A Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

This study is an exploration of the educational experiences of African American female high school students. Based upon the premise that education and schooling do not occur in a vacuum but are dependent on and situated within the broader context of society and daily life, the purpose of the study is to explore the overarching theme of how African American girls navigate their personal, social and educational worlds to construct their attitudes and perceptions about education, their lives, and their success as students. More specifically, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) contend, the primary socialization of children occurs in the home, and the secondary socialization occurs in societal institutions, namely schools. Forty-four years later, Sadker and Zittleman (2010) make the similar argument that children are socialized by interactions with their families, peer groups, schools and the media. This investigation aims to explore these four areas as they relate to the participants’ educational experiences.

According to psychology, sociology, health and educational research, African American girls have multiple experiences that are impacted by their race, class and gender. Issues such as self-esteem, physical and emotional health, risk behavior, family structure, and in-school discipline have been explored in the literature. The researcher has collected data by conducting classroom observations and individual and group interviews with seven African American female high school juniors and seniors. The participants have reflected upon the span of their experiences in grades K-12.
The research questions are as follows: (a) What role do home and family experiences have in the construction of attitudes and perceptions that African American female students hold about themselves, their lives, education, and schooling? (b) What role do schooling experiences have in the construction of attitudes and perceptions that African American female students hold about their lives, education, and schooling? (c) What role do social and peer experiences have in the construction of attitudes and perceptions that African American female students hold about their lives, education and schooling? (d) What role does the media have in the construction of attitudes and perceptions that African American female students hold about their lives, education and schooling? (e) What are the educational needs of African American girls?

By using grounded theory for analysis, the researcher has determined that the participants’ narratives reveal the significant role of family, resilience in the face of trauma, resistance to cultural stereotypes, and the significance of peer relationships and the media in their everyday lives. Furthermore, the data reflects the participants’ needs in schools as they pertain to social and emotional support and a curriculum that represents them as African American girls. The researcher offers several recommendations for parents, teachers and policy makers. These include, but are not limited to, educators encouraging the participants through a pedagogy of support that promotes mentorship, social and emotional support and an acknowledgement of their humanity.
For Shanta Dianne Elmore
and
Generations of Infinite Love
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When my doctoral work began, I was unable to fully conceptualize the professional and personal journey that lay before me. During my years of teaching, I learned that there was much to explore and understand about our educational system. This became highly personal as I grew to understand the most basic premise: that my students were above all, human, and deserved an educator who made it her mission to understand the world in which we are situated. My coursework and research have allowed me to explore this further and I have been adequately prepared to contribute to the field. My time at The Ohio State University has been marked by support, guidance and encouragement and I would like to acknowledge several people who have had a significant impact upon me during my time here.

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Chapter 1: Overview

Introduction

On January 30, 2014, President Barack Obama stood before the people of the United States of America and outlined his vision for the direction and political agenda for the country in the annual State of the Union Address. President Obama referenced several policy initiatives, including global competitiveness, the federal incentive program Race to the Top (RTTT) early childhood education, and college and workforce readiness. He spoke primarily to the working-class and middle-class sectors of American society as he addressed opportunity for all and economic growth and stability. Toward the end of the segment, in keeping with this theme, President Obama stated: “…I’m reaching out to some of America’s leading foundations and corporations on a new initiative to help more young men of color facing tough odds stay on track and reach their full potential” (State of the Union Address, 2014). The President continued,

“The bottom line is, Michelle and I want every child to have the same chance this country gave us. But we know our opportunity agenda won’t be complete – and too many young people entering the workforce today will see the American Dream as an empty promise – unless we do more to make sure our economy honors the dignity of work, and hard work pays off for every single American” (State of the Union Address, 2014).
Although brief, the President’s statement was powerful. It framed and solidified an agenda for males of color not only in educational policy but also as a matter of national importance and urgency. The implication is clear: America’s young men of color are in trouble and support will be mobilized to address this.

President Obama’s initial statement, however, did not connect with his next point concerning income inequality for women. His proposed agenda does not speak to the opportunities or experiences of First Lady Michelle Obama and Black women across the United States. Even more striking, this statement was the transition into his next point. President Obama told the country that women make 77 cents for every dollar earned by a man, and even this statement does not go far enough. This is a statistic for the earnings of White women. On average, African American women in the United States make 70 cents for every dollar earned by men and 64 cents for every dollar earned by White men (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2013). For this, President Obama’s remarks evoked the title of Hull, Scott and Smith’s (1982) *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*. His words highlighted the race and gender politics and tensions present in the representation of policy problems that are very much present within contemporary educational policy. The point is quite evident: the needs of African American female students are not well represented in the national educational policy arena. This author argues that this invisibility is not just restricted to educational policy agendas but within educational research in general.

This study employs qualitative research methods of interviewing and observation to explore the educational experiences of seven African American girls in eleventh and
twelfth grades. Education and schooling do not occur in a vacuum; they are dependent on and situated within the broader context of society and daily life. According to psychology, sociology, health and educational research, African American girls have multiple experiences that are impacted by their race, class, and gender. Issues such as self-esteem, physical and emotional health, risk behavior, family structure, and in-school discipline have been explored. In their seminal 1966 treatise, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann described the primary socialization of children as occurring in the home, and the secondary socialization occurring in societal institutions, namely schools. Forty-four years later, Sadker and Zittleman (2010) make the similar argument that children are socialized by interactions with their families, peer groups, schools, and media. This investigation aims to explore these four areas as they relate to the girls’ educational experiences.

The researcher has collected data by conducting classroom observations and individual and group interviews with seven African American female high school juniors and seniors. The participants have reflected upon the span of their experiences in grades K-12. The participants are high achieving students based upon their past and current grade point averages. They attend the same nationally ranked science and math focused high school. There is no proposed risk or benefits included these students using their voices to highlight the significance of their lived experiences.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore the following overarching question: How do African American girls navigate their educational, personal, and social worlds to
become successful in school? To explore this, the research questions are as follows: (a) What role do home and family experiences have in the construction of attitudes and perceptions that African American female students hold about themselves, their lives, education, and schooling? (b) What role do schooling experiences have in the construction of attitudes and perceptions that African American female students hold about their lives, education, and schooling? (c) What role do social and peer experiences have in the construction of attitudes and perceptions that African American female students hold about their lives, education and schooling? (d) What role does the media have in the construction of attitudes and perceptions that African American female students hold about their lives, education and schooling? (e) What are the educational needs of African American girls?

Background

The personal is political. This project grew out of three distinct personal experiences that have profoundly shaped my views of what it means to be educated as an African American female. The first incident occurred in 2003 when I, the researcher, was a junior in high school. My honors English class was reading Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and I was eager to discuss the first piece of African American literature that we had been exposed to in class. During the discussion, I was interrupted by a White classmate and told, “Calm down! You’re acting like a militant Black panther!” I waited for my teacher to address the comment. No such support came and the silence was deafening. This was a traumatic experience. Believing that my voice and contributions were no longer valued, I chose not to speak in that class for the rest of the year. This
silence extended to other classes and did not begin to break until my junior year at
Spelman College, a historically Black college (HBCU) for women.

Recovery came in the form of a course on Violence Against Women. My
professor, who was also an African American woman, took me aside and told me that
what I had to say mattered and had value and that I needed to speak more in class. I
suppose that this was the first time that I had ever been told something like this –
especially since I was so accustomed to silence in classroom settings. Although change
was not instantaneous, I began to understand that just as teachers, peers and school
environments had the ability to impact trauma via neglect or passivity, they also have the
ability to heal. I experienced this first hand once I entered the classroom and began
teaching my own students.

I taught at a school in a large urban district in the southern region of the United
States. The neighborhood that the school served was highly impoverished, which is
demonstrated by the fact that 93% of the students were on free or reduced lunch. Due to
gentrification, the neighborhood served one of the last standing public housing projects in
the city. The student and teacher populations were largely, if not completely African
American.

Under the direction of our principal, teachers of first grade students were expected
to fulfill the role of teacher, mother or father, disciplinarian, and mediator. We were
expected to handle significant behavioral and academic issues with little support and
were blamed for our students’ poor performance and rarely celebrated for when they did
well. I suspect that this is common in today’s educational climate.
I taught for a total of three years and intended to teach for a longer period of time. In my third year of teaching, however, I worked with a student that completely changed my outlook on the educational system. In fact, I credit her for encouraging me to explore the social and cultural contexts in which her and my students’ lives were situated. My student needed the kind of help that was beyond my capacity and training to provide. She was being shuffled along and justifiably angry about it. She exhibited aggressive behaviors toward herself and others, including self-mutilation. I am quite sure she believed that we hated each other. In one instance, she told me that she hated me and that she would scratch herself until she bled. She did. In hindsight, I recognize now that my student probably felt powerless. In addition to the clinical issues that she was experiencing, she was having mainly negative experiences with teachers and school administrators. I appreciated her resilience because despite these potentially silencing experiences, she still continued to speak her mind and express herself to bring attention to her needs. Although these are personal vignettes, the researcher suspects they may very well be common in the educational experiences of African American girls. More research is required to give voice to these students and their experiences.

**Significance**

“In 1947, Ralph Ellison eloquently described the plight of living life as an invisible man in America. Today, more than 60 years later, in many respects, it is the Black girl who wears the mask of invisibility. Even though we see her everywhere – as the video vixen at the periphery of hip hop culture, or the loud, neck-rolling mean girl in public spaces, do
we know her? Do we really know her? Are we aware of her special concerns, her distinct challenges, and the intricacies of her unique experience as she attempts to traverse a society that continually marginalizes her worth, ignores her struggles, and consistently fails to address her distinct concerns through social or policy action? For far too many of us, this is no.” (Jones-DeWeever, 2009: 8)

The above quotation is taken from a 2009 research study on African American girls in New York City. The report speaks to African American girls’ untold strength and resilience and discusses the unique challenges they face in education, emotional and physical well-being, safety and security and relationships with themselves, peers and families. The quotation describes the positioning of African American females well: even though we see them everyday, their very presence walks the line between hyper-visibility and hyper-invisibility. African American females are reduced to their physical beings through images of sexualized objects for the pleasure of men and yet their bodies are scrutinized and criticized (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013; Hobson, 2005). Their femininity is consistently called into question, and their experiences are consistently presented as less valid. The myth of the welfare queen has become culturally ingrained as a symbol of poverty and laziness and the mammy is the universal expectation and relegation of their personalities (Giddings, 1984; Jordan-Zachery, 2009).

Literature reveals that African American female students and girls in general are operating within an intersection of race and gender politics. W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) argues that African Americans function within a double-consciousness, meaning that they
have a sense of duality, seeing themselves as both American and Black in a nation where the two can never be fully be reconciled. African American women, however, arguably operate within a “triple consciousness” because of the added lens of gender and takes gender oppression into account (Gomez, 2007). As an institution that is not neutral to cultural nuances and messages, education presents a lens by which to explore this juncture.

By many scholarly and popular accounts, African American girls are doing well in education. They are especially doing well academically. This is shown quite clearly through educational attainment data released by the United States Census Bureau. Research shows that 5,166,000 African American females ages 18 and over report having graduated from high school. Additionally, 2,146,000 African American females in the same age group report having a Bachelor’s degree (United States Census Bureau, 2012). However, much of the prominent discourse on the success of African American females’ academic achievements is the comparison of that of African American boys. For example, 4,831,000 African American males ages 18 and over report having a high school diploma while 1,522,000 African American males report having graduated from college (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Going further, data from the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reflects that while African American girls are performing higher than African American boys on assessments such as fourth grade Reading and eighth grade Math, they are still performing behind their White peers (Girl Scouts, 2013).
While data on achievement and attainment alone reflect a need for a closer investigation, what is occurring in education is not independent from what is occurring in broader society. In addition to education, issues such as poverty, discipline and zero-tolerance policies, family structure, physical health, emotional health and risk are prevalent in the literature. My review of the literature will describe that both historically and contemporarily, representations of African American females fall within five themes: questioned humanity, questioned femininity, hypervisibility and hyperinvisibility, and attempts to address the pathological narratives. The goal of this research is to give voice to African American female students in an effort to explore and counteract these pathological narratives and themes.

In response to Austin’s (1995) call for minority feminist scholars to use their research to study poor and working-class women, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) call for “educational research, theorizing, and practice by women and scholars of color who are adamant about improving the academic outcomes and schooling experiences of Black girls” (p. 22). They offer several pathways for exploration through what they term as realities faced by Black girls in education. They are as follows:

Girls of African descent are at the bottom of the social totem pole in society; thus, there is an urgent need for a theoretical framework that serves to expose, confront and eradicate race, class and gender oppression in our families and schools. Currently, not enough is being done by scholars in the field of education on the policy front or pedagogically to unabashedly develop and implement classroom practice and curriculum that directly relates to the needs of Black girls.
In the postmodern era, Black girls’ psyches and bodies are being subjected to subjugation in the media, racist and sexist school policies that serve to exclude and silence Black girls, and social and legal policies that dehumanize rather than foster the quality of life of many low-income and working-class young women. Young women’s existence at the margins presents both constraints and possibilities for all educational reform efforts and overall societal transformation. Therefore, research with and on behalf of Black girls benefit the whole of society (p. 22).

This research is in direct response to the need to add to the dearth of educational research on African American girls and the need to bring their needs from the margin to the center (hooks, 1984).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented an overview of this study by highlighting its purpose, background and significance. Chapter Two will present a review of the literature and Chapter Three will discuss the study’s methodology. Chapter Four is a presentation of the data in the form of the participants’ narratives. Chapter Five presents the discussion and analysis. Chapter Six provides the study’s summary, conclusions and recommendations for future work.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will present an overview of the literature present on the education of African American female students as it relates to race, gender and class. In an effort to provide historical context for the study, this review will address the history of the education of African American women. This is followed by a review of contemporary literature. In addition, this chapter will include a discussion of how the current state of education for African American students has been framed as a ‘crisis’ to illuminate the necessity of understanding the needs of African American female students from an educational policy standpoint. Literature has been drawn from several fields of study that include education, history, psychology, sociology and health education and sex education.

African American Females and Education

The education of African American females cannot be separated from the overall social, political and economic events that have occurred throughout the history of the United States. This literature will begin with a discussion of the foundation of education of African American females in the United States within the frame of five distinct contexts: slavery; emancipation, racial uplift, and women’s rights with an eventual discussion of the treatment of African American girls within contemporary educational
discourses. Within these events are recurring themes of questions of humanity, femininity, invisibility and navigating within the constraints of gender and racial privilege.

**Education during slavery.** As an institution, slavery and its effects has been embedded in the history of North America for over 400 years. Traditional accounts of the start of slavery with African slaves in North America begin with the arrival of slaves in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. Indentured servitude with Whites as the source of labor occurred prior to 1619. Davis (2006) maintains that there is evidence that African Americans had arrived in Jamestown even earlier, having been found in Spanish Florida in the 1560s. Davis suggests that since a great deal of North American slavery occurred before the American Revolution, it is quite misleading to restrict slavery to the cotton plantations in the 1850s.

The status of the Jamestown twenty is contested. Although these Africans may have been indentured servants who were freed after their obligation ended, after 1660 the vast majority of Africans in North America were enslaved. For this reason, at that time and in the future, free and enslaved African Americans coexisted in Colonial America (King, 2006). Throughout this discussion on education during slavery, the author will make a distinction between the educational opportunities in both free and enslaved groups narrowing the focus as much as possible on African American women.

Stetson (1982) seeks to illuminate the experiences of African American women in slave communities, and pays particular attention to presenting a revisionist view of the history of female slaves. She maintains, “The need to conceptualize a feminist
perspective within which the female slaves can be studied is urgent. The story of slavery cannot be told without pursuing significant questions about slave women and their historical development” (p. 80). Stetson argues that the greatest emphasis on African American female slaves was their lives in relation to African American male slaves.

“Female slaves are discussed in the context of debate about limitations (never to the possibilities) of their role as mothers. Moreover, scholars treat the slavery experience as a African American male phenomenon, regarding African American women as biological functionaries whose destinies are rendered ephemeral – to lay their eggs and die” (p. 62).

Stetson advocates for all aspects of African American female slave life to be considered, including their attitudes toward housework, identity, sexuality, power, and comparisons between slavery and the welfare state.

**Education for free and enslaved african americans.** The educational lives of African American women has been captured in a variety of mediums, including speeches, autobiographical accounts, biographies, slave narratives, and poetry (Wheatley, 1770; Cooper, 1892; Jacobs, 1861; Baluvelt, 1901; Loewenburg & Bogin, 1976; Mullane, 1993; King, 2006).

In 1773, Phillis Wheatley, a slave, became the first African American author to be published in a book. Her owner, John Wheatley describes her accomplishment, stating, “In sixteen months time from her arrival, attained to the English language, to which she was an utter stranger before, to such a degree, as to read any, the most difficult parts of the Sacred Writings, to the great astonishment of all who heard her” (Mullane, 1993).
Wheatley published her first poem in 1773. Her credibility as a writer was questioned because publishers did not believe that a slave girl could have composed such thoughts (Jefferson, 1785). One of her most famous pieces, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” is as follows:

‘Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God that there’s a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither fought not knew.
Some view our fable race with scornful eye,
“Their colour is a diabolic die” (p. 40).
Remember, Christians, Negros, African American as Cain,
May be refin’d, and join th’angelic train.

Her writings are not free of criticism; her pieces have been accused of being too accepting of Christian and colonial norms. Alice Walker (1972) suggests that Wheatley’s writing is indicative of contrary instincts, as her loyalties and her mind were divided. Walker asks how this duality could not be the case because she was “captured at seven, a slave of wealthy, doting whites who instilled in the ‘savagery’ of the Africa they ‘rescued’ her from.” Arguably, this duality can apply to all enslaved African women as they navigated through this ‘new world’ American society. Regardless, at a time when even few White women were educated, Phillis Wheatley’s work and accomplishments are astounding (Mullane, 1993). Wheatley’s story reflects the nuances of the position of
African American women at the time: not quite human enough and not quite intelligent enough, but still actively resisting the imposed constraints of their condition.

Slave narratives were particularly significant in that they provided a firsthand account of the slaves’ experiences when they were generally silenced. One of the most prominent and popular slave narratives is that of Frederick Douglass (1845). He speaks of his family, life and eventual escape as a slave in Maryland. Just as profound but less well-known in popular discussions is the narrative of Harriet Jacobs (1890). Harriet Jacobs was an African American female author, activist, and former slave whose work was heavily invested in abolishing slavery and the welfare and education of African Americans and children. She was taught to read and write by an early owner. She published an autobiography about her life as a slave, titled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, (1890) which is regarded as one of the United States’ most famous slave narratives. Jacobs describes her work as a purposeful and political act: to

“...Arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations. May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect effort in behalf of my persecuted people” (p. 6).

Jacobs’ work is significant for two reasons. For one, it speaks to the invisibility of African American women in history. Perhaps the most famous slave narrative
presented to students is that of Frederick Douglass. Jacob’s work is equally remarkable in that it highlights the unique intersections of race and gender faced by women in slavery. Jacobs frequently dealt with the sexual advances of her owner. Fearing that she would be raped, she began a relationship with another White man for protection and had two children. She eventually escaped and lived in an attic for seven years where she could keep an eye on her children. She became permanently disfigured. Jacobs’ work also very much speaks to the education of African American women during this time. Although rare, Jacobs learned to read, write and sew from an early mistress and used her skills to fight for the freedom of her people.

Jacobs was an avid proponent of education. An article published in *The Freedman’s Record* in 1865 reported on the progress of Jacobs’ work which provided support for a school for free children in Alexandria, Virginia. Jacobs was sent to Virginia to attend to freedmen and women settled there. She helped to establish a school as well as “providing orphan children with homes, in nursing the sick, in assisting the able-bodied to find work, and in encouraging all in habits of industry and self-reliance” (p. 1).

The author notes that Jacobs’ life offers a clear example of the racial discrimination of the time, stating: “And yet, this woman, this lady, - who for years has been treated as a friend in the family of one of our celebrated literary men, and who has on the respect and love of all who have associated with her, - cannot ride in the street-cars at Washington, and is insulted even in a concert-room in Boston, on account of the slight tinge of color in her skin. We have made great progress but much remains to be done”
This speaks directly to social and political conditions at the time as well as the role of free African American women in efforts to help improve the community.

Lowenberg & Bogin (1976) maintain that in the nineteenth century, education was seen as a primary way to rise socially, politically and economically. Education was a privilege that had been denied to those African and their descendants who were enslaved and much of the free population. A member of the community, therefore, who had earned an education had the capability and obligation to help the rest of the race progress, hence the idea of uplifting the race. Literacy was a significant tool of learning and resistance, and in the nineteenth century, it led to the ability to read the Bible.

Christianity was a highly significant aspect of life for African Americans. Literacy was seen as a move toward freedom. Slaves went through extraordinary efforts and risks to become literate, as learning to read and write could be punishable by death.

Religion was seen as a source of inner freedom and the motivation for self-improvement. Being able to read and or write served very practical purposes. For one, they allowed slaves to forge a pass from their masters. It also allowed them to read a notice and communicate with family members who may not have been close by. It also allowed religious leaders on plantations to learn the Bible in its entirety rather than what their masters chose for them to know. Schools were established by religious leaders and people who believed in the importance of educating African Americans.

Prudence Crandall, for example, a Quaker from Rhode Island, established one of the first schools for African American girls. In 1831, Crandall opened an elite private school for girls in Canterbury, Connecticut. The curriculum is described as rigorous and
included reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, history, natural and moral philosophy, chemistry, astronomy, drawing and painting, music and French. In 1833, Crandall ran an ad in *the Liberator*, an anti-slavery newspaper announcing that the school would be open to “young Ladies and little Misses of Color” (Strane, 1990). Crandall was instantly condemned and even arrested for the decision to open the school. In response, the townspeople attempted to burn down the school, and she and her students were consistently harassed through various means, including having manure and eggs thrown at them. Additionally, shopkeepers refused to supply the school and students were barred from attending the local church. In 1833, the Connecticut General Assembly met to frame the “African American Law, which was eventually passed. The “African American Law” made it illegal to found a school that taught African American students from a state other than Connecticut. A phrenologist addressed the legislators, who concluded, after describing the facial features of African Americans:

> All of these peculiarities at the same time contributing to reduce his facial angle almost to the level with the *BRUTE*… it is… reasonable to suppose that the acknowledged meanness of the negro’s intellect only coincides with the *shape of his head*, or in other words, that his want of capability to receive a complicated education, render it improper and impolite that he should be allowed the privileges of CITIZENSHIP in an enlightened country. (Strane, 1990)

African Americans were thus seen as inhuman and educating them was a waste because education was a right afforded to citizens. Crandall was tried twice and eventually convicted. The conviction was eventually overturned, but fearing for the safety of her
students, Crandall closed the school.

While it was also particularly difficult for free African Americans to become literate, yet many women were successful, using literacy to make a living and serve the community as intellectuals. Once some of these women acquired a formal education, they often became involved in liberating African Americans who were enslaved (King, 2006). Free African Americans who were literate were able to seek better employment, know the law, and follow news and events and therefore because major actors in driving education forward for African Americans. Teaching, especially by African American women, was a way to bridge the gap between those who were literate and those who were not. It also served as a means of both personal development and community uplift.

Maria Stewart (1803 – 1879) was a free African American woman who believed that the salvation of African American could be best attained through education. She believed that education would free the mind, help develop the ability recognize social ills and help people envision a better world (King, 2006). Stewart was particularly focused on issues of morality, as she recognized that African American were seen as being inferior to Whites. Enslaved women were barely seen as human, as evidenced by the legalized denigration and disregard for African American female slaves. In 1661, Virginia passed the following legislation: “Children by got an Englishman upon a Negro woman shall be bond or free according to the condition of the mother, and if any Christian shall commit fornication with a Negro man or women, he shall pay double the fines of the former act.” (Giddings, 1984) Essentially, children who were borne of an African American woman would inherit her status, thus ensuring that the children of
slaves would continue to be slaves. Giddings argues that the wording of the legislation could in fact open the door for slave masters to use female slaves for breeding.

After this law was passed, White women, and free White women in particular however, continued to sleep with African American men (Giddings, 1984). Subsequent legislation was passed that added fines to free White women who had children with African American men. If a servant White woman did the same, she risked being banished. In 1705, Virginia published a piece that removed all confusion and solidified the place of African American women as slaves:

Sufficient distinction is also made between the female Servants & Slaves: for a White woman is rarely or never put in the Ground, if she be good for anything else, and to discourage all Planters from using Women so. Their Law imposes the heaviest Taxes upon Female-Servants working in the Ground… Whereas on the other hand it is a common thing to work a Woman Slave out of Doors: nor does the law make any Distinction in her Taxes, whether her Work be Abroad or at Home (Giddings, 1984, p. 39).

African American women were thus established as property whose wombs were not their own.

Thomas Jefferson (1785) described a multitude of reasons why African Americans in general why inferior to Whites. He referred to body composition, skin, hair, sexual appetite and intellect. A particular piece that speaks to the sexualized and animalistic nature of African Americans is as follows: “They are more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate
mixture of sentiment and sensation” (p. 66). He also refers to African Americans as being “brave and adventuresome,” but incapable of having forethought enough to see danger. He continues,

An animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep of course. Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. It would be unfair to follow them to Africa for this investigation. We will consider them here, on the same stage with the whites, and where the facts are not apocryphal on which a judgment is to be formed. It will be right to make great allowances for the difference of condition, of education, of conversation, of the sphere in which they move (p. 265).

Jefferson’s comments about the beast-like, ardent nature of African American love is ironic, given his long-standing and documented relationship with his slave, Sally Hemings (Gordon-Reed, 2007). This presents an interesting paradigm for the treatment of African American women that relates directly to their perceived lack of humanity. They were exotic enough to rape but as they were reduced to inhuman pieces of property, the sexual offense was of no real consequence.

Going further, Jefferson states,

But never yet could I find that a African American had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or
sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch (*2). Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved. Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. -- Among the African Americans is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism (p. 152).

Essentially, African Americans were merely a step above animals who were incapable of intellectual thought. Not ironically, it was in this same piece that Jefferson first outlined the necessity of education for a free society. He put forth an education system that would provide three years of public schooling to every White child in Virginia and then send the most promising males to progress to grammar school and public school for free. This, however, did not account for the enslaved children that Jefferson did not even view as civilized or fit to be educated. Between 1800 and 1835, a majority of the states in the south passed legislation that made it illegal to teach slaves to read or write (Anderson, 1988).

As an African American middle class grew because of economic forces in the 1830s, African American women had to overcome ideas about the relationship between class, color and morality (Giddings, 1984). Free African American women were
particularly focused on upholding middle and upper class ideals of white femininity that had been set forth by women’s magazines, gift annuals and religious literature. Women judged themselves and were judged by their husbands and other women based on the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Welter, 1966). Proper women who embodied the ideals of true womanhood were expected to be virtuous and chaste until marriage, at which it was time for them to submit to their husbands and fulfill the role of cheerful and caring wife and mother. Guides were written for women by both women and men that instructed women to be pure, demure and passive objects of men’s affection. The inability to live up to these standards made one less of a woman (Welte, 1966). This view of the delicate woman was only extended to White women, especially because African American women fit squarely outside of the pure, moral paradigm (Giddings, 1984).

Education, Racial Uplift, and Women’s Rights

After slavery ended, African Americans were adamant about seeking education, as this was a mode of advancement. Former slaves actively sought the aid of Republican legislators, missionaries from the north and the Union Army. The quest for universal education, however, was not in line with planters’ political or economic systems. Anderson (1988) argues that while planters tolerated some education for poor Whites as charity they did not support state-funded universal education. The rich planters’ class believed in little to no state involvement in either the education of children or larger society. He argues, “Active intervention in the social hierarchy through public education violated the natural evolution of society, threatened familial authority over children, upset
African American female activists like Maria Stewart operated within a paradigm of both embracing and rejecting imposed ideas of respectability, humanity and femininity. In one instance, they agreed with the notions of respectability and femininity by embracing the expectations of white middle class womanhood (Giddings, 1984). In another, they were opposed to the underlying racist and classist messages associated with these ideologies. Free African American women especially struggled with perceptions of humanity. Giddings (1984) maintains that the abolition movement had not freed them of perceptions of immorality. They also had to work within the confines of patriarchy and gender oppression. W.E.B. Du Bois (1920) made note of the tension in “The Damnation of Women,” in which he speaks to the struggle of African American women and their significance within both the African American community and American culture as a whole. The value placed upon African American women is evident as he states,

To no modern race does its women mean so much as the Negro nor come so near to the fulfillment of its meaning. As one of our women [Anna Julia Cooper] writes: ‘Only the African American woman can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me’ (p. 305).

He pays particular attention to motherhood, politics, religion, slavery, economics and wages. Du Bois asks, “What is today the message of these African American women
to America and to the world? The uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause. When, now, two of those movements – woman and color – combine in one, the combination has deep meaning” (p. 309).

This piece is significant because Du Bois recognizes and provides accounts of African American women as teachers and their education. He states, “As I look about me today in this veiled world of mine, despite the noisier and more spectacular advance of my brothers, I instinctively feel and know that it is the five million women of my race who really count. African American women (and women whose grandmothers were African American) are today furnishing our teachers…” (p. 308). He continues, “In the United States in 1910 there were 4,931,882 women of Negro descent, over twelve hundred thousand of these were children, another million were girls and young women under twenty, and two and half-million were adults. As a mass these women were unlettered – a fourth of those from fifteen to twenty-five years of age were able to write. These women are passing through, not only moral, but an economic revolution… there are 22,000 teachers” (p. 308).

African American women were not the only group concerned with morality and thrift. Former slaves of both genders contributed money and labor to help build schools. The Freedman’s Bureau and northern missionaries were particularly instrumental. These efforts were essential, as many of the educators and leaders in the years before the Civil War had become literate during slavery. While the short-term goal of educating newly
freed slaves was to provide literacy skills to participate as citizens, the long term goal was to develop a class of leaders who would lead the newly freed slaves to equality.

Interestingly, in his argument for the Talented Tenth in 1903, Du Bois makes it clear that the race will be saved by exceptional men. In this piece, Du Bois argues for racial uplift through education. He argues,

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.

The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with
the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race
that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of
the Worst, in their own and other races” (p. 15).

He further argues that “education is that whole system of human training within and without the schoolhouse walls, which molds and develops men” (27). He describes the usefulness of a more classical, liberal arts education as a means for African Americans to move beyond political, social and economic oppression.

By Du Bois using employment and wage statistics to focus on the accomplishments of the Talented Tenth, he inadvertently highlights African American female invisibility. Du Bois’ notion of the Talented Tenth is very much patriarchal. Although he references the importance of having both men and women as teachers to develop both African American boys and girls, he speaks specifically to the development of men (30). Although Du Bois has written pieces to position himself as a champion for the rights of African American women, this particular piece specifically envisions the Talented Tenth and leaders of the race as men.
Institutions of higher education for African Americans began to be founded during the late 1880s. Two schools in particular, the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute and the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute were founded to offer a curriculum that did not feature a traditional liberal arts education, but one that would serve the needs and interests of the White ruling class. Booker T. Washington was perhaps the most prominent and revered figure in African American America in the late 19th century. He founded Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Alabama in 1881. Ideologically, he stressed hard work, thrift and racial cooperation among newly freed slaves as a means to racial uplift. He especially advocated for industrial education. In 1903, he authored “Industrial Education for the Negro.” This work highlights how African American women in higher education were educated (at Tuskegee University in particular) and the occupational positions afforded to them.

“It seems to me that too often mere book education leaves the Negro young man or woman in a weak position. For example, I have seen a Negro girl taught by her mother to help her in doing laundry work at home. Later, when this same girl was graduated from the public schools or a high school and returned home she finds herself educated out of sympathy with laundry work, and yet not able to find anything to do which seems in keeping with the cost and character of her education… what should have been done for her, it seems to me, was to give her along with her academic education thorough training in the latest and best methods of laundry work, so that she could have put so much skill and
intelligence into it that the work would have been lifted out of the plane of drudgery” (p. 11).

Washington also spoke to other practical skills African American women should have such as housework, cooking and washing and ironing clothes. He lamented, “It is discouraging to find a girl who can tell you the geographical location of any country on the globe and who does not know where to place the dishes upon a common dinner table” (8). Women’s education from an industrial standpoint should be infused with practical skills that keep in line with their gendered roles in the household.

The same year that Tuskegee opened, two White female teachers from Massachusetts, Sophia B. Packard and Harriet E. Giles, founded Spelman College as the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia (Guy Sheftall, 1982). The school began with 11 students of all ages. According to Harry Lefever (2005), although the first group of students was illiterate, the founders viewed the school as a liberal arts institution in the future. Initially, basic courses were offered in reading, spelling, arithmetic, geography, writing, grammar, and history. Eventually, more courses were planned, including algebra, physiology, essays, Latin, rhetoric, geometry, psychology, Latin, chemistry, botany, zoology, and evidence of Christianity (p. 61). A grant from a foundation made it possible to teach more practical subjects such as printing, sewing, dressmaking, laundry, cooking and other domestic skills. Lefever (2005) maintains that these industrial classes were secondary to the academic courses. By the 1890s, what was then known as Spelman Seminary had 800 students, 30 teachers, and a property worth
$90,000. Its mission was shifting from a school that trained women to be teachers into a liberal arts institution.

**The african american female elite.** In 1886, Anna Julia Cooper addressed the Convocation of Clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church on the topic of “Womanhood A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race” (Cooper, 1886). It was there that she stated her trademark phrase: “Only the AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN can say, ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.’” On a personal note, Cooper was a significant driver of racial and educational uplift and a powerful contemporary of Du Bois and Washington. Although this author learned about Du Bois and Washington in high school, it was not until she attended an HBCU that she learned about the contributions of Anna Julia Cooper, which speaks volumes about the invisibility of African American women and their contribution to the fabric of American story.

Linda Perkins (1993) examines the educational experiences of African-American women during the mid- and late nineteenth century and how these experiences contribute to the feminist thought espoused by educated African American women. She discusses the impact of racial uplift on the development of African American feminist ideology until 1920, when women obtained the right to vote. (265) Perkins argues that education was perceived as extremely important by African Americans. Prior to the Civil War, families of free African Americans relocated to areas where their daughters and sons could receive a better education (266). Female seminaries were quite popular by the
1830s and 1840s but most institutions did not admit African American women (267). Perkins points out that the first generation of African American female graduates who became educators during this period had experiences that differed from those of white women. For example, while white women’s employment was terminated after marriage, accounts from Du Bois and Mary Church Terrell reflect that marriage and teaching were not necessarily incompatible. Perkins also mentions differences in sponsorship from the American Missionary Association (AMA), who would routinely deny sponsorship for African American female teachers. They sought teachers with a ‘culture and refinement,” a qualification that systematically denied African American women because of views about African American female womanhood. Perkins’ piece provides yet another avenue by which African American female education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries can be explored. Expectations from race, class and gender play a significant role in the education and hiring of African American female teachers.

Evelyn Brooke Higgenbotham (1992) argues that race is a social construction and touches upon racial constructions of class, and that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, race transcended class and ethnic conflict in the United States. African American women and men, for example were relegated to dead-end employment that paid low wages. The actual class positions of African Americans did not necessarily matter in these instances. Education is discussed within the racial uplift discourse, as popularized by the National Association of Colored Women. Higgenbotham maintains that the motto, “Lifting as we climb,” was paradoxical because it presented a belief in
African American womanhood’s common cause and recognition of differential values and socioeconomic positions (p. 271). Going further, she argues that Racial uplift, while involving a discursive ground on which to explode negative stereotypes of African American women, remained locked within hegemonic articulations of race, class and sexuality. African American women teachers, missionaries and club members zealously promoted values of temperance, sexual repression, and polite manners among the poor. (p. 271)

The women’s club movement was a driving force behind education and racial uplift in the early twentieth century. Higgenbotham’s arguments present a lens by which this movement can be critically examined for its promotion of white, middle class modes of gender and sexuality.

Giddings (1984) also discusses the role of reform and childcare within the work of the National Association of Colored Women. The club movement placed a serious emphasis on education and the group successfully lobbied for $12,000 of federal funds to establish kindergartens in Washington D.C.’s public schools (p. 100). She quotes Mary Church Terrell as stating, “The real solution of the race problem lies in the children... both so far as we who are oppressed and those who oppress us are concerned” (p. 100). Giddings continues, “No matter what their thirst for knowledge, it was particularly important for women to get an education because the majority of them had to work” (p. 101). Education would not only help African American women improve their status and
quality of life, it was also seen as a way to advance individually and also as a community. In essence, education was linked to rising out of poverty (p. 102).

**Summary.** A great deal of the accounts mentioned in this review were done by historians in an attempt to revise the narrative that has virtually erased the significant contributions of African American women to the education and uplift of the race (Giddings, 1984; Hill Collins, 1980). Much of what is taught in schools regarding American history and particularly African American history is, largely sanitized (Loewen, 1995; Zinn, 1999). The researcher acknowledges that significant contributions by African American women have been made in education in twentieth century (Berry & Blassingame, 1982; Giddings, 1984; Giddings, 1990; Guy-Sheftall, 1982; Shakur, 1987; Ransby, 2003; hooks, 1981). In an attempt to reframe the narrative with contemporary literature, it is essential to have an understanding of the literature present on the lives and experiences of African American girls in educational literature and beyond.

**Race, Class and Gender: Intersectionality, Invisibility and Representation Within and Beyond the Educational Literature**

This review reveals that the themes of minimized humanity, questions of femininity, hypervisibility and hyperinvisibility were weaved throughout the literature on African American students in urban, suburban and suburban schools. Moreover, these themes can be found in literature outside the field of education such as in the fields of sexual health, physical health, social work, and psychology.

Intersectionality is essential to seeing the treatment of African American girls in the literature. Class plays a large role and reflects the differences and similarities that
African American girls face and are represented as facing. Research has looked at how race and class impact African American girls’ school experiences (Grant, 1984; Fordham, 1988; 1993; Banks, 2005; Eggleston & Miranda, 2009; Horvat & Antonio, 1999) as well as the impact of African American students in general (Ogbu, 2003; Taylor-Gibbs, 1984; Tuitt & Carter, 2008; Wells & Crain, 1997; Andrews, 2009; Holland, 2012; Ispa-Landa, 2013). These studies pay particular attention to the experiences of students in suburban and elite schools. Quite a bit of attention is paid to the identity formation, interactions with White students and teachers and the ways that social and inequality is reproduced.

African American female students are also a focus within the higher education literature (Carroll, 1982; Dillard, 2006; Myers, 2002; Thomas, et al., 2009).

**Cultural Images and Representation.** In her discussion of how cultural symbols and representations impact social policy decisions for African American women, Jordan-Zachery (2009) provides six cultural images of African American womanhood. Based on Patricia Hill Collins’ (1991) conceptualizations Jordan-Zachery maintains, African American women’s existence must be analyzed via a lens that incorporates race, class and gender because they simultaneously and individually influence their lives. The influence of these factors on the lives of African American women flow from and into each other and are further conditioned by culture, political institutions, laws, economics, education and religion. Analyzing the social location of African American women in this manner allows me to uncover the ideology and power differentials congealed in these simultaneous factors of oppression (p. 47).
Jordan-Zachery’s proposed representations include: The Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Matriarch, Welfare Queen, and Urban Teen Mother. The Mammy is an image constructed during slavery and has the characteristics of a woman who is faithful, obedient, servile, and accepting of her status. Additionally, the Mammy is not capable of caring for her own children because of her duty to her master and the fact that she could not function without White supervision. The Mammy is an asexual being, which is required if she is a trusted caretaker of the White family. The Jezebel image was also constructed during slavery. She is sexually aggressive, thus making her the direct contradiction to the Mammy. The over-sexualized image of the Jezebel was often the rationale for sexual assault against African American woman. Sapphire is an image constructed during the 1950s, and even used as the name of Kingfish’s wife on the infamous radio and eventually television show, Amos and Andy (Jordan Zachary, 2009). She is a nag toward African American men and her actions help to emasculate them. The Matriarch image also lends to the emasculation of African American men. Made popular in the 1960s, she is the prototype of the bad mother because she does not supervise her children and leads the household without a man. The welfare queen image, made popular by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, is also a bad mother, consistently presented as lazy and heavyset, because she is too close to her children, does not work and ‘lives’ off the system. The urban teen mother, made popular in the 1990s, is childlike and simple and gives birth to children that she cannot afford. This image is linked to the welfare queen as well as living in a home headed by generations of matriarchs. (Jordan-Zachery, 2009)

In addition to these, the researcher posits an additional more contemporary, image – the
image of the Independent Woman (Harris Perry, 2013). She is strong, well-educated, successful, and single because she has made it clear that she does not ‘need’ to depend on men. This fact makes her emasculating. As she is concerned with her looks and her wealth, she will frown upon men who work in blue-collar positions, thus contributing to the fact that she is single. The researcher will make the argument that these cultural representations are very much present in the literature present on urban, suburban and rural female students.

**Ladies or “loudies”: Notions of femininity.** In 2005, Edward Morris explored the race, class and gender dynamics of students in a working class, predominately minority school. His study investigates how schools reproduce inequality in regards to race, class and gender through discipline and regulation of students’ bodies. Morris used reproduction theory and explored bodily displays of cultural capital. His findings revealed that at this particular urban school the operating belief system enforced by the staff, required students to adhere to the dress code and use proper manners in the belief that these social skills would ultimately help them secure employment. African American and Latino male students were continuously instructed to “tuck in their shirts” as a way to look more professional and because such behaviors were signs of gang affiliation. African American female students were told to “act like a young lady” by dressing in clothes that were unrevealing and appropriate, speaking more quietly, and by sitting and standing properly.

This study provides an interesting view of the policing of African American females’ bodies, clothing and behavior in school settings, based on an underlying notion
of what it means to be feminine. There is also a clear notion of well-being from the
teachers. They were unconsciously giving students these messages as a means to prepare
them for the future.

Two years later in 2007, Morris published a piece that focused solely on the
experiences of African American girls. He argues that though much scholarship focuses
on the experiences of African American boys, this research demonstrates that African
American girls face unique educational issues, perceptions and obstacles. The African
American girls were performing well academically but their teachers often questioned
their manners and behavior. Some of the teachers took it upon themselves to turn the
girls into ladies. Unladylike behavior was often linked to their perceived loudness and
assertiveness.

One thing here is clear: the African American female students observed by Morris
were often perceived as being unladylike because their actions fit outside of notions of
demure femininity. These perceptions impacted these girls’ educational experiences,
leading to disciplinary issues. The stereotypical Sapphire image comes to mind here, as
there seems to a preoccupation with the “sassy” African American woman image that is
very much out of line with traditional notions of girlhood. There is also a clear aspect of
respectability that seems to be aimed primarily at the working class African American
students. The researcher argues that encouraging the students to act more ladylike is a
way to enforce the middle class ideal of respectability that has been a mainstay in African
American thought.
African American students in substantially White schools face hostility in many aspects of their educational experiences (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Gordon, 2012). African American students at suburban schools, both male and female, have been also subject to these microaggressions. These microaggressions could appear in the form of being put in the spotlight because of their race, being ignored because of their race. (Carter Andrews, 2012) Literature suggests that these students are resilient by resisting the status quo in various ways, including forming supportive peer networks and relating their overall well-being to identity and pride as African Americans (Gordon, 2012).

**Humanity and The African American Female Body: Sexual Health, Physical Health and Health Education.** Research for African American girls in urban and rural schools yielded interesting results, showing an overwhelming preoccupation with the girls’ bodies. Studies were done on obesity (Lewis, et al. 2006; Kenney, Wang & Iannotti, 2013), health, self-image and self-esteem, diabetes education, drug use, sex (Kapungu, Holmbeck & Paikoff, 2006), pregnancy risk, single motherhood and family structure. This points directly to the cultural representations of the Jezebel, Urban Teen Mother, Welfare Queen.

The vast majority of the pieces for African American students in rural settings dealt directly with the health and body size of African American girls in southern states such as Georgia and Alabama. This is not surprising, as the Deep Southern states Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama had such a significant slave population. Outside of the fact that these are considered the states with highest levels of obesity, it is also where images of African American women are presented as being the most obese and poor,
evoking images of the Welfare Queen (Jordan Zachary, 1989). The general notion of pathology associated with African American females has a particular focus on health. Felton, et al. (2002), presents a study that compares differences in weight and physical activity by race. For example, the authors find that race, rather than areas of residence indicates the greatest differences in physical activity. The findings suggest that African American girls were less active than White girls and spent more time watching television and had higher body mass indices. African American girls reported less access to sports equipment and perceived safety of neighborhoods than White girls.

Sexual activity and family structure were closely linked. Kapungu, et al. (2006) presents a longitudinal study that explores the role of family structure and early sexual risk behaviors among urban African American adolescents. Their findings suggest that African American girls raised in authoritarian homes and African American boys raised in permissive homes were particularly at risk for early sexual behaviors which, in this instance, early means fourth or fifth grades. Waddell, et al. (2010) maintain that disparities in teen pregnancy rates can be explained by different rates of sexual activity and contraceptive use. Findings conclude that African American girls had the highest rates of sexual activity and lowest contraceptive use compared to Whites and Hispanics.

The researcher suggests that studies like these, which illuminate issues of public health, continue to put forth the notion of the pathology associated with African American family structure. Much of this pathology is associated with Matriarchs and female-led households. These health-related studies can perhaps be driving forward policies that continue to marginalize African American girls.
Hypervisibility and Hyperinvisibility. The researcher posits that African American girls are both hypervisible and hyperinvisible, meaning they are underrepresented in significant educational issues but are represented in a stereotypical way for two reasons. First, because there is so much literature on African American males’ educational achievement, attainment in addition to their social, economic and political outcomes, African American girls are either overlooked or compared as a ‘succeeding’ marker in contrast to African American boys (Kaba, 2008). Second, and perhaps more importantly, as discussed previously, the literature on African American girls seems preoccupied with pathology and otherness.

In a 2010 study, Sesko and Biernat review two studies that examine African American women’s invisibility through an examination of facial recognition and speech contributions. Their findings suggest that photos of African American women were least likely to be recognized and that statements said by a African American woman in a group discussion were least likely to be correctly attributed to African American women than compared to white men and women. Sesko and Biernat maintain that invisibility is a unique form of discrimination:

“It does not assume advantage or disadvantage of dual subordinate category membership, but rather suggests that African American women may experience a qualitatively different form of discrimination” …we do not mean to suggest that African American women literally go unnoticed and unheard; that their presence is undetectable. Rather, they are treated
as interchangeable and indistinguishable from each other, and in this sense are less ‘visible’ compared to other groups” (p. 360).

This unique form of discrimination is very much present in the framing of the educational crisis for African American boys.

Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) speak to African American female visibility and invisibility in the professional arena. Professionals and managers may find themselves as the only African American women at the company and although they have attained a higher professional status, their contributions may still be readily discounted or ignored. In the workplace, this can mean having fewer options for advancement or being assigned to a job that only works with African American clients.

This can be applied to high achieving African American girls in academic settings who are visible in that they are present but have their knowledge discounted when they are only asked to speak about issues that are related to African Americans. As a result, they are expected to become representatives for African American women as a whole (Robinson, 2013).

The Crisis

The notion that African American males are in a crisis politically, socially, and economically is a significant subject in the literature. It is very much apparent within educational literature. (Stinson, 2011; Tyre, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Taylor-Gibbs, 1988; Kunjufu 1985, 1986, 1990, 1995, 2005). The arguments maintain that African American males are falling behind in school and college enrollments and are targeted by zero-tolerance policies that portray them as criminals, among other significant educational
issues. While the researcher does not disagree and do not attempt to make light of the gravity of the situation for African American males, it is essential that African American girls are not removed from the conversation and thus made invisible by the focus on boys.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (2012) states: …The current ‘crisis’ in Black communities is one faced by our boys and our girls… We can no longer… afford to focus exclusively on the plight of Black boys and men and hope that in the end our work will translate entirely into intervention efforts to being our girls and women out of crisis. Instead, we must develop gender and race conscious lenses and interventions that adequately capture the vulnerabilities imposed upon our Black girls and women today, rather than imposing ill-fitting ones designed and intended for our boys and men (1). The school to prison pipeline is but one crisis that would benefit from a gendered lens.

**School to Prison Pipeline.** On March 21, 2014, the United States Department of Education released the findings of the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). The CRDC is formerly the Elementary and Secondary School Survey (E&S Survey) and its goal is to collect data on significant education and civil rights issues in public schools in the United States. Data is collected on student enrollment and educational programs and services and accounts for race and ethnicity, sex, limited English proficiency and disability. (United States Department of Education, 2014)

According to the 2009-2010 CRCD report for national estimations, there were approximately 8,061,621 Black students (4,114,188 males and 3,947,433 females) and 26,522,956 White students (13,760,109 males and 12,762,847 females) enrolled in public
schools in the United States. The estimate of total students, including American Indians, Asian/Pacific Islanders and Hispanic students is 48,273,920. According to this data, Blacks make up about 13.6 percent of the total population in the United States and about 17 percent of the population of students enrolled in public schools.

One of the most startling and tragic aspects of the report is the figures of students without disabilities who have had one or more or more than one out of school suspensions. In the first category, approximately 495,115 Black students (298,992 males and 196,123 females) and 405,752 White students (404,243 males and 1,509 females) were reported. In the second category, approximately 491,767 Black students (315,260 males and 176,507 females) fell into this category in comparison to 361,017 White students (261,844 males and 99,173 females.) These figures are stunning because this is one of the most glaring instances where Black students are surpassing their White counterparts. It certainly is not within enrollment in Advanced Placement and Math and Science courses, of which figures are available in the report. It is a major cause for concern when a group that makes up 16.6 percent of the districts surveyed represent 44 percent of students who have had multiple suspensions.

Not surprisingly, the findings of the report hit major news outlets and became the subject of debate and contention. Much of the focus of the articles is on the findings and danger of zero-tolerance policies for Black students in general. Headlines such as “Disparities Remain in America’s Schools (The Associated Press, 2014), and “American Schools Are STILL Racist, Government Report Finds” (Resmovits, 2014) are evidence of this. A great deal also focused on the findings aimed at preschoolers’ suspension rates:
“Preschool to prison: No Child Too Young for Zero-Tolerance” (Lee, 2014) and “Black Preschoolers Far More Likely to Be Suspended” (Demby, 2014). Although some pieces made mention of statistics for both Black males and females, none were found that spoke the issues of Black females independent of their male counterparts. One piece, published a week earlier but relying on the same data is titled, “Black Male Initiative Must Address Structural Racism.”

In late September 2014, the National Woman’s Law Center and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF) published a ground-breaking report titled *Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls: A Call for Educational Equity*. Findings suggest that today, fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education* and Civil Rights Act of 1964, African American girls and women are heavily impacted by barriers to equitable educational experiences and opportunities. These barriers, which include institutional and structural elements such as race, gender-based stereotypes and discipline policies disproportionately target African American girls, have both educational and economic outcomes. The authors maintain that this research addresses the gap in data on the educational achievement and economic consequences in the lives of African American girls. This is a significant and welcomed addition to the body of literature on the education of African American female students.

In an attempt to add a more nuanced discussion of gender to the discussion, Monique Morris (2012) presents a report on how African American girls have been impacted by zero-tolerance policies. She argues that without a nuanced discussion,
African American girls are compared to African American boys rather than other girls, which would be more appropriate. She states,

Perhaps due to historic constructs of inequality that have presented African American female experiences as more masculine or subject due to a perceived gender equity than their white counterparts, African American girls are left in a nebulous space between males and other women, where they are rendered not only invisible but powerless to correct course with opportunities to respond to their triple status as female, as youth, and as a person of African descent (p. 10).

An intersectional lens is essential to illuminate these experiences.

**African American Girls and Popular Culture**

“Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, ‘the mule of the world,’ because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else – *everyone* else – refused to carry. We have also been called ‘Matriarchs,’ ‘Superwomen,’ and ‘Mean and Evil Bitches.’ Not to mention ‘Castraters’ and ‘Sapphire’s Mama.’ When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner.” (Walker, 1972: 401).

In 1982, Hull, Scott and Smith presented an seminal work in Black women’s studies titled, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*. The significance of the text is apparent in the title: the work is an attempt to discuss the negotiations that African American must make when navigating gender and racial politics. This negotiation is very much apparent in contemporary discourses.
**Hip-Hop: A Culture of Misogyny.** Literature is very much present on the devaluing and degradation of African American females in hip-hop culture. “These hoes ain’t loyal,” for example, is a lyric taken from a 2014 song called “Loyal,” by Chris Brown. The lyrics show women being reduced to objects and accused of only caring about men’s material wealth, thus lying, scheming and using their sexual wiles to attain it. The reference to “hoe” speaks directly to this. This sounds eerily familiar to the description of Jezebel.

Rebello-Gil and Moras (2012) maintain that hip-hop exacerbates images of Black women as “domineering, freaks, bitches, mammies, and baby’s mammas” (p. 122) For example, the representation of African American women as single mothers or gold diggers is a misogynistic cover for the actual challenges that African American women face in United States society, such as being blamed for the breakdown of the African American family (Morgan, 2000).

Mirelle Miller-Young (2008) makes a connection between the hip-hop and porn industries, suggesting that the images of African American female are excessively sexual while undergirding African American male hypermasculinity. In an attempt to revise the narrative, it is important to name some positive role models for African American girls in popular culture. Paradoxically, even these positive role models can be critiqued for representations that fall within the same negative paradigms of cultural representation.

**Role Models for Black Girls.** Popular and contemporary role models for African American girls include First Lady Michelle Obama, entertainer Beyoncé Knowles, actress Lupita Nyong’o, athlete Serena Williams and fictional characters Clair Huxtable
and Olivia Pope. Interestingly, Michelle Obama is often compared to the ideal wife and mother along with Phylicia Rashad’s Clair Huxtable. All have been critiqued in various ways that the researcher argues display the internalization of the gendered and racial stereotypes that African American females operate within. They have been especially criticized for their bodies, indicating a lingering obsession with the African American female body and femininity, or lack thereof.

First Lady Michelle Obama is consistently criticized for not being feminist and using her position to be more empowering to women (Cooper, 2013). Her body has also been the subject of racism criticism, as shown when a Mexican radio host commented that she “looked like she is a part of the cast of Planet of the Apes” (Estrada, 2015). Serena Williams has also been derided for her body and is labeled as being too masculine (Blay, 2015). Oprah Winfrey, too, has been criticized for her weight and her attractiveness (Shugart, 2015). Recent starlet Lupita Nyong’o has become a media darling. She is praised for her beauty, skin and fashion choices rather than her talent. Her attention also reveals our society’s preoccupation with the exotic (Okeyo, 2014). These women all have stunning accomplishments, and yet are reduced to physical attributes. They are brown skinned, indicating yet another layer of colorism (Hill, 2002).

In 2012, Beyoncé Knowles was featured in a L’Oreal commercial for makeup. She referred to herself as being multi-ethnic, listing her African American, Native American and French roots. Beyoncé has light skin and wears her hair colored blonde. Her body is often a source of scrutiny, as she is criticized for being much too sexual. This analysis could most certainly be deepened and interrogated but even just scratching
the surface reveals that even African American women seen as role models are reduced to their features and femininity. This isn’t to say that White women are not subject to the same scrutiny, but the researcher argues that with African American women, there is a much deeper level of sexual politics involved.

Duke (2000) argues that images in popular culture impacts African American girls’ views. Her findings suggest that while viewing three popular teen magazines it did not necessarily impact their self-esteem, the African American girls understood that they were not represented by images that looked like them. African American girls are impacted by otherness from both gendered and racial perspectives.

**Conclusion**

This review of the literature indicates that African American female students are squarely within the intersections of race, class and gender politics. Cultural representations extending from slavery such as issues of humanity, femininity and invisibility play themselves out in contemporary research, illuminating the fact that these damaging cultural discourses persist and will arguably continue to do so. Fortunately, accounts that attempt to address and revise the pathological narratives are present.

The researcher suspects that more educational research is needed that focuses on the voices of African American female students and how they are living in the world. African American female students deserve our focus more than ever. An intersectional analysis to explore the nuances of the experiences of African American females is required. In the next chapter the researcher will present the study’s methodology.
Included are the study’s theoretical and methodological frameworks, research questions and method for data collection and analysis.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The theoretical perspective utilized in this study is two-fold. It has been primarily developed to address the factors that contribute to the academic success of African American female students. This targets and problematizes the themes of representation of African American females in educational research, with regard to portrayals of African American female humanity, femininity, hypervisibility and hyperinvisibility. This chapter will discuss the rationale for using a qualitative approach for this research project, as well as data sources, collection and analysis. This chapter will conclude with a brief description of the setting for data collection, validity, and ethical considerations when engaging in this line of research.

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

In response to Austin’s (1995) call for minority feminist scholars to use their research to study poor and working-class women, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) call for “educational research, theorizing, and practice by women and scholars of color who are adamant about improving the academic outcomes and schooling experiences of Black girls” (p. 22). They offer several pathways for exploration through what they term as realities faced by Black girls in education. They are as follows:
Girls of African descent are at the bottom of the social totem pole in society; thus, there is an urgent need for a theoretical framework that serves to expose, confront and eradicate race, class and gender oppression in our families and schools.

Currently, not enough is being done by scholars in the field of education on the policy front or pedagogically to unabashedly develop and implement classroom practice and curriculum that directly relates to the needs of Black girls. …

In the postmodern era, Black girls’ psyches and bodies are being subjected to subjugation in the media, racist and sexist school policies that serve to exclude and silence Black girls, and social and legal policies that dehumanize rather than foster the quality of life of many low-income and working class young women.

Young women’s existence at the margins presents both constraints and possibilities for all educational reform efforts and overall societal transformation (p. 22)

Therefore, research with and on behalf of Black girls benefit the whole of society. This study is in response to this call. In an effort to problematize the aforementioned themes, this study is particularly concerned with the normative assumptions and taken for granted views that impact African American female students in schools.

**Theories to explore african american womanhood in education.** Annette Henry (2001) states that black feminist scholars in education have worked to address and eliminate power and privilege in both theory and practice. Though work has critiqued racism and white patriarchy and black sexism in society (hooks, 1994), one question has remained: “What about the younger black female students? Where are the theory and
practice that might help us address the lives of black girls?” (Henry, 175) While cultural studies provides a lens to examine youth culture, the field has not produced much scholarship that examines black girls. Rather, black male youth have been explored. In an attempt to address this, this research will employ Black feminist thought and intersectionality as initial theories for approaching the work and analysis.

Patricia Hill Collins (1991) maintains that Black feminism is “a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (p. 39). Collins also argues that knowledge is socially situated because it is based upon experiences and varying situations. The knowledge that research participants hold has value and is valid. A Black feminist theory centers this knowledge as valid and provides a means for constructing knowledge from the insights of women.

Race and gender politics influence knowledge (Collins, 2000). She posits four major themes present in the construction of Black feminist epistemology. The first is that Black feminist epistemology is built upon lived experience rather than an objective position. The researcher cannot be removed from those being studied but rather begins by being connected to the participants through the connection present in personal experience. Lived experience is centered as a legitimate source of knowledge. Second, as knowledge is not objective outside of lived experiences, dialogue is valued over debate. The third point positions knowledge as being supported by the ethic of caring (p. 215). The ethic of caring suggests that self-expression, emotions and empathy are a central tenant of the knowledge validation process. The fourth and final point is the ethic
of personal accountability. Here, knowledge is based upon beliefs and one’s character, values and ethics (p. 218).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is also a critical theoretical approach. It is a feminist sociological theory that examines how race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation and other ways that we identify ourselves interact to contribute to oppression and social inequality. Collins and Crenshaw provide a critical theoretical lens that will be used to analyze the data.

The researcher seeks to explore how the stories of the proposed participants in this study are impacted by all of these elements. In order to fully understand one’s positioning, one must understand how race, class, gender, sexual orientation and other identifiers play a role in one’s identity. This is essential as the researcher analyzes the data to explore how African American female students make sense of their educational experiences and identities.

**Research Questions and the Methodological Framework**

The overarching problem that guides this exploration is: How do African American girls navigate their personal, societal and educational worlds to build their success as students? More specifically, what aspects of how they have been socialized have led to their academic and personal success? The questions that are being addressed in this study are as follows:

- What role do home and family experiences have in the construction of attitudes/perceptions that African American female students hold about their lives, education, and schooling?
What role do schooling experiences have in the construction of attitudes/perceptions that African American female students hold about their lives, education, and schooling?

What role do social and peer experiences have in the construction of attitudes/perceptions that African American female students hold about their lives, education and schooling?

What role does the media have in the construction of attitudes/perceptions that African American female students hold about their lives, education and schooling?

What are the educational needs of African American girls?

To investigate these questions, the researcher has determined that employing qualitative research methods would be the most appropriate manner to frame the study and collect data. Qualitative research is fluid through circuits, situations, networks and events. Individuals can never be independent of their overall cultural contexts. Actions and interactions are socially produced in all occasions. Human beings all have histories that change over time. This relates directly to Rose (1953), who maintains that human behavior cannot be reduced to merely variables because people are actors in the world. Qualitative research seeks to develop explanations for these processes. For example, a classroom is not just a classroom. It is a dense intersection of networks.

In an effort to explain methods of discovery, Abbott (2004) draws distinctions between quantitative research, which he labels as “population-analytic or experimental” and qualitative research which he labels as “ethnography.” He maintains that what is
typically called quantitative research is related to positivism, or the notion that much of the world is measurable in an objective way. Researchers can make sense of the data using models such as reductive analysis, behaviorism, individualism, realism and non-contextualism. Reductive analysis seeks to explain causality, and behaviorism explores what people are observed doing. Individualism is the notion that discrete individuals can be studied in terms of measurable internal attributes. Realism is the notion that the world is made up of stable sources and non-contextualism is the idea that context can be ignored, such as in an experiment or survey. Context and history do not play a role in the data.

In regards to qualitative research, Abbott (2004) maintains that qualitative research assumes that what we study is generated in a process that researchers do not entirely control or what we study has to be defined or constructed out of traces left by others. Abbott proposed qualitative models such as narrative explanation, culturalism, emergentism, constructivism and contextualism in response to their quantitative counterparts. Narrative explanation is juxtaposed with reductive analysis and explains causality by showing how an event occurred over time in particular locations. Culturalism is what people do but also how they make sense of what they do. This is in direct opposition to behaviorism. Emergentism, which is opposed to individualism, is the notion that people do not exist or function outside of their interactions and you can only study them in interactions. Constructivism explores how the world is being made. This speaks to fluidity and the idea that everything is a process. This goes against the stability
proposed in realism. Finally, contextualism, versus non-contextualism, implies that everything is contextually situated and that events gain meaning from context.

Normal science (Kuhn 1970) refers to models of science that constructs hypotheses and tests them against experience by observation and experiments. Scientific revolution occurs when the prevailing paradigm can not explain a new anomaly - therefore science goes from equilibrium to disequilibrium until the anomaly can be explained by new paradigm. In other words, growth occurs by a revolutionary overthrow of an accepted theory and a replacement by theory that can explain what had been here-to-fore unexplainable. Kuhn argues for a paradigmatic shift that calls for puzzling solutions rather than testing theories. Viewing science as connected to everyday life, Kuhn maintains that neither science nor development of knowledge is likely to be understood if it is viewed through revolutions it rarely produces. Testing cannot be relied upon, but rather, there needs to be puzzles that challenge and attest to ingenuity.

Narratives. In qualitative research, gathering participants’ narratives is a particularly useful means of data collection. Narratives present an opportunity for the voices of marginalized and silenced groups to be heard. Collecting narratives works particularly well with adolescents. Lyn Brown (1991) studies girls who are in early adolescence over time in an effort to explore how they actualize their lives and resistance to what they have experienced. She speaks to the power and bravery that are apart of the girls’ story telling and this must be considered during the interview process.

Given the limited knowledge about the educational experiences of African American female students during their K – 12 schooling experiences, narratives may be
used to move beyond the problematic conceptions of identity and representation that present a narrow view of what it means to be an African American female in educational research.

**The role of grounded theory in data analysis.** Qualitative methods have distinct advantages such as the humanization of problems and data, the portrayal of phenomena in context and holistically, and help attaching feelings and emotions to phenomena (Krathwohl, 1998). These complex ways of exploring data require a skillful method of interpreting and analyzing data. Stake (1995) suggests that qualitative research is mainly concerned with providing explanations. Moreover, it is particularly useful when providing explanations about the participant’s perceptions that allow the researcher to better understand his or her behavior.

Data has been analyzed through the use of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Charmaz, 2000). The grounded theory approach to qualitative analysis includes features such as theoretical sampling, coding and the development of themes in the development of theories to explain social phenomena. Grounded theory methods are a “logically consistent set of data collection and analytic procedures used to develop theory” (Charmaz, 1995). This differs from traditional quantitative study designs in which data is tested to test and prove existing theories.

In using grounded theory, the researcher begins with individual cases or experiences and develops conceptual categories to explain and understand data as well as locate patterns and relationships within the data. The theoretical analysis is built upon what the researcher determines is relevant to the worlds that are being studied. Thus, this
method provides methodical procedures for handling qualitative materials that are rich and extensive.

Analysis of data is multi-layered and interactive, and can include the participant’s explanation of their actions, unstated assumptions, intentions for engagement, effects on others, and the consequences for both individual and relational interactions (Charmaz, 1995). Emerging themes allows the researcher to become aware of the implicit meanings in the participants’ actions. Codes are created by the researcher and emerge as the data is studied. Coding, particularly line-by-line coding, leads to the development of theoretical categories. Line-by-line coding then leads to focused coding, which is more directed and concentrated than the former. The process of focused coding allows the researcher build and clarify the category by examining the data within and between that and other categories. This then leads to memo-writing and theoretical sampling and the construction of theoretical categories (Charmaz, 1995).

The interviews were transcribed and the data was analyzed using the grounded theory approach. The researcher read the transcriptions line by line, creating codes as themes emerged in the data. The researcher initially generated over seventy themes that emerged from the participants’ interviews. The transcriptions were then read multiple times, line by line, for focused coding. It was here that the researcher was able to make connections between the data and create clear theoretical categories.

**Setting of the study.** The study has been conducted at a high school in an urban district in a large, Midwestern city. The site is an alternative college prep high school where students gain admittance through a random lottery. This may have several
implications, including a higher level of parental involvement and higher levels of student achievement. This site was chosen for this particular reason. The purpose of the study focuses on the factors that contribute to the success of African American female students. This deliberately rejects negative and pathological views of African American female students. As such, the research site was chosen to reflect a population of students that are high achieving as reflected by their grade point averages.

**Methods for gathering data.** Data has been collected through group and individual interviews and classroom observations with seven African American juniors and seniors in high school. The group interviews and classroom observations have allowed the researcher to collect information on how the students engage with one another, other students and teachers. The individual interviews offer perspective on how the participants and speak about their educational experiences and personal and social lives. Juniors and seniors are at the end of their K-12 careers and have been chosen as the population because of their ability to reflect on their entire length of schooling experiences. There is no proposed risk and benefits include these students using their voices to highlight the significance of their lived experiences.

**Recruitment and snowball sampling.** Once IRB approval was obtained from both the university and school district, the researcher began recruitment immediately. A recruitment sign was placed in the front office, along with a packet that contained an informational letter, screening questionnaire, and consent and assent forms for parents and students. The researcher also placed a locked and secured box for consent and assent forms to be returned next to the materials. The researcher is the
only person who had access to the key to unlock the box. Potential participants were identified through the school principal and a teacher. Once identified, the researcher spoke to some of the potential participants personally for recruitment. The researcher sought six to eight participants. The university IRB suggested that twelve students be recruited in case students chose to leave the study. As such, twelve copies of the recruitment materials were prepared by the researcher. Within days, all of the packets were collected by students. The recruitment period lasted for about three weeks, as the packets were not immediately returned.

After initial identification by the administrator and teacher, the snowball sampling method was utilized to recruit the final participants. Snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Bertaux, 1981), also called chain referral and referential sampling, is a method of recruitment used to find participants who are not easily identified or known to the researcher. The researcher starts with the gatekeeper or other participants and asks for referrals (Krathwohl, 1998). Participants were asked to identify and refer other students who might be willing to participate.

**Interviewing and observation.** The individual and group interviews were both semi-structured and unstructured (Fontana & Frey, 2000). This means that while interview questions and points are prepared, the goal is for the interviews to flow more like conversations than formal one or two statement responses. Unstructured interviews provide the researcher with extensive data. Leech (2002) suggests that unstructured interviews are best used for insight when the interviewer has limited knowledge or wants an insider perspective. The use of these interviews allows the researcher to establish
person to person contact in an effort to understand rather than explain (Seidman, 1979).

Semi-structured interviews use open-ended questions. There are several types of question styles used during semi-structured interviews. Grand Tour Questions ask participants to give a verbal tour of a topic they are familiar with. While similar to Grand Tour Questions, Example Questions ask participants to be even more specific while answering. Prompts are statements that allow participants to keep speaking and keeps the interview flowing, with The goal of keeping the interviews as conversation-like as possible. However, as Converse and Schuman (1974) maintain, interviewers must have the awareness and ability to respond and adjust to the differences among participants. As such, semi-structured questions are an invaluable resource.

The purpose of the interview is not to receive answers to questions but to explore the valuable stories of others (Seidman, 2006). Interviewing also provides a means to explore how the meaning people make of their experiences affect the way they enact them (Blumer, 1969). The interview places the behavior in context. Two significant components of the interview process are gaining trust and establishing rapport (Leech, 2002; Spradley, 1979). Rapport refers to a respectful, encouraging and agreeable relationship between the researcher and participants. Building rapport with adolescent participants is particularly important, as children are considered an especially vulnerable population due to their age. Spradley (1979) names four stages that are critical to the rapport process in ethnographic interviews: (1) apprehension; (2) exploration; (3) cooperation and (4) participation (p. 45).
Apprehension in both the researcher and participant can occur as a result of unfamiliarity with the process. Descriptive questions are a useful tool in overcoming this stage, as it encourages conversation. Non-judgmental responses from the interviewer help to keep the participant talking. This leads to the exploration state. Both the interviewer and participant establish rapport through listening, observing and testing (p. 46). In time, building rapport moves into cooperation. This cooperation is built on mutual trust and understood expectations, allowing participants to feel comfortable enough to give personal information or ask the researcher questions. It is at this stage when the researcher has more of an understanding the participant’s culture. The final stage, participation, is the final dimension of the relationship. At this point, informants begin to grow more assertive and take on the role as instructor. While not all participants advance to this role, those who do become participant observers in their own right (Spradley, 1979). The group interviews are meant to be exploratory (Fontana & Frey, 2000). They can also be useful for triangulation by placing the responses from individual participants into context (Cicourel, 1974). Participant observation techniques in natural settings are employed to note human activity and the physical activities in which the activity takes place (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2003). It is assumed that observations in natural settings, or naturalistic observation, do not disturb the people or activities being observed. Angrosino & Mays de Perez (2003) suggest emphasizing observation as context for interaction rather than a method. This context of social interaction has been addressed through Spradley’s five principles.
Once seven participants were recruited, the researcher immediately began the individual and group interview process. Three participants engaged in the first group interview and two in the second. The group interviews occurred first as to gauge interest in topics for the individual interviews. This also provided space for following up and asking deeper questions during the individual interviews. Questions were aimed specifically at home and family life, social and peer networks, school and education, media interaction and elements such as perceptions of themselves, their race, class and gender. Observations were conducted during class periods once the interviews were completed.

**Validity**

Typically, the conception of validity has been designed for experimental models. Inquiry-based models such as ethnographies, case studies and narrative inquiries differ greatly while still being critiqued for scientific rigor. Mishler (1990) suggests a reformulation of validity for inquiry-based studies. By reframing validity as the social construction of knowledge, the main issue becomes whether the reported findings are deemed trustworthy for scholars in that community to rely on them for their own scholarship.

**Ethical Considerations**

Confidentiality and privacy was ensured through recruitment and data collection. An expedited application under the protocol number 2014B0429 was submitted to and approved by The Ohio State University’s Institutional Review Board. As the participants were under the age of 18, they were required to provide assent along with the consent of
their parents and guardians. Any students who may have turned 18 during the course of the study were required to complete their own consent form after the reached the age of consent. Participants and their parents and guardians were informed of the risks and benefits as a part of the consent and assent process.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the rationale for using a qualitative approach for this research project, as well as data sources, collection and analysis. It has also discussed a brief description of the setting for data collection, validity and ethical considerations when engaging in this line of research. The next chapter presents the data that describes, in their own words, the participants’ perceptions of their educational, social and personal worlds.
Chapter 4: The Educational, Social and Personal Experiences of African American Female High School Students

Introduction

The Setting: Northwestern City, USA

The Narratives: Arya Thompson, Brittany Owens, Courtney Miller, Gabrielle Carter, Maya Adams, Olivia Reese, and Taylor Barnes

Chapter Four will discuss both the setting in which the participants live and attend school and their educational narratives, which will be presented for each participant. Each narrative has been constructed from personal and group interviews as well as classroom observations. They are based upon the participants’ recollection of their experiences from kindergarten to their current grade, which ranges from junior to senior year. All seven of the participants engaged in at least one interview. Six of the seven completed two or more interviews. Interviews were conducted during the participants’ school day. The group interviews were coordinated during their lunch periods. Due to scheduling constraints, four out of the seven participants engaged in the group interviews.

Setting

Northwestern City is the third largest city in the Midwest. Each of the seven participants lives in the city. According to the 2010 Census, Northwestern City had an estimated population of 787,033 people. In terms of racial and ethnic demographics, 61.5 percent of the population identifies as White alone and 28.0 percent identify as Black or
African American alone. Both of these numbers differ slightly from the overall state demographics, with 82.7 percent and 12.2 percent identifying as White alone and Black or African American alone, respectively. The median household income is $44,072 between 2009-2013. Within this same period, 22.4 percent of the city’s population lives below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

Northwestern City’s Black population has a long history in the city dating back to the late 1700s and early 1800s where they arrived as free men and women and former and runaway slaves. Situated in the downtown and eastern side of the city, the Black community in Northwestern City built its own community within the city, with churches, community centers, doctors’ offices and a small segregated hospital, beauty parlors, barber shops and grocery stores. A large majority of the Black community remains in these areas today. However, due to demographic changes, city politics, economic downturns leading to loss of jobs, and an overall racialized atmosphere, the Black community, as with so many communities of color, has not flourished but has been in decline, with all of the accompanying problems and issues that include housing decay and blight, under and unemployment and youth unrest.

The city is categorized as one of the three largest urban cities in the state and is marked by a stark contrast in income. While some neighborhoods within the city are quite wealthy, others, including the one where the Northwestern Public Schools district is housed, are working class communities. The neighborhood that borders where Northwestern Tech High School is located has a median income of $104,484 while the school’s neighborhood has a median income of $22,545. (City-Data, 2015)
**District: Northwestern public schools.**

Each of the participants attends Northwestern Tech High School. The district is the state’s largest and serves approximately 51,000 students. The mission of the district is as follows: Each student is highly educated, prepared for leadership and service, and empowered for success as a citizen in a global community.

**School: Northwestern tech high school.**

Northwestern Tech High School is a college-preparatory high school. It has been identified as one of two high schools in the district that are among the top 2,500 high schools in the country by Newsweek (2014). It is a science and mathematics focused high school and has a more specific focus on biomedical sciences. Students are admitted to the school by entering and being selected from a lottery. The school’s vision statement is as follows: “[Northwestern Tech High School] students are rigorously educated in a nurturing environment, prepared for a lifetime of learning, leadership, and service, and empowered to be responsible citizens of the world.”

Northwestern Tech has a strong focus on college preparation. This was noted during a classroom observation during second period. After the principal recited the pledge of allegiance, he announced college acceptances of the students. On this particular day, the college acceptances included Spelman College, Youngstown State University, and Wittenberg University. There is also a display of student pictures in the front office. Many of them are wearing paraphernalia from their colleges.
The Narratives

Arya Thompson

Arya Thompson is a sixteen-year-old junior at Northwestern Tech High School. She identifies as African American. She was interviewed individually with one forty-five minute interview. She also participated in one group interview. Additional data was collected from one classroom observation during her American Literature and Composition class.

It should be noted that the data that is presented here is not from a complete interview series. Although she said that she wanted to continue her participation in the study, Arya chose not to complete the second half of her interview. The portion of the individual interview that she did participate in has provided data about her background, personal and family life. Some mention was made about her peer relationships and extracurricular activities. The group interview provides information on her thoughts on the representation of African American women in education and popular culture on African American girls in schools.

Background and Family Life

Arya is one of five siblings. She has three brothers and one sister. Her sister and one of her brothers are older than her and no longer live in her home. Her youngest brother lives with his grandmother. She and her remaining brother live together with her cousin, who has been granted custody of the pair. She has lived with her cousin, who shall be referred to as “second mom,” since she was four. She says that she was taken away from her biological mother because of her drug use, among other issues.
Arya: We were taken away from my biological mother when I was four. She was doing drugs and stuff like that. They took us away from her. We went to live with our grandma first, but at the time she was working and couldn't take care of us. My biological mother asked my second mom to take us in. We have been here since I was little.

Arya says that she and her cousin have a good relationship because her cousin cared about her when her biological mother did not. She sees her as a second mother, and even refers to her cousin as her mom. When asked to describe this relationship, Arya replied that it was good:

Arya: She's the person who cares when my real, my biological mother didn't. And she took us in.

Additionally, Arya feels as though she can talk to her about anything and that she is supportive with her grades and how she is doing in school. She rewards her for doing well and receiving good grades by buying her what she wants such as clothes and shoes.\(^1\) Arya doesn’t know where her biological mother lives. She speaks to her mother when she, in Arya’s words, ‘pops up’, even though she is not supposed to.

Arya: My biological mother is not supposed to have any contact with us, because of what she did in the past. But somehow she got our number and it's been the same for years. She just calls out of the blue. She talks to my second mom in a rude tone. My biological mother doesn't like my second mom. I

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\(^1\)Note: there were no follow-up questions on this as a motivating factor in school success, as this would have been in the second interview.
don't know why because she's the one who called my second mom to help us. My biological mother thinks my second mom is turning us against her. The last time my biological mother came to our home there was a big commotion. It was just crazy.

In this specific incident, the police had to be called. When asked why her biological mother can no longer have contact with her, Arya indicates that she was neglectful toward her and her siblings.

Arya: We used to go to my biological mother’s house, but she left us there. And I think a fire happened. We [Arya’s siblings] were in the house except my littlest brother. He wasn't born yet. I mean I want to have a relationship with her, but the way my biological mother acts towards my second mom is not acceptable. We [Arya’s siblings] would not have been together. If we had not come to my second mom, we would have been scattered across the United States. My second mom took us in and stopped everything.

She was going to school for nursing and she had to stop to take care of us. My biological mother is just really mean to her, calls her names and stuff like that. I don't want to talk to her. My biological mother drinks alcohol. She used to prostitute and she doesn't have a good relationship with her own mom. Calls her names too. She's disrespectful. It's just that she’s not trying to fix herself. We tell her all the time all you have to do is get yourself together.
Arya says that she does not know her father. When asked how that makes her feel, Arya indicates that it used to bother her but perhaps she has come to terms with him not being around because everything happens for a reason.

Arya: I don't know him. I don't know who he is. My biological mother doesn't even know where he is. She doesn't even know his name.

At first I used to cry about it, but now my mom says, there's a reason why he's not here.

Arya says that her second mom helps her through it because she has had a similar experience. She knows her father but does not truly know him, as he was not involved in her life. Even with this, Arya indicates that not knowing her father is particularly difficult when her other siblings know who their fathers are. Her older sister and brother have the same father. Her brother who lives with her and her youngest brother have different fathers. All, except Arya, know who their fathers are.

Arya: Sometimes it hurts. It's just like I'm special in this case. I don't really think about it anymore, because if my mom doesn't know him, it's obvious he doesn't know I'm here. Like, he doesn't know. He doesn't know that he has a daughter.

Arya is particularly close with her siblings. At some point during her childhood, after her mother lost custody and before she moved in with her second mom, she and her siblings moved around to at least two foster homes before the permanency of current home, where she and all of her siblings were able to stay together. Prior to this, Arya and
her siblings lived with other relatives, which unfortunately were marked by abuse and mistreatment.

Arya: The person we lived with was our own family, our blood family. My brother was mistreated. He wasn’t fed. He would complain about being hungry when he went to school. [The abusive relative] used to make him eat big bowls of beans, which he didn't like to eat. In the next home, I don't know how my sister was mistreated. She doesn't talk about it. I mean she's not ashamed, she just doesn't say anything about it.

While her own story of abuse is particularly horrifying, Arya recounted the details in a calm and even tone.

Arya: I was three or four. In [the foster home] lived a lady, but she had a mom. The grandmother used to keep me up at night. If I would fall asleep, she would pour water on me, cold water. She would pour water on me and make me stay up. There was another [foster child] there. They would make her beat me up. And I don’t know what happened to my sister. It's weird. Like, how can people do that to other people? Now, it's just like I have to go through all of that to get to where I'm at. Life, it's not fair. I mean it's, it's life. But, it's just all this stuff that I've been through. It got me to like a good place now. It’s weird. Like, how can people do that to other people? Now, it’s just like I have to go through all that to get to where I’m at. Life, it’s not fair. I mean it’s life. It’s life. But it’s just all this stuff that I’ve been through. It got me to a good place now.
Interviewer: So, you feel like you're in a good place now. How would you describe being happy?

Arya: To be able to have a roof over my head, and food, and stuff that I didn't have before. Clothes that are mine and shoes that are mine. And I can have an opinion on what I want. I don't have to get what they want me to get.

Arya enjoys spending time with her family and says that they do things together like travel for family reunions. She also sees her sister regularly when she goes to her house or when she drops her niece off at her house for her mom to take care of. She sees her grandmother when she is at her sister’s home.

**Behavior: Familial and personal reflections.** Arya is particularly concerned about the behavior of her younger brother, (YB), and how it is impacting his grades. She spent quite a bit of time during her interview talking about him. Arya believes that moving from home to home and the uncertainty of their lives, produced detrimental and negative factors deeply impacting her older siblings’ behavior at school and at home. He has a low tolerance for the teasing and jabs of other students. He fights in school when they make fun of him. She feels it is her responsibility to watch him regularly because he exhibits behaviors that are dangerous and concern her, including setting fires and sticking bobby pins into electrical sockets. She has no idea about the root cause of this kind of behavior and is certain that he has not seen it in their home because no one plays with fire. Moreover, since the home that they are living in is a rental property, it falls on the cousin to repair the damage caused by the brother.
Arya: He's twelve. He gets into everything. He goes in the kitchen and sneaks food. My mom asks him, ‘Why do you sneak food when it's already yours?’ Like, it's your food! He damages the house, makes holes in the wall. He does weird stuff. It's just so weird. It's not normal. His room is next to the bathroom. His room is right there. You can walk out and use the bathroom. He pees out the window. Like, ‘How old are you?’ You can just knock on the door and say I have to use the restroom.

Interviewer: So are you worried about him a lot?

Arya: Yes! He plays with fire! It’s like his third time playing with fire that my mom caught him. One time he found a match outside and was trying to light it up. We smelled it downstairs. I don't know how he did it, but it caught fire. One time he had a bobby pin and he was sticking it in the socket. He got shocked. On his skin was the shape of the bobby pin. He don’t get enough of anything. If my mom tells him something is going to happen, he has to see it or it has to be done to him, for him to stop. But he hasn't stopped. He has been messing up the house for a long time.

Interviewer: And what does your mom do about it?

Arya: She has to repair everything! It's not our house; we're like renting it. So, it’s not yours. You're messing up the landlord's house! He tore the screen out of the window. So the screen is damaged. And it cost a lot. [Those] screens cost a lot. My mom had to change the lock on his door. He will come out of his room and do stuff.
Interviewer: So did she lock him in?

Arya: Yeah, like when we go to sleep. Because one day he was [sneaking] playing with fire. My mom opened the door and told him to come. He just sat there. Like just done. Like just sat there. Like he just got done playing with the fire. My mom was like, ‘Come on! What are you doing?’ He’s just sitting there. Then my mom walked in there and smelled the fire.

**Personal behavior.** When asked about her own behavior, Arya stated that she had only been suspended once, during her freshman year at Northwestern Tech High School, because of an incident on Facebook in which another Black female student became enraged and threatened her because of a boy. Apparently the two were ‘cyber’ fighting, but the other girl escalated the dispute when she threatened to kill Arya. This was the only time that she had been suspended before arriving at the school.

Arya: It was this girl. She was mad because it was over a boy. Like it was a boy. He wasn't even all that. Like it's not my fault he liked me. It was over Facebook. And then my mom had to come in directly to the school because she threatened me. She said she was going to kill me. She said she was going to bring her gun to school. Yeah, and then we got suspended for like five days because I interacted with her. Like I was still talking to her. I said some stuff too, but I never threatened her.

Arya had a second incident with the same girl that resulted in an additional three-day suspension. She says that this suspension was overturned because the school looked at the tapes again and determined that she was not the one who started the confrontation.
The pair fought on the last day of school of ninth grade. The girl followed her home and instigated the fight. Interestingly, enough, afterwards both girls admitted that this was foolish, and according to Arya, “We just got cool again.”

**Academics**

Arya says that she has a 3.6 grade point average and her favorite subject is science. She is enrolled in: Chemistry, Common Core Math 3, Globalization, American Literature and Composition and Mixed Ensemble. She also serves as an office assistant each day. When observed in her American Literature and Composition class, Arya was focused on the task at hand. Her teacher informed the researcher, “There wouldn’t be much to see because they were just reading.” On this particular day, the class was reading *Kindred* by Octavia Butler. The classroom had tables arranged in a large rectangle that filled the room. Arya spent the period focused and engaged sitting at a table with two other girls at the table closest to the board at the front of the room. At the beginning of the class, she and her classmate were speaking quietly with one another. Once the teacher gave the task, Arya was completely focused, well aware that she was being observed. While she responded to her classmate when spoken to, she was completely quiet and reading for the duration of the period.

Arya knows that she wants to attend college, has been on numerous college tours and has already selected the schools that she wants to apply to. In regards to the first college tour, Arya says that their focus on science drew her interest.

Arya: My favorite subject is science. I like their science and the way they talk.

We had to go in there and they taught us about all the work they do. We
went on a college tour and we learned about all their...what they call it?

The majors? We learned about science and everything.

The second college interested her because of their track program and extracurricular activities. Arya has been involved in several activities. She says that while in middle school and high school, she has been a member of the Book Club and Impact Team, where she volunteers. She also used to run indoor track. Arya also participates in programs that help prepare her for college and join the workforce. She sings in the school’s chorus.
Brittany Owens

Brittany Owens is a seventeen-year-old senior at Northwestern Tech High School. She was interviewed individually with two interviews, forty-five minutes and one hour long respectively. She also participated in one group interview with Ayra Thompson. Additional data was collected from one classroom observation during her Advanced Placement United States Government and Politics Class.

Background and Family Life

Brittany lives with her mother, father and younger brother. In describing her family, she emphasized that her family is an intact unit, that is to say her mother and father are married and living in the same household. When she is at home, she spends most of her time with her mother and her younger brother because her father is busy working. Her mother is a hairdresser and spends twelve to thirteen hours a day on her feet. Brittany likes spending time with her family. She especially enjoys spending time with her mother, who she says acts more like her friend than her mother. They shop together at places like Charlotte Russe, Nordstrom Rack, Saks Off Fifth, etc. They used to shop more but have cut back once they began saving for college. She did not discuss her father’s profession but says that he works further away than her mother so it is more difficult for him to help out. Brittany therefore helps out at home to assist her parents when they are working. Helping out has made her more responsible and she is happy to do it since family is so important to her. When she takes on some adult responsibilities, she feels it is a privilege to help, especially taking care of her brother.
Brittany: I have a little brother. When I get out of work [or] from practice and everything, I’ll go get him from my grandma’s house because she picks him up from school. If I’m at practice, I’ll pick him up from my grandma’s house. Take him home. Help him take his little bath. Heat dinner up if it’s not already made. Sometimes I’ll stop at my mother’s job, get some money, and go out to eat somewhere. I help him with his homework while I do mine. We do everything pretty much together. He’s old enough to take his own bath. I just make sure he’s on task. My dad, he’s always at work. Some days my dad is home, like on Mondays. [Those days] he does my mom’s jobs, I guess. Normally, my mom would be the one to put my brother in the bath, make us dinner, do all that type of stuff. My dad is not very helpful, I guess. He’s just like a kid. I think pretty much if he knew my mom wouldn’t get mad at him for making us do certain stuff, he just wouldn’t tell us to do certain stuff. My mom has to tell him to do the stuff that she wants us to do.

Identity

Brittany identifies herself as African American. She describes herself as ambitious and a go-getter who is generous, helpful, nice, sweet, and honest.

Brittany: I’m honest, and I’m real because I don’t really sugar coat stuff to people.

If I feel a certain way or somebody asked me my opinion, I’m going to tell them the real deal. I’m not going to lie to them to make them feel good if they ask me. What else did I say? Giving? Yeah, I think I’m giving. I
like to help people out a lot. Giving and helpful ties in. I like to give things to people [who] deserve it or that need it. Not so much [to] people that already have stuff. I’m that type of person. I like to give to the homeless and help people out. I’m nice and sweet. I mean the nice and sweet, it ties into the being honest and real part because sometimes people think if you’re being real with them, they might take offense, because you’re giving them an honest point of view of your perspective. Nice, I can do it nicely. If somebody’s hair looks a mess, instead of being like, your hair looks a mess, I could be like, oh, you want me to help you flatiron your edges? Do it in a nicer way.

From her discussion, Brittany realizes that she has familial advantages that other students may not have. She believes that family and education are very important, as well as giving back to the community. She goes on to state the top three things that are important to her in life.

Brittany: Giving back, maybe. I feel like I live a very well life. I get to do a lot of things that a lot of people don’t get to do. Like going shopping with my mom or something. A lot of people don’t have parents or might not have money to do that. I’m very blessed. I guess that’s what I can say. I like to help the people that aren’t as fortunate as me. Education is very important. It could take you very far. If you don’t have the education, like I wanted to get a good job somewhere, I have to have a certain level of education just to do that.
Brittany is very much into fashion and keeping herself up. She likes to try to make her uniform more fashionable everyday. She takes pride in herself and her appearance because she feels as though she is doing what God has planned for her.

Brittany: I feel like I do most things right. I went in the direction that God wanted me to. I feel like I got most things right. If my parents were to describe me, they wouldn’t say that I’m a bad child, or I’m sneaky or anything. I follow the rules.

**Academics**

**Elementary school and middle school.** Brittany attended an elementary and middle school feeder school for Northwestern Tech. The school serves students in kindergarten through eighth grade. She says that she loved it because it was a science school, and recalls liking her teachers very much. She indicated that the faculty, like a big family consisted of predominately White females with a few White males, and that the school student population was predominantly African American where she felt very comfortable.

Brittany: [My classmates were] Black. There would always be one White kid in the class, or in our whole grade. We could be able to count all the White people on one hand. [As for science] our field trips were all science trips where you’re learning about animals, body parts, and just that cool stuff that some people find gross.
**High school.** As her middle school was a feeder school for Northwestern Tech, Brittany did not have to enter a lottery to attend. She likes the fact that it is a challenging school.

Brittany describes herself as a good student who is also ambitious. Despite having a busy year with multiple obligations such as completing college and scholarship applications, a job and extracurricular activities, Brittany has maintained a 3.5 grade point average and is on the honor roll. Brittany is enrolled in six classes: Vocational, Anatomy - Physiology, Creative Writing, AP United States Government, Orchestra, and Issues in World Literature. Her favorite subjects are any of her science classes. From her discussion, she really likes her school and the teachers, with the exception of a few teachers, who in her words, don’t really teach. They could care less if you learn about something or not. They just put the notes up on the board; don’t really teach.

Brittany: I like the fact that it’s a challenging school. It has a good name. We’re known for being good at our sports and our grades. I like the teachers here, too. Well, the whole time the class is going on, they might not be standing up teaching the whole time, or telling people to be quiet, or sit down in your seat. They’ll allow you to feel more like learning. The school is your home. I’m trying to think of a story I could tell you because it’s hard to explain. One day we were in [one teacher’s] class. He’s just a fun, cool, guy. [The teachers] act like themselves. They don’t act like oh, I’m the teacher!
**A typical day.** A typical day for Brittany begins at 7am when she wakes up. Her school day begins with second period, when she has Anatomy. After that class she has ‘teacher helper’, lunch, AP Government, and another free period. In orchestra, she plays the cello. Her final period is English 12. After school she may go to a local fast food place before cheerleading practice or a game ending around 5:30pm. Brittany has an after school job and works everyday except for Saturday, normally working until 8:30pm. Upon arriving home, she will do homework, rest, pack a lunch for the next day and then go to sleep. Her goal was to maintain a 3.5 this year and she is proud of herself for having accomplished this.

**Extracurricular activities.** Brittany is involved in a number of extracurricular activities that includes clubs, sports and cheerleading. Currently, Brittany runs track and is a cheerleader. She runs the 4x4, 4x8, shuttle hurdles and the high jump. With football season and now basketball season ending, so will her cheerleading. Throughout the course of the school year, beyond cheerleading, Brittany participated in cross-country and gymnastics. Brittany was on a gymnastics team for fifteen years. She was forced to quit when she tore her ACL while playing softball. She says that when she tried to return to gymnastics, it was difficult for her. Additionally, Brittany was on Homecoming Court and she is the president of an organization that, in her words, is an organization of scholarly young ladies who do community service around the state. She has been a member of this organization since sophomore year. One project her group works on is raising money for breast cancer research. She has been a member of a community
service organization since freshman year as well as the National Honor Society since junior year.

Brittany: We go to [a homeless mission] sometimes. The [community service organization] does that, too. That’s just something we share. We host a Valentine’s Day dance for the special education department. We feel like special-ed kids shouldn’t feel different or less than a regular child. We go there. We dance with them, eat with them, and have a good time. We host something called Pink Friday. That’s during October breast cancer month. We raise a little more than $1,000.00 every year to donate towards breast cancer research. We wear uniforms and sell wristbands, socks, headbands and pink items. At the football games on Fridays, we go there and we collect money.

*Classroom observation.* Brittany was observed during her advanced placement US Government class. During that period, the class was watching an alternative perspective film on September 11th and the events that occurred afterward. The task while watching the movie was to take notes for a discussion. Brittany sat next to her friend, Taylor Barnes in the rear center of the classroom. During one of her interviews, Brittany referred to Taylor as her very best friend. Their seats were directly in front of the teacher’s podium. Throughout the film, Brittany was engaged and asked questions. Her teacher asked her to make connections throughout the film. Her observation reveals Brittany’s scholarly nature and is in line with how she described herself as a student.
**Expectations, perceptions, and the future.** Brittany says that if her teachers or administrators could describe her, they would say that she was busy and a good leader. She has strong opinions on presenting herself in a respectable way, and being real.

Interviewer: Why do you think they perceive you as a good leader?

Brittany: Because I’m very involved. You have to carry yourself a certain way throughout high school. That’s how people remember you. That’s going to be your last time seeing a lot of people. They’re going to remember you, how you act. You want to keep yourself up in a good way. In school, we wear uniforms. You can tell if somebody carries themselves, well by—even if you just have to smell nice. Looking nice, you don’t always want to look raggedy, look like you just woke up, and you’re just here to be here. It’s just the little things you do. Your hair, the shoes, the clothes you wear. Is your shirt wrinkled or ironed? Look like you care.

Interviewer: What about acting?

Brittany: You want to be real with everybody. You don’t want to be known as a liar or a person that’s always in somebody’s business. Or tells people’s business, a big mouth. You also don’t want to be too quiet. You want to get to know people and make friends.

Interviewer: What about what you do?

Brittany: What you do, okay, so have you heard of ‘a thot’?

As Brittany explains a ‘thot’ is someone who is careless, promiscuous, acts inappropriately and plays around with many different partners. It stands for “that ho over
For Brittany, both males and females can be a thot. There are more perils and danger for girls to be labeled as a ‘thot.’ And as she warns, “You’d have to watch what you do.” Girls risk the label if they date several boys who are friends, and or go to the same schools. But males are still, even for Brittany, a bit different. From her perspective, it is quasi-acceptable or anticipated that males can act in these inappropriate ways.

Brittany: Yeah, a guy can be a thot. You don’t want to. Guys are going to be guys. Boys, they talk. They talk more than girls to me. I feel like every boy knows what every girl here has done. My guy friends tell me more about the girls at our schools than my girlfriends do.

Brittany says that she is encouraged to succeed by her friends and family.

Brittany: Most of my friends are very similar to me. We succeed together. My family encourages me a lot because they haven’t done as well as I have done. It’s like they know how it is, and how it feels not to do well. They encourage me to do things better than they did so I won’t end up like them. My mom, for example, she didn’t go to college. She works long nights. She works about twelve to thirteen hours every day. She always tells me, ‘Brittany go to college.’

Brittany is expected to do well in school and is not rewarded anymore for good grades because her parents bought her a car. Brittany has been accepted to her first choice for college, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), and has been offered quite a bit of financial aid. During the interviews, Brittany said that she would
love to go, but her mother did not want her to be that far away from home. While she hasn’t seen the campus, she likes the idea of the HBCU for a number of reasons.

Brittany: I’ve heard good things about it, so I think that’s where I want to go. I just want to get far away. I just want to go anywhere outside of [this state].

Really. I just keep hearing that’s a good school. I have to go in the college store there. I know a couple of people that go there. My cheerleading team, the captain that was here when I was a sophomore, I think she goes there now. There are a couple of girls that did cheerleading that go there now.

Interviewer: Do you like the fact that it’s an HBCU?

Brittany: Yes. Well, I don’t actually. It’s not a Black world. I feel going to college with Black people isn’t going to make a difference. When you get in the real world, it’s going to be Black and Whites. I feel more comfortable around Black people because a lot of the Whites are prejudiced. I don’t mind being the minority at a school. I’m more comfortable around Black people because they’re my kind. I think we should stick together.

When we followed up briefly two months after the interviews, Brittany stated again that her mother did not want her to be so far away from home. As such, she decided to attend a university in the state. She did not sound happy about the decision but she accepted it. Brittany plans to major in biology in college. Once she finishes college, she would consider herself to be successful if she could impact someone else’s
life. She also wants to make a good name for African American women. She ultimately wants to be a plastic surgeon.

Interviewer: Once you finish, once you have graduated from college, and you have the type of job that you want, how would you know that you were successful?

Brittany: Maybe once [when] I’ve made a change in someone else’s life, or just by helping something on the earth, or something. I feel like [my job] has to make an impact me. If I don’t like what I’m doing, I’m not successful. My point in going for something is to get a good outcome out from it. I feel like I’m on the right track. I do want to help make a good name for my nationality. That does push me to go further because I am more than just a Black girl as people can see on the outside. I just want to make a change in the world one day. I feel like that I could help.

Peer Relationships: “Riff” Sessions and Other Ways of Playing the Dozens

Elementary and middle school. Brittany has a group of friends that she’s been close to since kindergarten, remembering celebrating birthdays with slumber parties, and having fun at recess. This is attributed to the fact they were together from kindergarten through eighth grade. However, in middle school Brittany began to notice changing dynamics in these friendships. From her perspective the girls became meaner to each other.

Brittany: You start to notice more when you get older. You might lose friends because you realize why was I your friend in the first place? Now I can. You get to know people a little bit better and see how they transform.
Although they were all friends, the girls in particular would tease one another through riff sessions, which were verbal combat confrontations. Yet, even with the ‘riff’ sessions, the girls remained friends. Although she never did, she recalls knowing students who did get into physical confrontations as a result of these riffs.

Brittany: It’s [a riff session] when you just get in a circle. You don’t even have to be in a circle. You look at somebody and go back and forth battling being mean to each other. Our girls, well, we were mean to each other, but we were still all sisters. We were all close, still. I never got into a fight, but a lot of the girls there may have gotten in a fight. It was always the same girls getting in the fight. Maybe it was because of jealousy, or they just realized they weren’t meant to be friends. I don't know. They fought over dumb things. One time this girl fought because a girl called her a H word, a hoe. I’m like you can’t really care what people think about you. There’s no reason to fight because people called you that.

Interviewer: Do you think that you were mean to people?

Brittany: No, when we riffed each other, it wasn’t like take it to heart. It was just something that we did, I guess. I was pretty much a people’s person. I was just fun to be around. I didn’t have a lot of drama or a lot to say about people.

High school. Brittany describes herself as popular and well known and says that people at Northwestern Tech are nicer to her than ever. She feels that she is popular, so
much so that other students speak to her and she wonders how they know her name. She says that her friends would describe her as a nice, funny, person.

Brittany: Funny because I’m a goofy person once you get to know me, I think. I don’t do it on purpose or anything. It’s just sometimes after I think about what I say, it’s like, wow, that sounds ridiculous. You are a funny person.

**Dating**

Brittany does not date. She says that she used to have a boyfriend in her junior year at Northwestern Tech but they broke up shortly after they began dating. She does not like to be tied down or controlled.

Brittany: I’ve talked to guys that go to other schools. I don’t really date anyone, like make it official or serious. I just feel like if you’re young, you should live. You don’t need, well it’s not that you don’t need to, I’m just the type of person that I’d rather be free and not have a boyfriend. I won’t have a guy getting mad at me about little things. One of my boyfriends, when was that, last year? Yeah, the same boyfriend last year, I remember one of my friends came up to give me a hug. He wasn’t my boyfriend or nothing. He was a guy that I had liked. He was actually a friend. He was like a brother to me. He went to [middle school] with me for a long time. It was my birthday. The boy that I was dating got mad that that guy came and gave me a hug. I’m like, that’s my friend. That’s like my brother. You have to calm down. I just don’t feel relationships. I don’t think I like them until I’m ready to get serious or something.
Interviewer: You think you’ll date in college?

Brittany: No. When I go to college, I feel like it’s just going to be a big world. It’s going to be so many nice guys, and I just don’t want to have one guy. I feel like I don’t need a boyfriend when I need to focus on school. That’s my point in going to college.

Media and Representation

Television. Brittany watches television shows like *The Carrie Diaries, Empire, Orange is the New Black and Love and Hip Hop*. She describes such shows as ‘crazy’ and believes that while many young people are watching such shows, most of the actions and arguments are being done for the shows themselves, and that the behaviors of those on the reality shows are not ‘okay’.

Brittany: It’s not. The stuff that you catch them doing, you wouldn’t really catch happening in real life with some grown people, like my mom. You wouldn’t catch my mom doing that or her friends. There are some people that are like that. I don’t think they think it’s okay. Because as you watch it, you get to see, oh, that looks stupid. I’m quite sure when they go back and look at themselves, they’re like why did I do that?

Magazines. Brittany does not read regularly outside of class but she does look at magazines from time to time. Other than Vogue, she reads magazines that are catered to African Americans, such as Ebony and Essence, so she says that she sees African American girls represented.
**Social media.** Brittany only has an Instagram account and does not post often. She does, however, regularly look at what others have posted, to get ideas, especially since her prom is approaching, and then comments on her feelings about the images of Black females that are presented in social media. On Instagram, for example, Brittany comments that many of the girls taking photographs of themselves, have similar body shapes, tattoos, etc. While she herself doesn’t post, she feels that, ‘That’s their life, if that’s what they want to do.’

Interviewer: Do you think that’s representative of Black women as a whole?

Brittany: Not as a whole, because not all Black women are doing it. It does say something about some Black women. If you’re that size maybe you’ll say something about that size. I feel if they work out to get their body to look like, it’s really, I wish I had a picture. It’s like everybody’s body looks the same and takes the same picture. Have the same tattoos. They work out a lot to stay in shape. I don’t know why they show so much body. I wish I had an example.

**On Being an African American Girl**

Brittany wrestles with the notion of what it means to be both African American and female. She discusses the historical and contemporary treatment of African American women and recounts her own personal incident of experiencing racism. The conversation also explores the idea of whether or not there has been societal change in the advent of the first African American president.
Interviewer: Do you think you’re an African American or a female first? I know we started to talk about it, but I wanted to get more of your voice into it.

Brittany: I think it’s more important to be maybe a female. No, [I can’t choose one or the other] because I’m both so well. If I weren’t Black I would still be a female. If I weren’t a female, I would still be Black. We have to work harder than probably anyone else in the world because we’re female and the fact that we’re Black. It’s already harder for women because, back then, women were portrayed as housewives, not as strong as men, not as capable [of doing] things. It was like being African American and being female, we started off not [being] treated equally. It makes it even harder.

Interviewer: Well, interestingly, a lot of times when you hear people wanting to go back to the ideal family, they’ll reference going back to the 1950s. That’s when something, and before that, so the early 1900s, going forward, there was something called the cult of true womanhood that men basically helped to create that talked about what an ideal woman should be like.

Brittany: She should be feminine. She should be quiet. She should be pure. She should be helpful and know the kinds of ideals that stayed. Even in the 1950s when you have this idea that women should be subservient and take care of the home, not all women were doing that. If you look at commercials, it’s the 1950s, too, so everything’s very segregated. If you look at commercials, if you look at magazine ads, a lot of those are White women because Black women, for the most part, were still out working
because we had to. The idea of the fragile woman really never applied to
Black women. It’s like we were never seen as weaker. We were never
seen as frail. We were always seen as the ones who had to work hard,
especially dating from slavery.

Interviewer: Anything else that you think Black women are doing positively?

Brittany: Yeah, we’re doing everything that even White men, Black men, White
women are doing. I’m not sure how it is in the government, but I know
that we’ve had how many presidents have we had? Fifty? We’ve had
more White presidents. We’ve only had one Black one. [In] the Senate
and House of Representatives, I know there has to be a couple of women.
Maybe there will be a Black woman in it. Maybe there is already. I know
that there’s a Black woman in government. I know a couple of Black
judges that are federal. Just stuff like that.

Interviewer: Do you think that we’d ever have a Black female president?

Brittany: No time while I’m alive. I don’t think so. It’s very possible because I
didn’t think we would have a Black president while I was alive, and we
did. To have a Black woman president is a big—it’s actually not. It’s big
to the world. To me, I don’t think it’s that big. I think it’s very possible
actually.

Interviewer: Do you think things have changed much now that we have a Black
president?
Brittany: No. I feel like Black people are still treated the same. If anything, I’m not sure if I just noticed it, but I feel like a lot of Black people have been dying lately. I feel like if it was a White person, for example, if Trayvon Martin was White, the Zimmerman guy would’ve immediately [been] sentenced. They waited a long time before they did anything to him. I do feel like we have proven something a little bit better. We have something to say for ourselves.

Interviewer: Like what?

Brittany: In that little FaceTime thing I was telling you about. When I answered someone [responded], ‘Oh, it’s another [n-word]. I was like who’s the president? He’ Black. I’m Black. We have something to say for ourselves now.

Interviewer: Flinch? [an online game]

Brittany: It’s when [Flinch] calls random people, and the point of the game is to make them laugh and they get out. It gives you random people from all over the United States. Have you played that before? Most of the people are White. As soon as they answer, they think it’s funny, and they’ll look in the camera and say, oh, it’s a [n-word] again. Wow. I am a human being.

Interviewer: Do you think there’s pressure on Black people to do well or achieve higher than Whites?
Brittany: Yes, because most of the time, as I’ve been applying to colleges, there has been way more White people. I’m considered a minority. I think that’s what it’s called at most colleges. Maybe that’s why we feel like we need to. It’s more pressure on us because we want to. It’s a good thing. You don’t want to represent your race in a bad way. You want to represent it in a positive way, our nationality.

Brittany continues with her thoughts about the stereotypes that are associated with being an African American girl. If she was playing a game of Charades and had to act out being an African American girl, she would start by acting like someone who was strong. The thought of negative stereotypes is secondary and she mentions physical actions like eye and neck rolling, which signifies as being ‘feisty’ and the comparison of African American girls to White girls. Yet, from her perspective, it’s also a detriment when it comes to Black boys, because they see this behavior as negative as compared to White girls, who she believes live better and therefore have no reason to have an attitude.

Brittany recognizes that discrimination and racism exist but points out that not all White people are prejudiced. She reflects on her time in gymnastics where she was the only African American member of the team and says that she does not ever remember being personally discriminated toward. She does, however, remember feeling awkward because she was the only African American person on the team. This leads to a discussion on how comfortable Brittany is with her body.

Brittany: Well, not all White people are prejudiced. For fifteen years of my life I did gymnastics. I started when I was eleven months old. There were
mostly Whites. I was the only Black girl on the team for about half of the years I was there. I haven’t experienced a lot of racial conflicts, but going there made me realize sometimes I felt alone because I was the only Black person. It just felt weird. Because you poke out more to everybody. Everybody’s hair is all light, and you’re dark. You have this kind of hair and they have swinging ponytails. I have a poof ball, but they were never racist towards me.

Interviewer: Did anyone ever make comments about your hair? If so, how did that make you feel?

Brittany: Good. They love Black hair and they find it very fun to play in. Because I was the only Black person, I always felt like they had the good hair. You know, Black people, we have some thick hair. It’s not as smooth, and it doesn’t swing as much when you’re flipping around. I just felt like [White hair] was more attractive. Their hair is long and different colors. They liked my hair, and I’m like, I like your hair. When I did gymnastics, we all pretty much had the same kind of body and the same kind of shape. We ate the same foods, did the same workouts, [did] the same sports. We all looked similar except for our skin color and the texture of our hair.

Interviewer: Did you ever feel pressure to have your body look a certain way for gymnastics?

Brittany: No. I was always the skinniest one. I have a high metabolism. I think that’s what it’s called. I would eat a lot. I’ve always been pretty much in
shape, never had a weight problem or anything. A lot of gymnasts are really muscular. I was really muscular. I still kind of am. I have man muscles, but that’s how it makes you.

Brittany says that she was not self-conscious about her body around her White friends in gymnastics but began to be so when she entered high school, which has mostly African American students. While she is speaking, she notes that there have been moments where she feels uncomfortable about showing off her body and hated the attention from putting on a leotard in gymnastics.

Brittany: I just noticed that a lot of the girls here have woman bodies. They had hips. They had butts. They had boobs. I didn’t feel bad about myself because God obviously didn’t want me to be built that way. Sometimes, I just think I wonder if I’m ever going to look like a woman. My family that comes in town, they might not know my exact birthday or my exact age. A lot of them still think that I’m fifteen. I’m thinking I’m not sure if it’s my face that looks young or if it’s my body. I’m cool with how I am.

Interviewer: You said a lot of the girls have women’s bodies. That’s what you see on Instagram. Do you feel like that image is pushed on you as to say that’s what the ideal Black woman should look like?

Brittany: No, boys like it a lot. I don’t see the big thing with it. I don’t feel like all Black women look like that. That’s just more of what kind of a body to call it. I call it a women’s body. Maybe that’s not the right word to use because not all women are shaped like that. That’s just normally the body
that you transfer into as you get older. You start to grow hips and lady lumps. *[Laughter]*

Interviewer: Do you think that some girls try to get attention from boys because of their bodies?

Brittany: Yes. If they know that they have a big butt, or big hips, or big boobs. There’s certain stuff that you just can’t fit as well as you did when you were little and they’ll still force that, or try to show it off. Show a lot of it. I mean if you got it, flaunt it. I just wouldn’t do it wearing certain things. I couldn’t get on Instagram with a bikini knowing I have a big derriere, thong, showing my butt. I just would feel uncomfortable. I don’t like showing a lot of body. Even just putting a leotard on at gymnastics, I felt uncomfortable every day doing that. I just feel like it shows too much body. That’s what you have to wear when you do gymnastics. It just feels weird. I like to stay covered up. Even when I wear my little jackets like this, I zip them all the way to the top.

Interviewer: Was there ever a message you got when you were younger that you should stay covered up?

Brittany: No, not at all. I didn’t show anybody, so my mom never told me anything like that. She always said, ‘Brittany, why don’t you wear a V-neck?’ Even just to wear a little V-neck, I don’t like showing my chest. It just feels uncomfortable to me. I dress really weird so I don’t draw a lot of attention.
Interviewer: How would you say a classy woman would dress?

Brittany: Oh, if you’re going to school, I don't know. Just throw on a little button up, maybe some dressy pants, some casual blazers, button ups, T-shirts. Whatever is comfortable to them that will not show a whole lot of body. It’s just—I don't know, maybe a stereotype that when you show more body, it looks trashy. When I look at it, it just looks trashy to me. I don’t like when people show too much body. It’s okay to show a little bit.

By saying that she dresses weird Brittany is referring to her unique sense of style. Brittany says that she is beautiful. She does not wear makeup, but does not necessarily take issue with girls who do.

Brittany: I don’t have a problem with makeup. I like it. I do wear it, not everyday though. I just don’t like when girls wear too much of it. Their face would look really shiny. You would be able to see the powder, the colors, caked on. You just would be able to tell, hmm, you don’t always look like that. Maybe they’re trying to hide a pimple or maybe they have something wrong with their skin. Some girls are really pretty under their makeup and they just like it. Some girls just like playing in it.

**Conversations with Arya and Brittany**

Arya and Brittany participated in a group interview together. Their schedules were closely aligned and were able to participate together on the same day. During this interview, Brittany and Arya presented several insights on their feelings about being an
African American girl and the treatment of African American women and people as a whole.

**On being an african american girl.** Both participants grappled with questions of their identity as it pertains to being both African American and female. With prompting, Arya expressed her opinion on several topics such as the needs of African American girls in education and representation of African American women in popular culture. When asked if she identifies as African American or female first, Arya says female.

Interviewer: We started to talk a little bit about being Black and being a woman. Do you see yourself as being Black first or a woman first?

Arya: A woman. It shouldn’t matter what color you are. We’re all people and human, but the difference between a White and a Black person—we’re still women. A girl or a lady.

Interviewer: Okay, so—but what if it does? If you’re walking down the street, the first thing people see when they look at you. Do you think they see that you’re Black, or do you think they see you’re a woman? Or see both at the same time?

Arya: They see both.

Interviewer: How do you see yourself?

Arya: I don’t want to change.

Interviewer: Okay. We started to talk a little bit about how Black women are strong and Black women are independent. How else would you describe Black women?
Arya: Smart. I think a lot are open-minded.

Interviewer: What might a negative person say?

Arya: They’re loud.

**Media and Representation**

Arya and Brittany were quite vocal about the representation of African American women in the media. When asked about their feelings towards how Black women are represented in songs, music videos and television, Brittany’s overall view was that presentation was ‘normally not something very good. Sometimes it is though.’

Arya notes the many words that women are called in the media, such as ‘thot’ which stands for that ‘ho’ over there.’ Brittany uses hip-hop artist Lil Wayne as an example of the language that is used in media, particularly music.

Brittany: They say the H word and the B word a lot. That’s disrespectful, but we never know if that’s directed towards Black women. It’s just directed towards women period. They [are] using some weird words now, red bone, yellow bone. I’m trying to think of some. Like Lil Wayne, he’s a weird rapper. He [uses] some weird words I never heard. He [makes] stuff up. I don’t really take it to heart or anything, because I know that might not be how he really acts. He might just be doing that for the media. Maybe it rhymes with something he wanted to put in his song. But to me it seems he has a daughter, so I’m quite sure he probably wouldn’t.
Arya: I feel as though he’s only saying those words is because of every other
artist in the music industry. He’s just doing a stereotypical thing. I’m not
trying to put girls in the bad places, but they do it to get attention, and it’s
popular now because every girl is trying to be someone’s ‘thot’ or
something. I don’t really know the definition [of thot] but someone
who’s—a girl who’s messin’ around with a lot of boys.

Brittany: Mm-hmm. It means ‘That ho over there.’

This leads into a discussion about gender stereotypes.

Interviewer: Do you think boys can be ‘thots’?

A / B: Mm-hmm. [Laughter]

Arya: Yeah.

Brittany: No, they’re labeled as a ‘player.’ Most boys. We get the names, and they
just get called players. But, I call boys ‘thots’ faithfully.

Arya: Yeah, me too. [Chuckles]

Brittany: Men are like—that’s what they’re known for. Like that's something that
they do.

Arya: It’s all weird like—

Brittany: It’s normal for them.

Arya: If a girl goes around and sleeps with a whole bunch of guys, they’re a ‘ho’
or something like. But if a boy does it, it’s normal for them to do it.

Interviewer: Why do you think it’s normal?

Brittany: Because they’re boys.
Arya: I don't know, like because girls can get pregnant. Girls can get pregnant, and boys don’t have to be tied down. They can just—they think they can just leave.

Brittany and Arya were then asked about the double standard when female artists talk about sex and their bodies.

Interviewer: Okay, let's use Nicki Minaj for an example. She talks very freely about her body. How do you feel when you listen to her?

Arya: People think of her as a role model. The things you’re saying, and the things that you’re doing is going to result in what they do.

Interviewer: Do you have friends who look at her as a role model and want to dress like her as well?

Arya: Mm-hmm. Yup. Her clothing line is nice. It’s not like trashy or anything for like young kids. They sell it at K-Mart.

When asked what would they consider ‘trashy’ clothing, the girls described clothing that exposed ‘too much’ body, cleavage, clothes that were so short that underwear was exposed, and clothing that was ‘really too tight.’ With regard to another female artist,

Arya and Brittany indicated that Beyoncé is beautiful and their favorite artist. Arya loves her confidence, and her music. She perceives Beyoncé as an ‘original’.

Arya: She’s so confident when she’s on stage. I like her music. I mean, her old music—it said something about her. Like her songs, Listen and Resentment. It’s giving a positive vibe of her story. She does have a good
Brittany considers Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj to be her favorite musical artists. She says that Beyoncé is beautiful physically and because of her ‘heart.’ She admires Beyoncé because she sees her as a trendsetter. On the other hand, she doesn’t feel it is the job of Black female artists to be mentors.

In addition to Beyoncé, Arya says that actress Zendaya is beautiful. She names Oprah Winfrey and First Lady Michelle Obama as good role models. Arya mentioned Oprah Winfrey because she believed that Oprah was ‘really caring’ and grateful for her accomplishments since she came from such humble beginnings. Moreover, now that she has achieved, fame and fortune, according to Arya, Winfrey shares it with other people. Arya also mentioned First Lady Michelle Obama. Arya knows that she advocated for ‘kids to get outside and play’ instead of spending their time on cell phones and computers. The interviewer then asked about a racially charged incident involving the First Lady. Arya offers her thoughts on the recent news story where Michelle Obama has been called an ape, which reflects her thoughts on racism.

Arya: Oh, I heard that. I didn’t see it, but I heard it on the radio. It said something about her looking like that.

Brittany: She doesn’t look like an ape. Somebody’s mad.

Arya: Yeah, mad.

Interviewer: Do you think that a White person would ever be called an ape?
Brittany: No. Because they were not Black or dark like an ape. They weren’t treated badly at some point. They’ve always had an advantage in society.

Arya: No. It’s like they’re always on top. They were always first, and they were always portrayed as the good people.

Interviewer: So why do you think someone’s mad enough to say that Michelle Obama looks like an ape?

Arya: Because she’s doing something good in the society. Like she’s getting up there and they don’t like that obviously. She's showing [there’s] a difference than what we were called back then. She’s doing something better than what we’re portrayed as.

Brittany: Yeah, because a Black person is doing good.

**Needs in School**

Arya and Brittany were asked to reflect on the needs of African American girls in schools. Believing that Northwestern Tech High School is a competitive environment, Arya stated that one need of African American girls is ‘equality’.

Arya: Equality. To be equal. To be a part of the school. Where it’s not like a competition between everybody.

Interviewer: What would equality look like to you?

Arya: I think every school should get a uniform because we’re the same. We’re wearing the same. You don’t have a reason to talk about someone’s clothes if they’re wearing the same thing.
When asked if she notices unequal treatment between boys and girls, Brittany says in society, yes, but not in school. Arya says that the students who misbehave get the most attention. The boys would be the ones most likely to misbehave.

Arya: It’s like the teacher might give someone else more attention because the other person is not trying to do what [he or she] is supposed to do. They’re not trying to learn. They’re playing.

Interviewer: Who would be the person most likely to be playing?

Arya: The boys. I mean, some girls talk a lot, but they don’t be disrespectful. There are some girls that are like that, but most often—it’s the boys.

Interviewer: Anything you would tell other African American girls?

Arya: To be their selves. Don’t let anyone change you. You don’t have to be like everyone else because of what they’re doing.

Brittany says that African American girls need motivation.

Brittany: Motivation. You never know what’s going on in some people’s lives. They might need somebody just to talk to—maybe somebody to help them out, whether it’s money-wise or spirit-wise. Make them feel like they’re somebody. Give them positive advice. Make sure they don’t give up on life. [Black girls] need somebody to keep pushing them.

Interviewer: If President Obama or Governor Kasich could bring in a speaker here to Northwestern Tech that would only talk to Black girls, what would you want that speaker to talk about?
Brittany: Just a little bit of inside scoop on the real world, because I think that students tend to focus so much on high school that they forget there’s a real world out there. There’s this one girl here. She’s very open and speaks her mind whether it’s rude or nice. In the real world you can’t do that because you’ll get slapped. If you say the wrong thing to the wrong person they will bop you in the face. Yeah, I understand we’re in high school and people know that you’re very open-minded. Not everybody outside of this school knows that you’re open-minded.
Courtney Miller

Courtney Miller is a sixteen-year-old junior at Northwestern Tech High School. She was interviewed individually with two hour-long interviews. Due to constraints with her school schedule, she was not able to participate in a group interview. For this reason, her interview was a bit more in-depth in an effort to cover the issues of representation and the needs of African American girls. Additional data was collected from one classroom observation during her Math class.

Background and Family Life

Courtney resides with her mother and stepfather full time. She frequently visits and stays with her birth father as required by her parents’ custody agreement. She has two older brothers who are twenty-three and nineteen. Both brothers have a different biological father. Due to their ages, they no longer live at home with her. She also has one younger sister turning one from her birth father. Courtney describes herself and her family as middle class. She bases this on the size of her home and the fact that she can get what she asks for because of her grades.

Her mother and birth father broke up when she was a baby. She recalls that there was abuse in their relationship that she remembers from a very early age. This memory came out when she was discussing her involvement in a girl’s program at school.

Courtney: The girl’s program [is a place] where we pretty much talk about everything that goes on in schools like how you can learn from other people's mistakes. We had a session where we had a with a bunch of teenage moms. We got to hear about their experiences of trying to get

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through school, and how they dealt with abuse and stuff like that. I'm one of the oldest girls and I go to help out mostly. There was a session where they were taking about abuse and [teenage pregnancy]. My mom was a teen mom. When she was single, I watched her struggle and go through stuff. That really hit home. Their stories were touching. When I was just two years old, I watched my dad hit my mom. It's like I had a flashback. I never really understood it until this session. I understood why my mom stayed a little bit and why she wasn't with my dad. I wanted my parents to be together when they split up. As I got older I understood why they weren't together anymore.

Courtney’s relationship with her father is a difficult one. The abuse that she witnessed with her mother developed with her when she was in the sixth grade. She describes the abuse as verbal and says that it made her very angry.

Courtney: Just the way his temper is, some of the things he can say can be abusive in a way. I got really angry. It started when I was in sixth grade. Ever since then it just limited my trust that I have for males. I've always heard people say, ‘I want my husband to be how my dad is.’ I don't want anybody like my dad. That's just a person that I would run from. He would say things like, ‘You can leave my house, and I would just stop caring about you. I would just pay child support.’ He would just bash my mom in front of me. He would just call her all sorts of names, talk about my grandma, and just say really hurtful things. He knows my mom is somebody that I'm really
close to. If anything happens to her, it would just—that's the only way somebody can hurt me, by saying things about her. He just threw a lot of blows. I just stopped talking to him. When he's at home, I try not to be home. If he is home during the week and I'm at home, I'm always in my room.

The verbal abuse continued until Courtney’s sophomore year in high school. Courtney clarified here that when she was younger, her parents’ custody agreement specified that she was to spend more time with her mother. When she turned twelve, the courts gave her the option to choose which parent would have primary custody. She chose to remain with her mother full-time because her mother ‘knew what she was going through with her father.’ She says that she went through counseling the summer of her freshman year, but that it did not really do much to help with interacting with her father. She chooses to cope by avoiding him as much as possible. Although she says she can talk to her mother about many things and says that they are very close, she describes her mother as strict and says that if she has a real problem, she will go to her brothers for help.

Courtney: My mom is really strict and overprotecting. She wants you to talk to her about things, but her approach isn't always the best. So I would talk to my brothers about it. She'll always throw her opinion in there, and the times where you would just need her to listen, rather than talk, she would just kind of downplay how you felt and want you to feel how she felt about the situation.
Courtney shared that her mother, stepfather, and brothers are all emotionally supportive. Courtney is very close to her siblings. In addition to them being emotionally supportive, she describes her brothers as protective. At some points, she speaks of her relationship with her siblings in terms of her relationship with her father.

Courtney: It's good. I can still talk to them about things, because I'll just—I just think it's normal for brothers to be overprotective. If I'm feeling something that I can't tell my mom, I'll tell them, because they understand how my mom can be. It's like when my father started showing his true colors, I got closer to my brothers. They didn’t really know that my dad was like that. When they finally found out they were teenagers, and I was in middle school.

Interviewer: Once it started, did they say anything to him?

Courtney: They wanted to, but my mom wouldn't let them. My brothers have tempers. My mom has three older brothers. When my uncles found out about it they were really upset. My uncles knew what my mom went through, and they didn't think that my father would turn some of that on me because he was upset with my mom. When I first found out about my baby sister it was crazy. I found out when she was three months old. It took my dad a while to tell me. At first I was taken back on it, because I've always been the only girl, and I didn't really know how to accept it. When I wanted a little sister, my mom didn't have a baby. She would always say, ‘Ask your dad,’ or he would say, ‘Ask your mom.’ It's like
I'm sixteen, and now you start over. It just—I don't know. It was a weird experience, but when I met her, it was just—I love her now. She’s helped me with dealing with stuff with my dad. There are things I've done with my dad that I don't want her to go through. I can deal with stuff that my dad has done to me in a better way, and I can prevent her from going through those things.

**Identity**

Courtney describes herself as a person who tells the truth. When she is in a light-hearted environment, she says that she is a happy person and that she cannot stop laughing. She also says that she is a jokester. Her family would describe her as outgoing and responsible. She enjoys hobbies such as working out to stay healthy. Family is very important to her because she can always depend on them. She bases her day and mood on if she and her family are doing well. She believes that education and that knowledge is key. She is proud of herself and is most proud of her grades. She says that she does not consider herself to be popular but that people look up to her. She has a unique sense of style and says that her classmates often ask her where she purchases her clothing. She describes herself as girly but likes to wear tennis shoes, flat shoes and boots.

Courtney self-identified as African American on her screening questionnaire. When asked if she sees herself as African American or female first, she says that she identifies as female first because people question whether or not she is fully African American. They assume that her mother is White or that she is of another race. She
believes that there is something unique about being an African American girl. She specifically names hair and bodies as being unique and coveted by other races.

**Academics**

Courtney has described her elementary, middle and high school years with particular clarity. She recalls her elementary school experience with a focus on emotional issues. Middle school and high school are described more in terms of academics with social issues interspersed throughout her commentary.

**Elementary and middle school.** Courtney attended one school in Northwestern City from grades K-8. When reflecting on her elementary school experiences, Courtney says that elementary school was easy for her. Although the work was easy for her, she recalls that she was very angry as a child and it impacted her behavior in school. When she became angry, Courtney recalls hitting things and other students. Her teachers knew her because her older brothers had attended the school earlier. This relationship was to Courtney’s advantage because the teachers were understanding and supportive and tried to find ways to help her cope. In view of the behavioral difficulties Courtney was experiencing at the lower grade levels, she shares that she was suspended only once in all of her years of schooling. The incident occurred in third grade and was perceived that she and a friend were bullying another student.

Courtney: In kindergarten I was supposed to get skipped to first grade. My mom didn't really want me to. She didn't know how I would handle it being younger. I was angry as a child, possibly because I had a temper. There would be certain things that you could say to me and it would just trigger
me. I would just black out. Sometimes I would be so angry, I wouldn't remember what I did. It would depend. I would want to retaliate. I would just hit the wall or something like that, whatever was in my reach.

Interviewer: How did your teachers respond to that?

Courtney: Well my teachers knew me because my brothers went there. They kind of figured out ways to calm me down. My teachers would just try to talk to me or take me out of the classroom. Some of them would call my mom. My mom would always be the one to calm me down. Once my friend and I were in Music class in third grade. My friend got into it with another girl. I got suspended because it looked like we were bullying her.

Courtney proudly reflects that her time in middle school was satisfactory and relatively easy for her in terms of grades. Although the fact that high academics were relatively easy to maintain, she still had serious anger issues to confront. As an end result, Courtney chose to avoid such issues by keeping everything locked within. Courtney admitted that the avoidance strategy was not working well. Despite her continuing issues with controlling her anger, Courtney continued to excel with her grades. Courtney felt that middle school offered no challenge whatsoever and did not experience an increase in academic rigor until her high school years.

Interviewer: How were your classes in middle school?

Courtney: Really easy. All my reading teachers were the best reading teachers. They were the ones that I got the most challenging assignments from, but as far as math and everything really came easy to me.
Interviewer: Did you ever feel like middle school was an awkward or difficult time for you?

Courtney: It was awkward when I started to go through a lot with my family. In middle school when I had two of my close family members pass away, I was just—I didn't really know how to express what was wrong with me. So I would just keep everything bottled up. Most things that I feel I can handle on my own. If I get angry about something, I'll just hold it in. Sometimes, because I hold so much in, there will be situations that will make me angry. Then everything that has made me angry from the time before will come back to me, and it will make me angrier, to where I wouldn't even remember what started it. It would just turn. It takes me a moment to calm down.

Courtney was never suspended because of her angry episodes. She did have some issues with teachers that she did not get along with. She admits that she was sarcastic with these teachers but was not formally disciplined for it. She attributes this to the fact that she was perceived as a strong student and never got in trouble. As such, she was always given warnings by her principal and never suspended. Below, Courtney describes why she had run-ins with her teachers that she disliked.

Courtney: I felt like, in a way, they thought I should have been intimidated by them. It would be something like where they would say a comment, and the way I perceived it was something I didn't like. So we would go back and forth, or I would say a question to them because I was really sarcastic in middle
school. I would say something to them, and they wouldn't like it, and then it would just go back and forth with me.

Courtney played volleyball, track and basketball in middle school. She also participated in mentoring programs for African American girls on the weekends. Even with her full schedule, Courtney excelled and she did not feel as challenged as she could have been.

Courtney: It was like the academics weren't challenging anymore. The school and their whole outlook just changed. It wasn't as good as it was. I was supposed to go there until twelfth grade, but it just came easy to me. I could play so many sports, probably not even do any homework, and still get a 4.0, but I always did my homework. It was just easy.

Her mother felt the same way and had her apply to different high schools around Northwestern City. Northwestern Tech was her first choice.

Interviewer: You applied to Northwestern Tech for a challenge?

Courtney: Mm-hmm, and I was kind of, forcefully, because my older brothers. They all went to Northwestern Tech but my second oldest brother had to leave because my mom stopped liking the school. Northwestern was always just my first pick. I had a basketball coach that I really loved, and when she left from [my earlier school], it was like I'm leaving too and I'll go where she goes. I picked Northwestern Tech as a first pick and when I started looking into it, it became a school that fit me.
High school. Courtney is considered a high achieving student. She is enrolled in five academic courses: Spanish 3, Globalization, Common Core Math 3, Advanced Placement Language and Composition, Chemistry, and a course for college credit. She is also a teacher helper. Her grade point average earned her the distinction of being on the honor roll. She describes herself as a very organized student who does not procrastinate. For example, if she has a project that is due in a week, she creates a timeline for how to complete the project immediately and gets it done as soon as possible.

Courtney: I would start it in pieces. I would plan it out of how I'm going to do it. If it was a big project where it had a lot of different sections, then I would start one or two sections today, and then do the rest either Saturday or Sunday. I would have it done before the week that it's actually due. If it is a small project, then I would just do it before I leave school.

Although she will work on the weekends, she tries to complete her work before then so that her weekends are open.

Courtney describes Northwestern Tech as one of the better high schools in the district and that she feels safe there. She does say that the school could be better socially. She attributes the need for improvement to the behavior of the freshmen in the school and the administration’s response to their actions.

Interviewer: How would you describe Northwestern Tech?

Courtney: I would label it as one of the ‘bougier’ Northwestern city schools, because we're like any other high school, like same drama and everything. But as far as academics, most of us are here for academics or sports, and pretty
much just to try to graduate. Northwestern Tech is—it's not a bad school. Socially, I think it could be better, but education-wise, I think I couldn't get any better anywhere else.

Interviewer: And how socially could it be better?

Courtney: Just the things that happen in our school. As far as freshman, and even our seniors, they're not really that mature. So I feel like if everybody were mature enough to be in high school, we would get to do more activities. Probably have a couple of dress-down days, stuff like that.

Students at Northwestern Tech are required to wear uniforms. Courtney is used to this because she has had to wear one in her previous school. She says that the uniform policy has been put in place for the students to feel equal, eliminate bullying, and tell the students who attend the school apart from students who do not. She says that she does not wear one at Northwestern Tech and is not disciplined for it.

Courtney: Except for I don't really wear a uniform here. Right now I don't really have on a uniform. It looks that way. I wear the colors, but I don't wear a uniform, because I'm just—I'm kind of sick of it now, and I have a little bit of senioritis come in, so I'm done with the uniform. Sometimes the principal will say, ‘Courtney, you got on a hoodie?’ I think everybody pretty much knows that I don't wear a uniform, and most of the junior and senior class does that anyway.
A typical school day. Courtney was asked to walk through a typical school day for her. She outlined her day by class period and then described her after-school activities.

Courtney: I get up and do personal hygiene things at 6:30am at the earliest. My first period's real chill. I walk around the hallway, talk to friends, or do some homework that I didn't do the night before. Second period Spanish is fun. She's a female African American, and we do a lot of fundamental things, but they're also educational. Third period's Globalization. I don’t really talk in that class. It’s the teacher I’m not really fond of. We don’t do anything in his class. Fourth period is Math. That's a teacher where I call her my auntie, but she's not really my aunt. I do her work, and then I just have conversations with her. In AP, we joke around, but we learn at the same time. Seventh period is just a free period. My eighth period class is chemistry. I like that class. I'm not really a fan of science, but the teacher makes me really like chemistry.

After school, Courtney says that she sits and talks to her friends in the same teacher’s classroom that she sits in during lunch. She drives to school so she has the flexibility to stay as long as she tells her mother where she is going. Sometimes, if her homework is done, she will go to a basketball game. She played tennis in the fall but since that ended, she doesn’t have any sports practices to attend. Courtney is also involved in extracurricular programs such as community service organization and
mentoring groups for young women. She says that she is normally home before six o’clock.

**Expectations and perceptions.** Courtney says that she does not feel pressured to do well in school and is self-driven when it comes to her achievement, although she infers this thinking was influenced by her mother.

Interviewer: Do you feel pressured to do well?
Courtney: No, I have a life. I'm self-driven. I feel I have to do it for me, because I know my mom's not going to take care of a twenty-two year-old that's not doing anything. My mom always told me, honor roll. We weren't allowed to come home with anything below a 3.0. When I got in high school, I would always get 3.8s and above.

Interviewer: Do you think there could be positives and negatives associated with that?
Courtney: Yes, if you're not self-driven. You think that you're doing it for your parents or you're just doing it because you have to. You don't want to disappoint your parents. It’s just my mom is going to be upset with me. I would be upset too because I’m not used to that. I'm disappointed when I still see a B on my report card. Or like in middle school I had my first C. I cried over it. Stuff like that really makes me upset.

When asked about how this relates to her health and how she takes care of herself, Courtney says that she does not realize that she is running herself into the ground until someone points it out.

Interviewer: Do you feel like you take enough time for yourself?
Courtney: I would say lately I have been. The school year gets really hectic since it's fourth quarter. I'm probably going to get a little stressed. It's only going to be because of all the final exams, and I really want to pass my AP test.

Interviewer: How do you think you handle stress and what do you do to cope?

Courtney: Most of the time I try to sleep, but other times I don't realize it until someone tells me, like, 'Courtney, you need to slow down. You're working too much.' I would be doing homework until one o'clock in the morning, because I just feel like I got to get it right. My mom or my dad would say, 'Courtney, you need to take a break,' or 'You can finish it tomorrow.'

When asked how her teachers and principal would describe her, Courtney has to think about their response. She says that she feels as though she can be herself in this environment, but does not necessarily know how she is perceived by the faculty.

Courtney: I know all my teachers will say that I get my work done. That's something that always comes first to me. As far as personality-wise, I don't really know. I have a feeling they would say that I could have a better attitude with certain things, but other than that, I don't really know. I really don’t get in trouble a lot. It's only occasionally, like every once in a blue moon, and it's mostly the days that I'm really having a terrible day.

**Classroom observation.** During her classroom observation, Courtney exhibited many of the behaviors that she described her characteristics as a student. The assignment was to complete a set of problems. This could be done individually or as partners.
Courtney worked with a partner, but it was clear that she was the stronger student of the pair. She sat in the very back of the classroom, in the last row, in the seat closest to the door. This seat granted her easy access to the teacher’s desk, which was directly in front of her and to the left. Courtney worked diligently on the assignment for the duration of the class. There were several points during the period where Courtney remained focused while her students were laughing and talking amongst themselves. She did interact with her teacher by asking questions to confirm her answer and to laugh at her teacher’s jokes. Courtney makes it very clear that she is focused on the future. She plans on attending college and is looking to apply to Spelman College, North Carolina A&T State University, Clark Atlanta University and Morgan State University. She says that she wants to attend a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) because she feels she would be most comfortable there. She has researched the schools and their programs and credits one of her extracurricular activities with helping to pique her interest.

Courtney: Just because I feel more comfortable. I don't feel uncomfortable around other races, but I'm more comfortable with it, and I'm able to be myself more. I've always gone to African American schools from middle school. I have a cousin that went to Morgan State. I've heard that they were a really good school, so that's what drove my interest into it. I'm in an ACT program, and they didn't make it just about ACT. They wanted it to be something where we understood what we needed to do. It's actually more helpful in a way. They had a session where people who went to HBCUs came in and told us their experiences. It was somebody from Clark
Atlanta, Wilberforce, Howard, and North Carolina A&T. A guy who spoke about North Carolina A&T really drew my attention, and made me want to visit. I like the programs that they have. She says that she also heard great things about Spelman College. She thinks the environment will be a good choice to keep her focused on her studies.

Courtney: Everybody who I know that has been there, they said they had a really good experience. I think with it being an all-girls college, I won't so much lose focus.

During her spring break, she has plans to visit North Carolina A&T and Morgan State. Her goal is to major in Sports Medicine and open up her own physical therapy business or work with professional athletes.

Courtney’s classroom observation was during her fourth period Math 3 class. Her second interview took place during the period prior to the math class. When she walked in for the interview, I noticed that she had a large binder. Half of the binder was disorganized and had crumpled papers. The second half of the binder was neat and color-coded. She explained that the entire binder was for her Math class but she stuck a folder in for her Globalization class because they were back to back.

Courtney: Yes, and then this folder is just—I put this in here because third period I have his class, and then fourth period I go straight to hers; I don't go back and get my stuff.

Interviewer: Which teacher did you say you were uncomfortable with? It's unorganized.
Courtney: Stapled.

Interviewer: Stapled, and it's falling apart, versus the teacher who you do like, and you are more invested in her class. You've got a binder that is extremely organized. I'm going to use that.

Courtney describes having an earlier disagreement with the teacher whose class had the unorganized binder. She says that this is the only class she has been uncomfortable in and that being in this class could lead to setting off her temper.

Interviewer: What could set you off?

Courtney: If me and a teacher don't have a good relationship—like I have this teacher here now, my Globalization teacher. After one situation of him feeling like I was disrupting his class—I was laughing. This guy had made a joke, and I just started laughing, to the point I start crying. The teacher said it was a disruption. He called my mom, and she disciplined me. It wasn’t so much of a discipline because my mom was laughing too. She just told me to try not to laugh. After that our [the teacher’s] relationship went downhill. We just got in an argument again. It got to the point where he would say slick stuff to me, and I would say slick stuff back. I've always—with him, have the mentality like what you give me is what you're going to get back.

Interviewer: It's a respect issue?

Courtney: Yes. With him, it's like you can never know. Some days he'll want to be cool, and he will try to respect you, and then other days he'll just turn into
a whole different person. That's when it comes out of me, and we go back and forth.

Interviewer: Is this a White teacher or a Black teacher?

Courtney: A White teacher.

Interviewer: You don't feel like this particular teacher understands you?

Courtney: I just feel like sometimes he tries to act like a kid at times. I feel like he can be childish. He'll say jokes, and sometimes they'll go too far. Then when the class doesn't respond, he gets upset.

Luckily, Courtney has teachers who understand her temper and are supportive.

Courtney: There are teachers in this school who know how much I'm trying to change the way I am with my attitude. I'll go to one of their classrooms and try to calm down.

**Peer Relationships**

Courtney recalls that while she had many associates in elementary school, she only had three or four friends. She describes the distinction between the two as a difference in the depth of their interactions.

Interviewer: The friends you had in elementary school, do you feel like you had a lot?

Courtney: I really had, probably a lot of associates. But friend-wise, I probably had maybe three or four friends.

Interviewer: What's the distinction between friends and associates in elementary school?
Courtney: Associates were people I'd color with. We played on the playground. My friends were people who my parents let come over and spend the night, and I'll go to your birthday parties and stuff like that.

These friendships continued when Courtney was in middle school. When she arrived at high school, there was a shift in her sense of familiarity because she was now around an entirely new group of peers.

Courtney: This school is different. I've been at [my former school] so long, I knew everybody. So the high schoolers, I knew them because they knew my brothers, and everybody will call me a mini [brother’s name]. Coming to Northwestern Tech, it was just like something I've never experienced. Like people—there was a lot of drama. People would just pretty much disrespect somebody else just to joke around. It would be like a form of bullying, but I've really never experienced it. It was just if you looked like you were an easy target, somebody would just say something about you or try and joke with you, but it would be in a disrespectful way.

Courtney says that she was never the target of this disrespectful behavior. She says that her peers have left her alone for the most part because she makes it clear that she is focused on school and does not have time for the arguments or drama that her classmates engage in.

Interviewer: Did you ever feel like you were an easy target?

Courtney: A lot of people already know that's not going to work with me. Some people say I look mean, so they just leave me alone. But, really, I’m just
trying to get in school and out of school. The drama to me is kind of petty. We just recently had a situation over some bob that was a weave. This girl who had really pretty long hair, was long, she cut hers in a bob. And basically after she got the bob, the girl who had the bob first was like, ‘You stole my hairstyle,’ wanting to fight her. The girl who had the really pretty hair was like, ‘I'm not going to fight you over hair. You didn't make this hairstyle up.’ Many people in this school had a bob, so it was really her just trying to start something. The drama here is mostly seniors. They just pretty much try to start petty stuff.

Courtney goes on to describe more of what she deems petty behavior, which is demonstrated by both girls and boys.

Interviewer: What are some other things they fight about?

Courtney: Talking to somebody's boyfriend. In high school they call them ‘side pieces.’ If a girl has a boyfriend, and there's another girl whose boyfriend tries to talk to a female, the female gets mad at the one who's supposed to be a side piece, and she doesn't get mad at her boyfriend. I don’t really understand it.

In addition to staying above the arguing, Courtney says that she also does not date. She says that as a junior, she is more mature than the vast majority of the senior boys. The boys are not focused enough for her. She tells the boys who ask her out that she is focused on graduating and doesn’t have time for them or the games that come with dating. Rather, she has boys who are her friends only. She acknowledges that part of her
reason for not wanting to date is due to her trust issues from her relationship with her father.

Courtney: I'm not really into dating anymore, because I think most of the guys here need to grow up. Our seniors, I could say that I'm more mature than ninety percent of our seniors who are guys. They really just care about sports, and they're just not really focused. I have a trust issue, and it basically really came from with my dad. I'll have guy friends who like me, but I won't give them the time of day, because I tell them I don't have time for games, and I'm just trying to graduate. Some of them I've been friends with since freshman year, so it's like they've been trying to talk to me since freshman year, but there's certain guys, like when I get so close with you, I just can't look at you that way anymore. You just became a friend, or they didn't friend zone me, but I friend zoned them early on.

On the weekends, Courtney chooses to hang out with her friends and family.

Courtney: Sometimes I babysit, go to the movies, skating, or I'll go to my friends' houses and hang out at their houses.

Interviewer: Whom do you go to the movies and skating with?

Courtney: Friends or family. Sometimes me and my mom go.

Interviewer: Who do you babysit?

Courtney: My little sister. I have a ton of baby cousins, and sometimes my mom's friends' children.
Overall, Courtney says that her peers both look up to her and yet speak negatively about her. However, she is not concerned with the opinions of others about her.

Courtney: Well, I always think of people who have something negative to say. People will always want something that you have, because they lack the things you have. Sometimes I'll have people say to me, ‘Oh, Courtney, I know you always have your work done. You're smart. I'm trying to get like you.’ Stuff like that. I often get that I look stuck up and mostly that I’m mean. I don’t really, I don't really—it doesn't faze me. I think it's funny, because not everybody thinks I'm mean. It's just that people really don't know me.

**Society, Media, and Representation**

Courtney had an in-depth discussion on the representation of African American girls and women and the stereotypes that are placed upon them.

Courtney: I think people expect us to be teen moms, have bad attitudes. Now they say like ratchet. I guess urban. I think they expect us to just don't really care about a lot of things.

Interviewer: Let's say you were playing charades. You pull a card, and it says ‘Black Girl’ on it. How would you act that out?

Courtney: First thing I would probably do is dance, I guess inappropriately, the way we dance. I would probably do what the stereotype is, because that's what people would guess. Like as far as cuss words and being really loud.

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Courtney says that while the girls at Northwestern Tech do not get in trouble for being loud, they are told to act more ladylike. She states that if a young girl dresses in a certain manner, the way you act can portray you to be something that you’re not.

Interviewer: Do you ever feel like they’re told to act more ladylike? How so?

Courtney: Yes. If you're dressing a certain way, I think the way you act can portray you to be something that you're not. Like as far as if you wear yoga pants or something, I feel like you want to be comfortable. But if you're acting out a certain way, like tooting your butt up in the air and stuff, you could be portrayed differently.

Interviewer: Do you think girls should be able to wear whatever they want?

Courtney: It depends. Like if you’re showing too much skin, or if it's just really inappropriate for school. Certain things that are made a big deal shouldn't really be made a big deal. You should pretty much brush it off, because you're not going to be able to address every situation. I think that they're told to act more ladylike when it comes to picking battles.

**Television and movies.** Courtney says that she does not watch much television. When she does watch it, she watches shows like *Empire*, the different *Love and Hip Hop* series, *The Game*, and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, which she watches with her mother. She says that of the shows she watches on television, she feels as though the characters represent her.

She spoke about *Empire* and said that her favorite character was Cookie.
Courtney: I really like Cookie, even though she wasn't there to bring up her kids, because she was in jail. I think that she would have been more nourishing to them, and it wouldn't have been all about the music and the empire. I don't think that Hakeem would act the way he did. As far as her noticing—what is his name—Jamal, the way he was going to be. I felt like she paid more attention to him.

Interviewer: Would you say that she was a good mother?

Courtney: Yes, because I think when they had the flashback, Cookie noticed then that he was different, and his dad just ignored it. Cookie really shouldn't have lost the years that she lost. I just like her personality. She's feisty. Because she knows what Lucius is capable of. She still doesn't take it from him how everybody else takes it. I think that we go through a lot, and we still find a way to come out on top.

She says that for the most part, she watches movies on Lifetime and movies on Netflix. She specifically mentions watching Tyler Perry movies.

Courtney: I think his movies are good. I saw one that I really wasn't that fond of it, Madea Goes to Jail. I just didn't like the acting, and I really didn't like how the message was portrayed. He could have gone about it in a different way.

Interviewer: What was the message?
Courtney: Pretty much how you can come from a good home as an African American girl, and you can still get one mess up, end up in jail. It was just—I don't know. It was weird from the movie.

Interviewer: Do you feel as though, in any movies in general, he paints Black men a certain way, or paints Black women a certain way?

Courtney: Yes. I don't think he does it on purpose. I think, in a way, he tries to really actually get us to see how we are portrayed. Movies like Why Did I Get Married? I think that a lot of women could have really relate to that movie, because it was just, as far as the emotions that women have, it was all there in four different women.

Courtney does not watch the news because she finds it to be negative. She specifically points to the overrepresentation of crimes that are committed by African Americans. Instead, she hears about current events through e-mail. She would prefer that more positive images be shown, particularly of youth. The negative images put pressure on her because she would rather give the older generations hope rather than be a failure.

Courtney: I don't really like how most of the time it's something negative.

My mom emails me certain things that she thinks stands out. Somebody's always getting robbed, or murdered, mostly from African Americans. Pretty much, I feel like the news makes you more unsafe than you already are. They stress the negative and ignore the positive things. It makes you always paranoid. I wish they would show more accomplishments from the
youth, because I think that everybody just thinks that our generation is going to be terrible. I think that everybody in our generation, because of all the gangs and the crimes being committed from the youth, I think they expect us to fail.

**Music.** Courtney’s favorite musical artist is Chris Brown. She has loved him since she was a little girl and feels as though his music speaks to her life. She particularly mentions a song he writes about his mother and says that she identifies with this, as it conveys the emotions she feels about her mother. She has attended his concerts.

When asked about how she feels about Brown’s incident with Rihanna, Courtney’s response is an interesting one given her personal experience with domestic abuse.

Courtney: It didn't really bother me. I don't believe that women should take abuse, but then again, I think that I really can't have an opinion on it because the media isn't always right, and I wasn't there. Situations like that happen everyday. I don't think that that situation should be looked at as bad as any other situation that occurs, just because he's famous.

Courtney was also asked to reflect on the use of the words hoe, bitch and the [n-word] in Chris Brown’s songs and in hip-hop in general. Her response suggests that she is somewhat conflicted on their use. She also says that when songs refer to women as hoes, she replaces the word with boys.
Courtney: I always change it to boys, so when he said, ‘These hoes ain't loyal,’ I just said, ‘Boys not loyal.’ I just change it. I don't like the fact that a man referred to females as any word that isn't their name, or is something that's appropriate, but because I can't really do anything about it. It just doesn't bother me as long as it's not said to me.

Interviewer: What about the [n-word]?

Courtney: I have different feelings on that. I feel like sometimes it shouldn't be used. When it is used in certain contexts, as far as when Kevin Hart uses it in comedy, it's funny. When I think about the history and how we were called that, I think it shouldn't be said. Then again, I can't really say anything because I know I've said it before. I don't want to be like hypocritical about it. I think we shouldn't really use the word.

Interviewer: Do you think the [n-word] is more hurtful than the B word?

Courtney: To females, I think that the B word is more hurtful. To males—well, for me they're offensive for both of them to be said to me, but for anybody else I think that the [n-word] is more offensive to a male rather than a female.

Interviewer: Pretty much every hip-hop song right now refers to women in a disrespectful way. Do you still like the music? Do you still listen to it?

Courtney: Yes. The first thing when I hear a song, I listen to the words. What more so will catch my eye on a song is the beats and just certain verses. I don't really listen to certain artists that say those words, like Chief Keef or
Kanye West and Jay-Z. I'm not a fan. Most of the time I listen to Drake. Certain artists also talk about stuff that happened in real life, and stuff that actually matters.

Courtney says that she does not listen to contemporary female hip-hop artists. She does, however, listen to female R&B singers such as Jennifer Hudson and Chrisette Michele. She makes it a point to critique Beyoncé’s image since she had her daughter. She briefly discusses the responsibility that artists, both male and female, should have to their fans.

Courtney: When it comes to female artists, I'm kind of on people that were out since before I was born like Mary J. Blige. I like Chaka Khan, or Chrisette Michele and Jennifer Hudson. I like Beyoncé, but I'm not, oh my gosh, Beyoncé. I feel like some of the songs that she put out after she had a baby, she shouldn't have put them out. I don't like the song. I like the album, but I feel like it should have been released early on, because of the fact that she just had a baby. Just like if my mom was talking to her friends, certain conversations she doesn't want me to hear, I feel like it should be the same way with her and the music. Just the way, in that song ‘Drunk In Love,’ I think that song is really nasty. I don't think that she should have put that song out. I think certain things shouldn't be said. Because people of all ages listen to her music, I don't really think that some of her music should consist of the words or the scenarios that she portrays.
Interviewer: Do you think that Black female artists have a responsibility to their fans to be a certain way?

Courtney: Yes, but I also think males do too. I feel like they should do more for the community. I think some of [the lyrics] are okay. But censoring some of the stuff that they say, we shouldn't label ourselves as—or males label themselves as the [n-word] because they hear it in songs. Certain words that are said in songs, it's like, they can say it, why can't I say it?

Courtney makes the point that she and her friends are not influenced by their music choices and infers that she is critical about what she consumes.

Interviewer: What about women? Like, for example, how do you feel about Bad B word?

Courtney: I don't like that, because I don't refer to myself as that, and I feel like you are not that. You should refer to yourself as a female or the name that was given to you.

Interviewer: It's okay to hear it in songs?

Courtney: Depending on who the person is.

Interviewer: Who would be a good person to say it?

Courtney: Someone who really isn't influenced by music should be able to listen to certain songs that are bad, and stuff like that. But someone who is greatly influenced by music and they do what music says, they shouldn't really listen to it. Because it's not really putting them on the right path.
Interviewer: Do you think there’s any woman in your age group who isn't really influenced by the music?

Courtney: Besides my friends and I, not really.

**Social media.** Courtney does not regularly access Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. Although she has the accounts, she uses Facebook to keep in touch with older relatives, tweets sporadically, and has not used Instagram since 2014. She only uses Snapchat.

**Reading.** Courtney likes to read biographies. She mostly reads for her AP Literature class and reads occasionally outside of class. She reads magazines when she is in stores. She does not name any magazines by title, but reads the ones that catch her attention. She acknowledges that girls and women who look like her are not readily found in these magazines.

Interviewer: Magazines? Do you read them?

Courtney: Only when I'm in stores.

Interviewer: Which ones?

Courtney: Certain ones that have somebody on the cover that attracts me. The last magazine I saw was Bruce Jenner, how he was changing to a woman.

Interviewer: When you're looking through magazines, do you feel like there are enough images of people who look like you?

Courtney: No. I think that the media wants you to look like someone that you're not. It doesn't allow you to have the opportunity to be yourself.
Interviewer: What would that ideal person look like, that they're trying to get you to look like?

Courtney: Really thin. Long hair and pounds of makeup. As far as for Black girls, I think they want you to have straight hair. I think natural look is really coming back.

**Beauty.** Courtney considers public figures like Mary J. Blige and Oprah to be beautiful. She asks if beauty is representative of a whole person or just their appearance. She noted that she nor her friends idolized figures like Nicki Minaj or Kim Kardashian.

Courtney: I really like the way Mary J. Blige carries herself, and I want to say like Oprah. Just because they try to—well, I've seen them try to. I've seen the way that they're portrayed. To me, what I know about them, I feel like they're good people. They don't really do what the norm is. [Like] Oprah is really helpful and caring. They know where they come from and wanting to help others makes them a really good person.

Courtney says that other races emulate African American women’s hair and bodies while, at the same time, African American women envy characteristics of other races such as smaller bodies and hair that is less kinky. She says that the media has a hand in this.

Courtney: Well, I think other races want the thickness that we have to our hair, but also the curl pattern. I think sometimes African American girls really want slick hair and body features. I think that they want to be smaller.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?
Courtney: Because what the media portrays seems like that's more accepted.

When it comes to her own appearance, Courtney says, without hesitation, that she is beautiful and that she has self-confidence. She does not feel uncomfortable with herself often and does not feel pressured to dress a certain way for popularity.

Courtney: I think I'm beautiful. I have self-confidence. If somebody says something they don't like about me, I don't care.

Needs in School

Courtney is asked to respond to a series of questions where she described her ideal school and could give hypothetical feedback to principal about Northwestern Tech. She also gave her opinion on what African American girls needed in school.

The ideal school: Curriculum, teachers and rules. Courtney is quite vocal as she critiques current practices in place in schools. She feels as though what students are taught and testing could be more equitable to ensure that all students succeed. She is particularly critical about testing and how it places disadvantaged students even further behind.

Interviewer: If you had the opportunity to make an ideal high school, what types of things would be taught?

Courtney: I really like the way high school is. Like years back, where they had home economics, driving in school, woodshop, and basically stuff that you can actually use in life. I feel like some classes that they have today aren't really helpful. Like Globalization. That's not in everybody's profession, so I feel like it's just not necessary at times. I think really a lot of classes
will prepare you for life, for finances and planning your life, so you can have goals.

Interviewer: Do you think that what is taught represents you as a Black girl?

Courtney: No. I think that it just represents a way of how they want to control. I think, even though we are a democracy as far as government, I feel like the rules that they set, and some of the criteria that you have to meet, isn't realistic. Like testing. I don't think that defines your intelligence, because everybody doesn't test the same. I just think that it's just set up for people to fail in a way. You have seniors taking [state tests]. I don't think it's because they don't know the stuff; I just think they don't remember it. They put stuff on there that's from years back, and we can't remember that stuff.

Interviewer: You don't think that testing is a good way to define people's intelligence. You think that it's setting people up to fail?

Courtney: Yes. In particular, inner-city kids. I know suburban schools. They pretty much have more materials to prepare them for certain things. They have advocates who can help them get far in life. I think our teachers care, but I think they only care so much to where you have to do the rest on your own.

Interviewer: Do you think it's a way to teach you independence?
Courtney: Yes, but then I think, in a way, it makes it harder for the student, because they have more knowledge. When we go to them, it's for us to basically know how to do something. Know what to do in a situation.

Courtney believes that the adults in the school should impart lessons beyond academics and practical skills that focus on emotions and attitudes. She implies that improving this professional help may assist students with their behavior and discipline issues. Although she begins by saying teachers should be providing this support, she shifts slightly to say that the adults in the school who are professionals should be doing this work.

Interviewer: What are some things that you think they should be teaching you about life, other than the practical skills that you talked about like home economics and driver's education?

Courtney: More so focusing on a person's attitude. Certain things that you do in high school, people won't go for that in the real world. So as many chances as you get for suspension, you can come back. When you're an adult, you go to jail, that's just your punishment. There's nothing else you can do. You don't get to come back from what you did.

Interviewer: How would you handle someone getting suspended?

Courtney: I don't think putting them out of school would do anything. Probably try to look in deeper to the issue. I feel like children act out for many different reasons, and most of the time I think it's from within their personal lives. I just think they might need more help, as far as on a professional level.
Knowing how to deal with the situations that they're in, so counseling, or just more support from the adults in the school.

If she had the opportunity to tell policy makers about the needs of high school students, Courtney would suggest that changes be made to testing.

Courtney: I don't think that testing should be based off of things that you learned from middle school, and you're in high school. I think that the test should at least be more updated, and I think that they should provide more materials to prepare you for the test.

Courtney also comments on class size, suggesting that a graduating class should have between 100 and 200 students with 30 students per class.

Courtney: I've always been in an environment where there are at least thirty people in a classroom. I feel like you can get the attention that you need, rather than being in the class with fifty students. I think you need two teachers for that.

A class for african american girls. If this school had a class that served African American girls, Courtney would tailor the curriculum to developing the whole person as well as address content that speaks directly to what African American girls experience.

Interviewer: What kind of class if you could create a class to really serve your needs as a Black girl, what would that class teach?

Courtney: I think that starting as a person, or basically developing the qualities of a person. I think that more females need more confidence and self-esteem, and then learning what you're good at, and just having confidence in.
I think that we should be more informed about the statistics that we live, or the statistics we could possibly become, and the stereotypes that are portrayed on us, and figure out ways to channel it in a different direction, like not become part of what people actually think we are.

Here, Courtney is referring to the stereotypes of being teen mothers, speaking loudly and crudely, and needing to act more ladylike. Courtney suggests that learning about content that connects African American girls to their history may help alleviate poor behavior.

Interviewer: If you had the chance to design an English class or a history class for Black girls, what would you have in it? Any books you think Black girls should read, or things we should learn about?

Courtney: I read a book called—it was like a Blueprint series. It was pretty much about the average high school girl. It was about African Americans and how basically you're looked at from other races, how other people view you, and I would basically push that issue, because I think that really limits the opportunities that we get, because people think that we're like every stereotype there is. I think that we should just learn everything else that any other race learns, but also learn more about where we come from and our heritage. I know I've seen movies, or my history teachers that I've had, they've talked about how racism was back in the day, and how women were treated, so I think that for all those women who weren't treated fairly, and didn't get to vote and everything, we should pretty
much—we shouldn't be acting the way we are. We should be more appreciative.

Courtney is very clear about the attributes that are demonstrated by her favorite and least favorite teachers. Her favorite teachers have been those who challenge her while also letting her be independent. These teachers had personalities that reminded her of her mother and family. These teachers also pushed Courtney to want to succeed just as her family members. In addition, Courtney feels as though these teachers’ classes are important and that she is learning something from them.

Interviewer: What would you say makes a good teacher, or what were some characteristics of your favorite teachers?

Courtney: They were always the ones who gave the most challenging assignment, you could ask questions, but they didn't baby you. They let you be independent. They weren't overbearing. If they assigned an assignment, and you had questions, but you didn't ask, and you got a bad grade on it, they wouldn't like oh, why didn't you ask me this? That's just on you. You had to take the initiative to want to get a better grade. Sometimes, if I would just go in their classrooms when it was just us, they would joke around how my mom does. When I need it when I would be upset about something, and I didn't really have anybody to turn to because I was at school. They would be there, like when my great grandmother died in middle school, I had someone to go to that was like a mom to me,
and she understood. I always felt comfortable to come to them about things that bothered me.

Courtney did not get along well with teachers whose personalities did not connect well with hers. She mentions them feeling as though she should have been intimidated by them. When reflecting on classes that she did not do well in, she says that it was the way the teacher taught it that gave her the most trouble. She gives biology as an example.

Courtney: As far as biology I didn't, because it was teachers that I've had. I haven't I feel like it's the teacher. If I was assigned an assignment, if I used the book, I understood it. But her trying to teach it to me, it didn't always work.

**My sister’s keeper.** Courtney was asked to reflect on President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative and offer suggestions for the programming in a hypothetical My Sister’s Keeper initiative that would serve girls of color.

First, Courtney notes that she supports The My Brother’s Keeper initiative because the boys that she knows would benefit from it.

Courtney: To the first question, I think it's a neat idea because I have guy friends in this school who, they either don't have a father figure, or they just don't really talk to their dad often, but they know that he's there. I know some of the guys in our school—we have really smart males in our school, but they just don't take advantage of it. They're either lazy, they really just don't care, or they're just here because their parents said they had to come
here. I think that our school needs—well, the guys in our school need—a push, because they think sports is going to get them far. They don't really have a purpose. I think they don't think that there's a reason they should be here. I just don't think they really care enough about their future. I think some of them don't even think about what they're going to do later on in life.

She says that this is different for girls and attributes this to girls’ maturity and the morals that are instilled in them by their families.

Courtney: The girls in our school, we're pretty much, the majority of us, all want to be something. We have our lives planned out as soon as we leave college. We're just not thinking about anything else except for what we want, how we're going to get it, and stuff like that.

If Courtney could have a voice in the creation of a program that would serve African American girls, she suggests a focus on emotional health. She says that while women have an issue with emotions in general, it is more of a struggle for African American women. African American women feel a greater amount of pressure to succeed so that they do not become another statistic.

Courtney: I think that more support and stability as far as emotions, because females, I think we are so emotional. Some of the emotions we have we really don't know how to channel them in the right direction. I just think overall it's a female thing, but I think it's heavier on African American females
We know we don't want to be another statistic. We have so many stereotypes that are labeled on us, and we just don't want to make them true.

Interviewer: Do you feel as though Black women put pressure on ourselves to do well? What could be some positives or negatives of that?

Courtney: Yes. I think that—I guess putting stress on yourself. You don't really lack in certain areas as far as with confidence sometimes. I guess your confidence would be up to a higher level because you hold yourself to a higher standard. The negative would be sometimes you just need a break, like knowing that you are a stereotype already, it's like when you go from high school over into the real world, it's kind of scary because you don't want to hear the word 'no' as far as opportunities coming your way. It just seems like it would be harder knowing that females get—they make less than males, and already African American females don't really have an advantage when they apply for jobs.
Gabrielle Carter

Gabrielle Carter is an eighteen-year old senior at Northwestern Tech High School. She was interviewed individually with two interviews that were approximately forty-five minutes in length. Due to constraints with her school schedule, Gabrielle was not able to participate in a group interview. Additional data was collected from one classroom observation during her Pre-calculus class.

Background and Family Life

Gabrielle lives in a house with her paternal grandmother, grandfather, and one year old daughter. Her mother and father live in separate homes in Northwestern City. Her father is now married. She has an older sister who is twenty-two and two brothers on her mother’s side who are fourteen and two respectively. She also has two younger sisters on her father’s side who are sixteen and ten. She and her fourteen-year old brother share the same father. She says that she is close to them but has always been closest to her fourteen-year old brother.

Gabrielle has lived with her grandparents for the past two years because she does not get along with her stepmother or her mother. She does not care for her stepmother, because she always wanted her mother and father to be together. She has not gotten along well with her mother for the last four years or so. She does not exactly recall why they fell out with one another but notes that her behavioral issues were the cause. The catalyst for her behavioral issues came from her mother and father’s break up, which occurred around the same time as her father going to jail.

Interviewer: Do you remember what started the problems between you and your mom?
Gabrielle: No, not really. It’s [was] just behavioral issues. I just used to act out. I didn’t live with my dad. I always wanted my parents to be together. They just broke up. I was about ten. When they weren’t together, it’s just, I don't know.

Gabrielle’s parents broke up when she was in the third grade. She says that she got in trouble when she was in kindergarten and first grade but she does not remember why. She says that she may have gotten a call home as a form of discipline but overall, she was not all that bad.

Middle school was, in her words, rough for Gabrielle. She describes herself as a fighter and used to get suspended for it. She does not like fighting but will do so if necessary. Gabrielle: Because I just don’t—I don’t let people just walk over me. It takes so much for me. I can ignore you for a long period of time. Once you get to me that point, then you come in my personal bubble.

She fought in sixth and seventh grades and calmed down in the eighth grade, although she recalls that her last fight may have been in the ninth or tenth grade, off of school grounds. She attended anger management until the ninth grade and says it was helpful for her. It allowed her to talk about the issues that were making her angry, which was focused on her family. Gabrielle: Middle school was rough. I was a fighter. I used to fight. I used to get suspended in sixth, seventh. Eighth grade I calmed down. Girls would say
something to me. It really was my—I was just—I don't know. I had to go to anger management and stuff, too, when I was younger. I started going to anger management about eleven. My mom put me in counseling. It was nice. It kept me calmer. I talked about my problems, personal stuff like life, my family.

Gabrielle’s father went to prison for five years in 2008 for possession of an armed weapon when Gabrielle was around eleven years old. Gabrielle and her father were very close. She says that this is what truly hurt her and was compounded by the pain of her parent’s breakup.

Gabrielle: Well, my dad went to jail. That’s what really hurt me. [I was] about eleven, in ’08. Yeah, I was about ten or eleven.

She began attending anger management shortly after this because she was being disobedient with her mother, teachers, and essentially everyone. Her teachers responded by writing her up or suspending her. Her mother would put her on punishment.

She was able to visit him during his incarceration. She went with her paternal grandmother whenever possible and noted that her mother never went to visit him and that they never really discussed him being in prison. Gabrielle harbored bad feelings throughout her father’s incarceration and didn’t like telling people that her father was in jail feeling that it was too personal. Gabrielle is close to her grandmother and lives with her now. Although they are close to one another, she describes her grandmother as being judgmental because she feels as though she is right about everything.
Gabrielle: We have our little arguments. They’re little petty arguments. There’s nothing really particular. She [the grandmother] just nags. Sometimes she gets [on me about] my daughter, like ‘Gabrielle, she don’t need to be wearing that.’ I’m like, It’s okay. It’s fine. I put a little jacket on her, or a sweater, ‘No, she needs a big coat on.’

Gabrielle began living with her grandparents around the time she got pregnant. It should be noted that although she lives with her grandparents, Gabrielle often only refers to her grandmother in describing her living situation. Her grandfather is ill and has kidney failure. She says that as long as her grandfather is still alive it does not bother her.

Before living with her grandparents, while her father was in prison, Gabrielle lived with her mother. When he was released, she moved in with her father. When Gabrielle found out that she was pregnant, she was going to live with her mother but ultimately decided that her grandparents would be a better choice. She says that this is her ideal living situation.

Gabrielle: I was living with my dad. Then, I was going to go back and live with my mom. My mom—I just, I don't know. I felt like it was best for me not to live there because I know how we are. I just said, okay, let me go live with my grandma. I know how we’ll [the birth mother] argue, and how she likes things just her way, and she don’t like to listen.

Although she has a good amount of family support, Gabrielle is the sole caretaker for her one-year old daughter. She and her daughter’s father are no longer together but she says that her daughter loves her father and knows who he is. He sees her every
weekend but Gabrielle says this is without a child support agreement in place. She says that he works at a warehouse but does not provide for her daughter. She has not put him on child support because she feels as though she can take care of her daughter on her own.

Gabrielle: Oh, I mean he comes around for her, but no, we’re not together. He gets her every other weekend. He spends time with her. [My daughter] loves him. She knows who her dad is.

Interviewer: Has he been put on child support?

Gabrielle: No, because I mean that’s not one of my priorities right now. That's not something I really am caring about. I can do it on my own. I have a nice support system. It’s not too bad.

Gabrielle says that her parents love their granddaughter. Her father sees her whenever she visits him, which ranges from every one to two weeks. Her mother sees her once every one to two weeks as well, when they spend time together. They might go out to eat or go shopping. Although their relationship has improved and Gabrielle says that they have fun together, she maintains that they cannot live together.

Gabrielle credits her family with impacting her viewpoint of success. Gabrielle’s father now owns his own restaurant and her mother works at the airport. Her grandmother helps out at the family restaurant. Gabrielle used to do the same but now she has her own job at a restaurant. She also works as a lifeguard during the summer.

Gabrielle: I feel like even though my dad has went to jail, my dad is still a successful Black man owning his own restaurant, making sure that we are to go to
school, and make sure that we’re heading our way to success instead of just sitting and being failures. The same with my mom. She works. She’s been working at a nice successful job.

Interviewer: Do you think they’re role models for you?

Gabrielle: In a positive way. Yeah, they make me want to be successful and make me want to set goals so I can achieve every goal.

Identity

Gabrielle self-identifies as African American. She describes herself as intelligent, strong and outgoing and says that she is perceived as pretty, outgoing and loud. She loves being herself and does not ever feel uncomfortable in her own skin.

Gabrielle has a daughter and is quite vocal about not choosing to be a statistic and stereotypical teenage mother. Recently, she had the opportunity to speak at Northwestern Tech’s baccalaureate program. She gave a testimony about her experiences. Using the theme ‘Never Give Up,’ Gabrielle said that despite her struggles, she kept pushing because she knew that statistically, high school parents do not graduate. She refuses to be one of those statistics.

She believes that she, her daughter, family, school, and work are the most important things in her life. She is Christian and her faith is very important to her. She tries to attend church every Sunday and prays on a regular basis.

Gabrielle: My daughter’s important to me because, I don't know, she’s just important. She’s just—that’s my baby girl. Family’s important because they’re my support system. They help me through. School is to better my
education. Working is to provide for me and my baby. Being myself is important because if I wasn’t myself, I would be trying to be like everybody else.

I feel like God has been there. I’ve been through some situations where I felt like me believing in him just made things—me praying made things a little more not stressed.

She is referring to the stress of learning about her pregnancy and the other things that have happened in her life.

**Academics**

Gabrielle is enrolled in six classes: Issues in World Literature, Pre-calculus, Democratic Citizenship, Physical Education, Physics, and VCAP. It was explained that VCAP is a module-based online course that students take when they have failed a class. Students normally do not have enough time to retake failed classes during the regular school day and so they are placed in an online class where they can cover the material again. Although she did not make the honor roll for the third quarter, she has made the honor roll throughout her time at Northwestern Tech.

**Elementary school.** Gabrielle attended an elementary school in Northwestern City. Her mother and father lived in a house outside of the area but she still attended school in the city. She is able to recall each of her teachers by name. She remembers loving most of her teachers and still keeps in touch with some of them.

Gabrielle: Oh, I had some teachers. I loved most of my teachers. Still contact some of them. [They were] mixed, but majority White, yeah majority White.
She recalls that her classes were easy for her and that her favorite subjects were math and science.

Interviewer: How would you say academics were? Was it easy for you?

Gabrielle: Yeah, it was easy. Math and science. Really liked math after I learned my multiplication.

**Middle school.** Although she says that her behavior made her middle school experience difficult, she had a positive experience when it came to her classes. Her favorite classes were math, science, and Spanish.

Gabrielle: Academically wise, I could say it was pretty positive. I used to like Spanish. Don’t really care for it. I don’t understand it, and I’m done with my languages for high school.

**High school.** Gabrielle applied to Northwestern Tech because her mother and sister attended the school and she wanted to follow. She says that the academics are challenging and names her pre-calculus and physics classes as being the most difficult. She has stayed after school several times during senior year for assistance with pre-calculus.

Interviewer: How did you choose Northwestern Tech?

Gabrielle: My mom—oh, my sister and my mom went to Northwestern Tech; so I wanted to follow.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the academics?

Gabrielle: It’s challenging. It’s more—it’s not more of you knowing, it’s more of you’re thinking. Right now pre-calc and physics are most challenging. It’s
because my teachers challenge us. They’ll give us word problems or
equations to where you have to really sit and think about what calculation
you have to use and what forms.

She describes her most and least favorite teachers at Northwestern Tech. Both
teachers are African American women. She says that her most favorite teacher has
always supported her.

Gabrielle: My favorite teacher she always stuck by me. She makes me laugh and she
helped—she guided me through a lot of my stuff in her class.

Her least favorite teacher, on the other hand, was not as helpful to her. She also taught
English, a subject that was always difficult for Gabrielle.

Gabrielle: I don’t really care for [my English teacher] because I just feel like she
would give us work that really wasn’t for us. That’s why I failed her class
because I really wasn’t attentive. It just wasn’t—you asked for help and
she would just be like—she really wasn’t helpful.

Interviewer: Do you feel like [your English teacher] wasn’t helpful because she wanted
you all to figure things out on your own?

Gabrielle: Maybe, I don't know. English is just not a subject—has never been my
best subject. I always need help. When she just wasn’t able to help me, it
just—made me give up a little bit.

Gabrielle says that she never failed any other classes and that her grade point
average is now a 3.0 and above. She normally receives C’s in her classes. Freshman
year, she was on the honor roll until the fourth quarter. Her grades fell significantly
sophomore year when she was barely attending school. She says that she barely had above a 2.0. During sophomore year, Gabrielle began hanging out with the wrong people. She and her friends skipped school regularly and her grades suffered for it. She began going back to school regularly at the end of sophomore year and raised her grade point average to above a 3.6

Interviewer: You said that was the end of freshman year. Then, sophomore, you barely went to school. What about junior year?

Gabrielle: Well, [at the] end of sophomore, I started going to school a lot. Maybe third quarter because I seen that I was slipping on my grades. Eleventh grade I was on 4.0s and 3.8s.

Interviewer: What was the school doing when they noticed that you weren’t coming? Were they sending notices home? Were they calling?

Gabrielle: They probably did. They probably called and left little machine things [messages]. My mom, she didn’t really check them. My dad really didn’t either, or I’d be at school, and I would just skip classes. I just didn’t want to go to class.

Gabrielle became pregnant toward the end of her sophomore year. She stayed at Northwestern Tech throughout the pregnancy. Gabrielle had her daughter in February of her junior year. She says that her daughter changed her life, especially in terms of how she treated school, success, and her future.
Gabrielle: Oh, she changed it a lot. She made me think more positive and see the world differently as if I’m not just living for myself. I need to succeed so my daughter can see that anything’s possible.

This is demonstrated in her plans for college once she graduates.

Interviewer: What are you doing after graduation?

Gabrielle: Going to [a local] college. I think it’s a two year, or it can be a four year. I want to do two years there, and then transfer to [a larger school].

Because I got accepted to [state college], but the tuition is way too much. Then, I just want to start off with taking a few classes because I want to work, too. I want just a good paying job so I can take care of my daughter.

I want to go into the medical field. I want to be a pediatrician.

Interviewer: Do you plan on still living with your grandparents?

Gabrielle: No, not eventually. I plan on moving into my own little apartment.

**Classroom observation.** I observed Gabrielle in her pre-calculus class, as she said that it was one of her more challenging classes. High school students in Northwestern City Schools are required to take a certain amount of credits for math. Pre-calculus is not a requirement and if students choose to take it, teachers must provide a recommendation for the student to take it. The school created a section of the class to accommodate the thirty or so students who wanted to take the course.

The given task for the class was to complete a set of problems. Gabrielle’s actions were very much in line with her description of being outgoing and loud. While she completed the given task, she chatted throughout the entire period with the people
around her who were both male and female. She sat in the desk to the back left of the classroom. The desk was farthest from the door and at the very end of the row. She could not be readily seen from the teacher’s desk. From my location near the front of the classroom, I heard her very clearly. She split her time between working, talking loudly, and looking at her cell phone. She completed the task at hand.

A typical school day. Gabrielle was asked to walk through a typical school day, from when she wakes up to when she goes to sleep.

Gabrielle: Well, it depends. On a non-working school day, I would wake up. Get ready for school. Get my daughter ready for daycare. Take her to daycare. Then, go to school. Then, during the school day, go to all my classes. Eat lunch. Hang out my free periods. Then, 2:30 comes. School’s out. Get on a bus. Go home. Take a nap. Go get my daughter. I go get her about 6:00. Then, come home, cook dinner, feed her and chillax. Get ready for bed around 8:30-9:00. Then, get myself ready for the next day and go to sleep around 10:30.

Gabrielle splits cooking duties with her grandmother. She also helps around the house by cleaning her room, the dishes, and her chores. In the morning, she drops her daughter off at day care, goes home, and rides to school with a friend. At the end of the day, she takes the bus home. If she has homework, she squeezes it in during her free periods.

Interviewer: That’s a lot in a day. How do you feel about all that?
Gabrielle: I don't know. I'm used to it. It’s not that stressful. I get a little nap in. It just goes by fast. I’m used to staying busy like this anyway. I usually do it [homework] during my free periods, if I have any. Most of my classes, we don’t usually. It’s in classwork.

**Extracurricular activities.** Gabrielle has been a member of the drill team and swim team. She joined the drill team in the fall of freshman year and the swim team in the winter of sophomore year. She also participates in a community service organization that she has been a member of since her freshman year.

**Expectations and perceptions.** Gabrielle says that her family has encouraged her to do well in school.

Interviewer: Do you think your parents push you to do well in school and be successful?

Gabrielle: Yes. By staying on my case about me doing my homework, just staying on me about my grades, staying on me about the college acceptance, and applying.

Initially, she says that she does not think the same of the people at Northwestern Tech. She then says that even though they do push her to do more, it is ultimately her job as the student to push herself and get the most out of her education so that she can be successful and take care of herself and her family.

Gabrielle: I have my own mindset. My teachers, they push us to do more. Me as a student, I can clown and still get my work done and still understand. I know at the end of the day, me bettering my education is going to get me a
better job, a better paying job to where I want to be successful and can provide for me and my family. I mean I don’t feel bad [when I get a bad grade]. I just feel like I tried my best. If I know I tried my best, and I still get a bad grade, then I’m not going to feel bad because I know I tried my best.

Interviewer: What if you didn’t try your best?

Gabrielle: Then I still—I won’t feel bad. I just know well, I know I just played this off. I should’ve expected this one. I do feel bad if I do try my best, and I didn’t get the grade I thought I was going to get. I will feel bad, but then I wouldn’t because I feel that I tried my best.

When asked how she believes her principal and teachers would describe her, she says that they would say she is loud, an intelligent person and a role model.

Peer Relationships

Elementary school. Gabrielle recalls that she had lots of friends in elementary school but does not remember them all. She is still friends with some of them now and regularly keeps in contact. One of these friends is her cousin and they speak to one another all the time. She also names a friend that she communicates with through phone calls and texts.

Gabrielle: I had a lot of friends. I remember some of them, not the majority of them. My cousin, we call each other all the time. My friend, we call each other. We text each other. Sometimes, we’ll call.
**Middle school.** Gabrielle mostly describes her middle school years in terms of her behavior and conflicts with others. She begins by saying her time in middle school was good and that she had friends but then immediately touches upon the fact that there were people who went out of their way to bother her. She describes one fight in particular that stands out to her.

Gabrielle:  
It was good. I had friends. It was just people would just take it there sometimes with me. They would just keep on picking with me. In the sixth grade, this really tall girl used to pick with me all the time. Then one day, she pulled my hair and I just lashed out on her. I don't know why she picked on me. She just used to pick on me. I can’t even really remember what she used to say. I fought her.

Interviewer:  
What was the consequence?

Gabrielle:  
Oh, I only got five days, maybe because I didn’t start it.

Interviewer:  
How often would you say you were getting into fights?

Gabrielle:  
I got in maybe two fights in middle school. The rest of them were arguments. One time I got [in school suspension]. It’s like an out of school suspension, but you’re not in school. I don't know how to describe it. It was in sixth grade, right around the time when dad went to jail.

Gabrielle says that she met one her closest friends in middle school. She used to attend Northwestern Tech with her but now attends a different school.

Gabrielle:  
I became friends with one of my closest friends to this day. She used to go here, but she had a baby.
**High school.** Gabrielle says that many of the girls at Northwestern Tech are not generally nice people.

Interviewer: Would you say the girls here are nice, in general?

Gabrielle: No, they all have their days. They’re fake. A lot of them talk behind your back. Just what girls do, I guess, if that’s what you want to call it.

Although the female students generally act the same from middle school to high school, the fighting has decreased since middle school because Gabrielle is better equipped to cope.

Gabrielle: Now I can take a lot in. See in middle school, I couldn’t take a lot because I would just snap really quick. Now I can just ignore people.

Although the fighting lessened, Gabrielle is quite open about the negative relationships she had from the end of freshman year through sophomore year.

Gabrielle: I started hanging out with the wrong people. I was either out of school or skipping. I was just laid back and didn’t really care. We’d like stay home, and go over to each others' houses, or leave school early. Just chill.

She was living with her father at the time and managed to keep this behavior from him. He found out that she skipped school once and disciplined her. It was not enough to keep her from stopping the behavior. Gabrielle’s daughter’s father was a part of the group of friends that she hung out with. She said that as far as her friendships went, attending school while she was pregnant was positive.
Gabrielle: It was okay. I was cool with everyone. I still am cool with everyone. I didn’t have problems with people. The people I used to talk to still talk to me.

By the middle of sophomore year, Gabrielle decided to stop hanging out with that group of friends. She attributes this to her starting to work part-time and becoming more active in sports and lifeguarding. Currently, Gabrielle spends her time with one of her best friends. They met freshman year and have been best friends ever since.

Gabrielle: We go to the mall and just hang out at my house or her house. We hang with my daughter. Majority of time, I’m at home with my daughter. We do a little bit of everything. Sometimes we just walk around just to make the time go by.

Gabrielle: Yeah. just to hang out.

Gabrielle says that she and her best friend are both well known and well liked. She imagines that people would describe her and her best friend as loud and outgoing.

Interviewer: Do you ever feel like you being loud gets you in trouble?

Gabrielle: No, because I know when and where, if it’s the right time. When we’re just hanging out and being cool, not in class or nothing. We’re not as loud. We’re still talkative, but we get our work done.

Gabrielle is not currently dating anyone. Dating is not a priority for her and she prefers to focus on school and her daughter.

Interviewer: Do you date anyone here?
Gabrielle: No. I don’t like boys that go to my school. I just feel I be around them too much. Here, a lot of people here are nosy. I don’t like everybody in my business. That’s just not a focus right now. Finishing senior year and going to college is.

**Social media.** Gabrielle does not use may social media platforms to connect with her peers. She primarily communicates through Twitter and text messages. She does use Snapchat. She has an Instagram account but does not use it, and she deleted her Facebook account because of the drama.

Gabrielle: It was just too much drama. It was just like my old life, old friends. Yeah, just like it was a whole bunch of nonsense. Gang related, all that. I removed myself from stuff like people I used to hang around.

**Media and Representation**

Gabrielle does not have much time to watch television. When she does watch it, she mainly watches with her daughter.

Gabrielle: Yeah, we’ll just watch TV. The Disney Channel. That’s all she watches. I got so used to watching it. I don’t really turn the TV to anything unless my grandma is like, ‘There’s a movie on BET.’ I’ll be like okay.

She listens to music on her phone. She does not have a favorite artist but listens to singers such as Jhene Aiko. She also likes Nicki Minaj’s music and gospel. She listens to a bit of everything. She does say that she does not like songs that refer to women in a derogatory manner, although she attended a Chris Brown and Trey Songz concert last year.
Interviewer: How do you feel about hip-hop? Well, songs in general that refers to women by other names?

Gabrielle: I don’t like it. I feel like it’s disrespectful because I know how I am. I don’t like when people call me out of my name. I don’t usually listen to stuff like that though. Most of my playlists are like Jhene Aiko or The Weeknd, Chris Brown.

Interviewer: When I think of Chris Brown, I automatically think of ‘Loyal.’ What do you think about a song like that? ‘These hoes ain’t loyal.’

Gabrielle: ‘Loyal?’ Oh, that song. I don't know. I don’t really like—I don’t really listen to the lyrics. I really like the beat, if I do like any of that stuff.

Interviewer: Do you like Chris Brown? How do you feel about what happened years ago with him and Rihanna?

Gabrielle: Yes. Oh, yeah, I didn’t like that! I used to really be in love with him. I heard that and I was just like eh. He always has good music so that’s why.

**Beauty.** Gabrielle names Beyoncé as the most beautiful famous person that she can think of. She discusses her physical appearance and expresses her preference for a more natural look.

Interviewer: Going back to media, what famous person would you say is most beautiful?

Gabrielle: Most beautiful? Beyoncé. She just wears natural. She’s always been a natural type of person. She doesn’t dress outrageously, trying to do all
that different stuff. Like, you know how Nikki Minaj first started out with the pink wigs? She’s always been a natural type of R&B artist.

Gabrielle believes that everyone is beautiful in their own way.

Interviewer: What do you consider beautiful?

Gabrielle: Everyone’s beautiful. Everyone’s made differently. Not everyone’s made the same. I mean I don’t really judge people about how they look. If you have a nasty attitude, that kind of pertains to yourself. It’ll make you look like you’re a bad person.

In a discussion about representation in pop culture, Gabrielle presented insights about the perception of beauty for African American girls and women.

Interviewer: Have you ever liked to read magazines? What do you like to look at/for?

Gabrielle: Yeah, I did when I was younger. The pictures and [to] read about celebrity life. I don’t remember what [magazines] they are. Just used to pick them up at Kroger’s or something.

Interviewer: Do you feel like the people that you saw in the magazines, or let’s say you’re just scrolling through on Twitter, or you don’t go on Instagram a lot, but you’re just browsing on the Internet, on whatever sites that you’re on, do you feel like you’re seeing a lot of African American girls who look like you?

Gabrielle: No. Because we’re all unique.

Interviewer: Do you think that you see a lot of African American girls period?

Gabrielle: Sometimes, not really.
Interviewer: Do you think that Black girls are considered pretty in comparison to other groups?

Gabrielle: No, because some people’s skin is darker than others, or our hair is more natural than others.

Interviewer: Do you think that our society thinks about what is beautiful—do you think that we consider darker skin or natural hair beautiful?

Gabrielle: No, that’s why a lot of people get sew-ins with straight hair. I don’t think nothing is wrong with it. A lot of people get them because they don’t like their hair texture, or they don’t like their hair period. I love my hair. Sometimes, I wear it straight. It depends. After I wash it, it just stays like this [natural] until I find someone to [flat iron] it.

Interviewer: How do you feel about girls your age wearing a lot of makeup?

Gabrielle: Sometimes, I mean just for special occasions maybe. But I’m not the type of person who will wear makeup every day.

Interviewer: Do you see a lot of your classmates wearing a lot of makeup?

Gabrielle: Yeah, they put foundation and that stuff on.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Gabrielle: I have no clue honestly. Maybe because they think it makes them look better than what they are. My mom always told me the more natural you are, the better beauty you are. Natural beauty’s always better beauty.

Interviewer: What about when you’re watching TV, or you’re watching The Disney Channel, do you think that as your daughter gets older, she will start
seeing characters that look like her, or do you think she sees characters that look like her now?

Gabrielle: No. I mean, I don't know. I want her to see herself as being herself and not looking as trying to be somebody else.

Interviewer: If you could give her advice about that, what would you say?

Gabrielle: That just be yourself.

Interviewer: Would you say you try to be yourself, or you are yourself?

Gabrielle: Yeah, I am myself.

While Gabrielle does not watch the news, she gets information from her grandparents. They watch the news and inform her of what is occurring in the world. Interestingly, although she has fought herself, she does not believe that fighting is appropriate.

Interviewer: How do you feel when you see stuff on the news about Black girls in high school beating up other Black girls?

Gabrielle: I feel like fighting’s not cute, period. It’s just an ugly trait. I don’t like fighting, but if I have to fight, I will.

Needs in School

Gabrielle is given the opportunity to reflect on the needs of African American girls in schools. She suggests that guidance and mentoring are important.

Gabrielle: Maybe the right guidance, and the right—how can I put this? The right pep talks to show us even though you go through stuff, that you feel like
may keep you held back, it doesn’t always keep you held back. Just give them examples of strong, Black women who’s successful.

Interviewer: You’re saying mentoring would be important?
Gabrielle: Yes.

Interviewer: What about testing and what you’re learning about in school? Do you feel like what you’re learning about in classes represents you?

Gabrielle: Not necessarily because not everyone has the full comprehension of what—everyone has their strengths and their weaknesses academically. You might be real good in one subject and another subject you’re struggling. That doesn’t mean you’re not smarter than the next girl sitting to you.

If she could create her own class that best represented her, Gabrielle would focus on teaching skills such as strength and collaboration.

Interviewer: If you could make a class that you felt represented you, what are some things that would be taught?

Gabrielle: Being strong, pulling out everyone’s strengths and weaknesses, just talking amongst a group. I just—I like working as a group. I feel like we are better working as a team. I also like working by myself because I do have a certain mindset [on] how I want things to look, how I want this, or how I know this is going to get. Stuff like that.

Interviewer: Would you want to learn about famous Black women, famous Black men?
Gabrielle: Yes, to show them that it’s not only the White men or the White women that are the only ones who can ever be successful.
Maya Adams

Maya Adams is a seventeen-year-old old junior at Northwestern Tech High School. She was interviewed individually with one thirty minute and one hour long interview. She also participated in one group interview. Additional data was collected from one classroom observation during her Math class.

**Background and Family Life**

Maya lives with her mother and four siblings: a twin brother, a sixteen-year old sister, a ten-year old sister, and a nine-year old brother. She says that they all get along but she and her sixteen year old sister bump heads.

Maya reveals that her father has been killed tragically when she and her brother were very young.

Maya: I’m not sure because my dad passed away when I was real little.

I don’t remember a lot about him. He got shot and then they put him in his car and left him there. It was 2000 and something. I’m not sure which year, but I know I was real little.

Interviewer: Did details ever come out as to why?

Maya: They wanted to rob him because he was a drug dealer. So they thought he had a lot of money somewhere. They kidnapped him, and it was his friends too. They kidnapped him and had him for two days. They ended up killing him.

Maya explained this in a very matter-of-fact tone. She says that she does not know how to feel and that she numbs herself. She makes the point that while she wishes her father
were around for her and her twin brother, she especially wishes that her brother would have the benefit of a father figure. She spends a significant amount of time in the interview discussing her brother and her concern for his struggles and future.

Maya: I don’t know how to feel. You just numb yourself. I don’t know how to feel. I wish my dad was here because I have a twin brother and I want him to have a father figure, but I don’t know. I want both of us to, but it’s easier for a woman to raise a woman. It’s not easy for a woman to raise a man. Boys tend to think they have— their views are different. They tend to think they know everything like they got everything is always right and sometimes they abuse their power. They want to control women and stuff and it’s like you can’t be like that. My mom’s trying to teach my brother respect everybody the same. We’re all human. You don’t control anyone because you don’t want anyone to control you.

She says that her mother is too nice, perhaps to a fault, and that her brother would benefit from a firm voice. Maya says that even though she and her brother are twins, they are completely different people. This is especially the case with their achievement and behavior in school.

Maya: To be honest, everybody is different. People tend to think twins have that little twin telepathy or something. We don’t. I don’t know what it is, but we don’t. We’re two totally different people. We are. I get good grades. I’ve been getting good grades since kindergarten. He’s average. I’m like a scholar. I’m motivated and he’s not. You have to
literally tell him a thousand times to do something before he’ll get up and
do it. I stay trying to tell him now we’re about to be seniors and you’re
still just not doing nothing.

Her brother does not attend Northwestern Tech and Maya says that he would not
make it at the school. While the two of them get along, Maya acknowledges that they are
going in two different directions and this frightens her.

Maya: Yeah, we get along [socially]. But not at all [academically] and that’s
scary. I want my brother to do as good as me, if not better. It’s harder as
a young man in today’s world. With all that gang violence, drugs, all that
stuff. It’s easier for me to do better for myself but for them. They got—I
mean females have peer pressure too, but they [Black teenagers] really
have pressure. Like pressure to not be smart or not go to school or just be
in the streets all the time and just not do anything. I’m really more scared
for him than for me because I know I’m going to make it, but I don’t know
about him, especially growing up today. Especially with the music and
like TV and our phones. We have so much stuff that we can do like what
our people know. We have so much access to everything. It doesn’t
benefit you. I feel like it’s not a benefit. It’s too much. I think it’s way
too much. I don’t mind. I like my phone and stuff, my computer, but
sometimes you can do too much stuff like bullying, all the stuff on the
Internet, like messing with people. It’s just crazy.
Maya has a great deal of admiration for her mother and the sacrifices she has made for her family. She particularly highlights her mother’s attributes of strength and independence as traits that she looks up to. Although she admires independence, however, she desires a partner that will support her.

Maya: She just does everything for everybody else and she does little for herself. I want my mom to have stuff for herself, but I also want to have stuff for us. She’ll go and buy us stuff and then she’ll be like I’ve had the same clothes since 2006. Mom, go buy you something. She’ll be like, no, I’m okay. I always buy her something. Anytime I go somewhere I’ll always get her something, so she’ll know that we appreciate her. When my mom got pregnant with me and my twin brother, she was in college. She dropped out of college to raise us because she said I don’t want to be a parent that has their grandma raising their kids when I could be in my kid’s life. I think that’s another way how she showed us because she could’ve stayed in college and just let my grandma raise us. I want to be independent, but I also want to have somebody that has my back or is there when I need them. I’m all for being independent because I feel like you can do it by yourself as long as you try.

Maya’s admiration for independence does have negatives in terms of perceptions and how one might treat themselves.

Interviewer: What negatives might be associated with being independent?
Maya: Yeah, because people would think, well, she thinks she’s better because she thinks she don’t need anyone. She thinks she’s better than that. It’s like no, I’m just as good as you are. I just want to do it by myself, but it’s always okay to ask for help because you can’t. I don’t think it’s possible, but it’s possible. You understand what I’m saying? To do something by yourself but you’re always going to need somebody that’s going to be there. Even if it’s not a partner, if it’s just a friend or your mom or your grandma. Somebody that’s going be there for you to fall back on if you do need help.

Interviewer: It sounds like you’re talking more about interdependence.

Maya: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think the negatives might be how other people perceive you? Do you think there might be any personal negatives?

Maya: No. I don’t think so. I think it all depends on the person—in a person’s personality because you could just think highly of yourself. You just get so full of yourself you, don’t want anybody—you don’t want any help at all or you just don’t care what anybody else has to say. You think everything you say is the right way to go and sometimes it’s not because your first judgment is sometimes your worst.

Interviewer: Do you think that can take a toll on somebody mentally or physically?

Maya: Yeah, I think so because when they try to do what they thought was going to be okay and good, then something bad happens and then it’s just they’re
depressed because I wanted it to turn out this way, but it turned out this way. So I don’t know how I’m going to change it.

Maya says that she has had issues with anger and that she has a temper. In discussing this, she reveals that her father’s death was not the only tragedy she has experienced.

Maya: I can be nice, but I also have that little side where people don’t want to see. Because I really hit below the belt; I really do. I know I need to change that, but it’s something you’ve got to work on over time. It don’t just happen overnight. I don’t really tell people this but my brother got killed in front of me. He was like a brother to me. My mom helped raise him. It was one of her friend’s sons and she wasn’t doing the right thing. I don’t really respect a lot of people because if you can take a life for no reason, why do you need respect? I don’t know. People say I’m mug. I don’t think I’m mug, but I just have an actual look on my face and I don’t like talking to people. I can pop off real fast. I think that’s another reason why my temper is so short. I don’t take the time to get to know people. I think I see the bad in people or I can see—you know how you look at somebody and be like, ‘Oh yeah, she ain’t right,’ or ‘He ain’t right.’ I think I can see that. I don’t even give you a chance to even get to know me or talk to me, because I feel you’re not even worth my time.

Although her temper did not begin with her brother’s death, it did worsen. Maya shares that she not only witnessed the shooting, but that she was sitting in the car right
next to him when he was shot in the head two years ago. Maya believes strongly that this senseless crime was committed on purpose. It angers her that the perpetrator of this crime was never apprehended.

Maya: Oh, I had a temper before that, but it got worse. It [really] got worse after that. I even pop off with my mom and she has to tell me, ‘You just need to calm down, take a deep breath,’ but I have blood, and I don’t stop for nothing until I’m satisfied with what I said to you or your feelings are hurt.

Identity

Maya was born in Northwestern City. Her father was of Haitian and Jamaican descent. Her mother is African American. She identifies as African American. Maya describes herself as someone who is beautiful, intelligent and has power. She is not concerned with others’ opinions of her. Maya says that she is a feminist who believes in women’s independence. She also seeks interdependence because she acknowledges that support is important. She cites her mother as a strong example of the strong, independent African American woman and strives to be like her. Her faith is important to her and she is a Christian.

Academics

Maya attended elementary and middle school in Northwestern City. Her first elementary school was closed down when she was in the third grade because it was an older building. A new school was built and she was transferred to the new building. A similar occurrence took place with her middle school: the first was closed down and is
now an all girls school. The school that she was transferred to is now closed because of low enrollment. While her elementary schools were neighborhood schools, she had to be entered into a lottery to attend her middle schools.

Maya describes her experiences in school in terms of both academics and her peer relationships. Maya says that she got in trouble quite a bit in elementary and middle school because of her temper. Elementary school is described through its emotional aspects, while middle school is more so about relationships and behavior with a short discussion of academics. High school brings the discussion of grades and courses.

**Elementary school.** Maya remembers that her teachers were nice and caring.

Maya: [My first school] was nice. The building was just old, but it was a good school; I liked it a lot. Our teachers were really nice. They weren’t as hard and as strict on us. They wanted us to learn. They made fun ways for us to learn, we would play games to learn our ABCs or learn how to spell big words.

Interviewer: What was the ethnic makeup of the school?


Interviewer: You felt like they were caring?

Maya: Mm-hmm.

This is the same in her second school.

Maya: It was the same way. It was new because we had our first graduating classroom there in fifth grade, but it was a good experience because I was in a spelling bee. I didn’t go all the way but I went to the second round.
Middle school. Maya applied for a lottery for her middle school. She was accepted to a number of middle schools but she chose to attend her particular school because it was the only one that her mother approved of.

Interviewer: What made you choose [your school]?

Maya: I don’t know, I think that was the only school my mom liked that I got into. Because I got into [a middle school] but since it’s an all year round school and you’ve gotta call your teachers mama and baba she didn’t want me to go there. Then I got into [a second school]. It was a newer school so she didn’t want me to go there, because she didn’t know how it was.

She was comfortable at her school. When asked about her teachers, she says that they liked her but did not expect her to be as smart as she was.

Maya: All my teachers like me because I feel like they didn’t expect me to be so smart. Because you know how they associate geeks or lames or—they don’t have any friends they just worry about school. With me, I worry about school and I still have a lot of friends. And I’m able to joke around in the classroom and still get my work done. [The classes] was easy. I feel like nothing’s ever easy, but you just have to try and be willing to do something. I’ve been on the honor roll since kindergarten, so I never know what it felt like to have a F or a D. You’ve just got to be willing to try because nothing is easy.
Behavior wise, Maya was suspended a few times in middle school because of how she spoke to people. She notes that she was never suspended for fighting because she would never fight in school.

Interviewer: When you were in middle school were you in trouble to the point where you were suspended?

Maya: Yeah. Not a lot, but sometimes. My mouth, mostly [got me in trouble]. I don’t fight at school. We can fight outside of school or something. Because if you go home—because obviously schools are—not in charge, but you’re still under their protection until you step on your doorstep. If I go home and then come back and fight you I won’t get suspended. But if I don’t go home and I just fight you I’ll get suspended.

Interviewer: Don’t fight at school. Why would you choose to fight outside rather than inside? You’re worried about getting suspended?

Maya: Yeah.

**High school.** Maya is enrolled in six classes: Art, Chemistry, AP United States History, AP Language and Composition, Common Core Math 3, and a course for college credit. She is also a teacher helper. Students have to have a certain grade point average to be placed in the college class. She says that it is not mandatory and that she chose to join. She says that her cumulative grade point average is 3.6. She made the honor roll for the third quarter.

Maya chose Northwestern Tech after representatives from the school visited her middle school and talked about the academics. She also wanted to challenged.
Maya: Because at Northwestern Tech there are people that went to my middle school that came to Northwestern Tech. They came and talked to us about Northwestern Tech. When they talked with us, it was like it sounds like a really nice school. They’re academics are good. They’re known around the world. I was like, yeah that might be the school for me. Then I got accepted, so I was like, yeah I’ll come here. It’s a challenge. I don’t want to go to a school where it’s like, oh I can just get an A easy, by doing a couple papers.

While Northwestern Tech is a great school, Maya says that it has its disadvantages. She wishes that the school were more racially and ethnically diverse.

Maya: People aren’t open. I feel like it’s not a lot of different ethnicities. It’s mostly African-American. I think we should have a variety of people because society is not only one dominant race, it’s a lot of different races. That’s why I think they should have more—lean more towards other races.

Interviewer: Do you feel like there have been advantages to being in a school setting like this with a large number of African-Americans?

Maya: I don’t know. I don’t think so, I think it’s the same. Because every school that I went to has been predominantly African-American.

Maya says that her teachers would describe her as bright and well-liked. Her interactions with teachers and administrators have been positive.
Interviewer: How are your relationships with the administrators and the guidance counselors?

Maya: They’re good. They don’t know my name because I don’t get in trouble anymore. If they see me they’ll be, ‘Oh.’ They know my name, but they don’t know my name to the point where they see me all the time. I haven’t been in trouble since I’ve been in high school.

By trouble, Maya means suspended, which has not occurred since she finished middle school.

_A typical school day._ Maya describes her school day briefly and places a particular emphasis on free time and sleep.

Maya: Wake up, get in a shower and get dressed. My mom drives me to the bus stop. Come here do all my classes, go home, do homework. Get a couple hours of sleep, two hours of sleep and then I’m free to do whatever I want after I wake up.

Interviewer: You do your homework first then you take a nap?

Maya: Yeah.

Interviewer: What about dinner?

Maya: We eat dinner at different times because my mom works at night. She’ll cook before she goes to work and then we just eat it whenever we want, but the food will be done. Sometimes when she doesn’t have to work we eat as a family. When she has to work we don’t. We all sit downstairs but we don’t sit at the table.
Interviewer: Do you watch TV when you’re eating?

Maya: No, my older brother does, but I don’t. I’ll be hungry and so I’ll be worried about my food.

Interviewer: Did you say you take the bus?

Maya: Yeah. Sometimes or my mama drops me off if I don’t feel like riding the bus.

Interviewer: What time does the bus come?

Maya: At 6:40. I get up at 5:45.

Interviewer: What time is first period here?

Maya: 7:30.

If she could design her ideal school day, Maya says that it would be just like the days she has at Northwestern Tech, but with more sleep and time for a job.

Interviewer: Why?

Maya: Because everybody here at least tries and everybody at least gets to where they want to go.

Interviewer: What would your ideal day look like? Because you’re tweeting about how you’re ready to go.

Maya: A lot of sleep. School for a couple of hours. Work. Do a couple homework assignments and stuff. Get some more sleep and then a job.

Interviewer: Do you feel like you’re not getting enough sleep?

Maya: No, I think I get enough sleep but there’s nothing like more sleep.

Interviewer: What kind of job?
Maya: I don’t know, just one that pays a lot of money, that I enjoy doing.

**Classroom observation.** Maya was observed in her Math class. The assignment was to complete a set of problems. The students could work independently, in pairs, or in small groups. Maya started off working by herself. She then migrated toward a group of talkative girls. Maya was the most quiet in the group. She was focused on the task while laughing with the group of girls and engaging in conversation. Maya sat in the middle of the room when she was sitting by herself and then moved over to the back right of the room, in an area that was farthest from the teacher. When one of the girls in the group said that her brain was about to ‘tap out,’ Maya said there was no such thing and kept working.

Her behavior was directly related to how she has described herself as a student. She was focused and hardworking but also liked to have fun with her friends. Her quick temper was also noted. She is in the same class as Olivia and as they participated in a group interview together, close attention was paid to their interaction. At the beginning of class, Maya asked Olivia a question. When Olivia responded with ‘What do you think?’ Maya said angrily, ‘That’s why I don’t like talking to you because of your mouth.’ The pair collaborated at some points during the class but were mostly separate and sat in separate locations.

**Extracurricular activities.** Maya says that she does not have time to be a part of activities at school because is very involved outside of school.

Maya: No. I don’t have time to be involved in stuff at school. I do so much stuff outside of school. I do community service too. I help out at Bible studies
and stuff. I don’t really have time. Then I just don’t want to. I’m more focused on academics for college, not trying to play a sport for a college, or this and that.

Interviewer: Where do you go to church?

Maya: I don’t go to church anymore because I feel like it’s a lot of work getting up in the morning. I do go to Bible study though.

Maya does not work during the school year but has a summer job. She works with an organization that places young people at sites around Northwestern City for summer employment. Last year, she was placed at a recreation center and worked with children.

**Expectations, perceptions and the future.** Maya says that she does not feel pressure to get good grades or behave a certain type of way. She says that she does not put pressure on herself, either.

Interviewer: Do you feel pressure to get good grades or behave in an appropriate manner?

Maya: No, because my mom, she’s not the strict type. My mom, her saying is, do right to others and they’ll do right to you. But if somebody treats you wrong then you can treat them wrong, because they did you wrong first. If somebody hit me I can hit them back, but I can’t hit somebody first.

Maya comes to school to get good grades so that she can leave and go to college. After she graduates, Maya wants to be a neurosurgeon. She has already begun to look at Historically Black Colleges and Universities such as Spelman College and Clark Atlanta
University and is planning to attend a college tour in the summer to visit them. She has already visited local colleges and universities. Her mother has encouraged her to visit college campuses and says that she will pay for her tours. In the future, she wants to have a job and be stable.

Maya: Have my job and be stable. Enough money to survive and being happy. Being able to be myself, be married, kids. Being able to help my mom. Make sure my mom’s okay as she gets older. Just being able to give back to people. I feel like at certain places you have to act a certain way for people to accept you. Here I act as myself because I don’t need acceptance from anybody. Certain people want you to do this, when you go to a job interview, you can’t go in there slouched over, with ripped jeans on. You’ve got to look nice and be presentable or you won’t get the job. Sometimes you have to change the way you are to get what you want.

Interviewer: You don’t feel like you have to do that here?

Maya: No. Like a job interview. If you normally don’t dress up, you need to go buy some dress up [laughter] clothes, so you can look presentable. Like I said, you can’t go in there dressed with old things on. Because first looks are how people judge you. People judge you based off of your looks. Then once you start talking to them then they start to really get a feel of who you are. You can’t go in there [job interview] talking in slang, I ain’t or, why you is that? You have to talk proper. Some people don’t know how to speak because they don’t know because they never learned,
But at least try. I didn’t have anybody in front of me to show me the way. I had to find my own way by myself because I’m the oldest. Nobody else in my family went to college. Nobody else in my family—most of my family didn’t even graduate from high school. So, I found my way for myself. I made things happen for myself.

Maya is proud of herself because she has figured quite a bit out on her own.

**Needs in School**

Maya is clear about the types of teachers that she works the best and least well with. Maya works best with teachers who connect with her on a personal level.

Maya: They’re open with us. They don’t act bourgeoisie or act like they’re better than us. They actually talk to us. They’re willing to listen to our problems. They just have fun. In a class they teach, but you have those free periods.

Interviewer: What about how they teach?

Maya: I like the way they teach us because they don’t just do one thing. They take many approaches. Visual, write on the board or sometimes—we don’t even get book work. We don’t even use our books half the time. Visual, or they just talk to us and not just sit there and give us a page and be like, ‘Do this and turn it in at the end of the period.’ We don’t get that a lot.

Maya does not work well with teachers who she says play favorites.

Interviewer: What about your least favorite teachers?
Maya: Some, they play favorites; they do favoritism. I feel like you shouldn’t have favorites if you work at a school because it’s filled with a lot of different kids. You don’t know if they just want you there because they don’t have that person to help. You can speak and they act like they don’t hear you.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Maya: You can be, hi. They’ll just keep walking and they act like they don’t hear you, but I know you heard me, because you looked up.

Interviewer: What do those teachers look like?

Maya: They’re White.

Interviewer: Male or female?

Maya: Female.

Interviewer: Do you feel you relate more to your Black teachers?

Maya: No, because I relate to some of my White teachers too.

She notes that she does not need anything more from Northwestern Tech.

Interviewer: Imagine that you were brought in to talk to the Principal or your teachers, what would you want them to know about what you need from Northwestern Tech?

Maya: I don’t know, because I don’t really feel like I need anything from Northwestern Tech. They give me everything, education, helping me out. I really don’t feel like I need—
However, Maya offers suggestions if she had the opportunity to give input to policy makers for what African American girls need.

Maya: They need mentors, just like boys. Leadership, because some people don’t have their mothers. Either their mother’s passed away or their mother is on drugs or doing this or doing that. So they like need somebody that they can just talk to about anything, that’s not going to try and like preach to them but talk to them and lead them in the right direction. So I think they need mentors, too.

They need more support. They need Black women to come and speak to them to show them that I did it so you can too. To show them that Black women can empower each other and not put each other down.

Maya: And I think it's, everybody needs somebody to like come and speak to motivate them. A lot of people don’t ever want to speak to kids. Like why wouldn’t you? You made it. And if you claim you want see people do better, why can’t you just come and give like a 30-minute speech? It doesn’t have to be a whole two hours, just a 30-minute speech. Sometime you could write it on your way home in the car. You have to like come and show people that they can really make it out. They just have to try like you tried.

Interviewer: Let’s say that people who are in charge of making laws about education specifically wanted to know what Black girls needed. For example there are policies to try to get Black males to achieve at higher rates, or aimed at
helping to improve their behavior and get off the streets. Do you think
Black girls need anything like that?

Maya: They do but it’s not in the forefront.

Interviewer: Why?

Maya: Because people tend more to think that males need more help than
females. Females have that strong background; they can fend for
themselves. They could try to survive because they have that caregiver,
caretaker inside them. When they have to they can.

Males I sometimes think are dependent on females. Females can be
dependent on males too, but males depend on females I think more of the
time because some of them don’t have that male role model or male figure
in their life. They want somebody to take care of them for the rest of their
life.

Interviewer: Then you’re saying we do need those things but it’s not at the forefront?

Maya: I don’t know, because females I think tend to do better anyway. They
know how to put stuff to the side. Females suppress to peer pressure but
not as much as males, because they always have that in their face.

Interviewer: Females tend to do better, but do you think that that can have a negative
associated with that?

Maya: No.

Maya acknowledges that there is pressure associated with doing better.
Interviewer: Do you think that it could be a lot of pressure on women to know that at the end of the day they’re always going to do better?

Maya: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think that pressure could be good or bad?

Maya: I think it could be both, because it could make you strive to do better for yourself. Also it can send you into depression because you know you should have done it, but then you chose to be lazy just because you didn’t really achieve your goal.

Peer Relationships

Elementary school. Maya is still close to some of the friends that she made in elementary school.

Maya: Some of us are still friends today. We used to just always argue and then be friends—not friends, but like talking. I don’t think we really knew what friends were in elementary school. We were just cool with everybody. We didn’t have a select group of people we were always hanging out with.

Middle school. Maya says that middle school was different because she had to learn to navigate being around a new set of peers.

Maya: Middle school was different, because it was a lot of people—it was more people. You’re a sixth grader coming in, and you see these big seventh, eighth graders. It’s like you don’t know how to act. Some people from middle school, we’re still friends today too. That’s when you started to
get into your select group of friends, people you always hang out with and
people you just talk to at school.

Interviewer: Your middle school friends carry over from your elementary school
friends?

Maya: Yeah, some of them did. They were funny, mostly Black. They were just
easy going. Free spirited and we could just be ourselves around each
other. We weren’t uptight or try to treat somebody different because of
their background.

**High School.** Maya describes her social life at Northwestern Tech as being
positive. Her friends would describe her as someone who is open-minded and someone
who would not bite her tongue. She is well known. She says that although there are not
many, there are people who do not like her and perceive her as spoiled because of her
material possessions.

Maya: The [social life] is good, I talk to everybody. It’s not a lot of people that
don’t like me but you always have those couple of people that don’t know
you but they think they do. Because I know I do the same thing, I judge
people before I know them. I know I do. Some people think I’m spoiled
because I’ve got nice clothes, five pairs of UGGs. I have an iPhone; I
don’t know why they think people are spoiled because they have an
iPhone. My mom, it’s not that I’m spoiled but she does what she can. A
lot of people think I’m nice, but some people think I’m mean because of
just the way I sometimes look. I don’t know I never see it. I’m smart but
I’m popular, I guess. I don’t consider myself popular because I don’t like that word.

Although it has lessened, Maya’s temper is still an issue in high school and it impacts how she interacts with her peers. “It’s my mouth. I have a really bad temper and my mouth is just foul.”

Maya: If I hear you say something, or if I know you’re saying something but you don’t think you’re saying something, I’m going to say something to you. Just yesterday, I cussed her out—I called her so many B’s and I know I shouldn’t have. I’m contradicting myself. I don’t like that word, but I called her a whole bunch of B’s but it’s because I was mad. I don’t even know her, but she was talking about me and I knew she was because I’d seen her. You know how you peep it? I was quiet at first. I was like, Why are you talking bout me? She didn’t say nothing. She was like, ‘I wasn’t saying nothing about you.’ I said, I saw you and I know when people are talking about me. You literally looked at me and then go and start whispering. I’m like, okay. Then she said something and I just popped off on her. I just cussed her out.

**Dating.** Maya says that at school, people date who they want to. She does not hear of girls complaining that they cannot find a boyfriend. Maya is seeing someone but he does not attend Northwestern Tech. He attends a high school that is not comparable to Northwestern Tech and she is unclear about his future plans and ambition.
Maya: Because I’m not the one to see you everyday type person. If I see you at
school and then you want to come over to my house after school, and on
the weekends, I’m going to get tired of you. I’d rather see you on the
weekends and a couple of days out of the week than see you every single
day of the week. I don’t know what he’s [current boyfriend] going to do
with his life. We’ve been talking—we’ve known each other since we
were little babies. We were friends at first, and then we started dating. We
dated for three years and stopped when I was in eighth grade and he was
in ninth grade. We stopped talking because I’m focused on school.

Maya is very clear about dating on her own terms and not allowing a relationship
to impact her schoolwork or future. She plans on breaking up with him before college
and does not plan on dating in college.

Maya: Yeah. Then last year he told me, ‘I got a baby by another girl.’ I’m like,
well I’m not mad because we weren’t together. Now we’re back together.

Interviewer: Does he want to go to college?

Maya: No. He won’t make it. I’m done. I can’t be with somebody that’s not
about to try and do better for themselves. You can’t be a drug dealer for
your whole life. We really love each other. We really do, but, I don’t
know. I think it’s just because we love each other that he doesn’t let me
around that stuff though. He doesn’t want me around when he’s doing
that. He does a lot of stuff for me but I think that’s one of the ways [he
shows he cares]. We go places, he buys me stuff all the time. I tell him I
can pay for myself. He wants to pay. He bought me Victoria Secrets, that hoodie. He bought me a crazy hoodie! He bought me some shoes one time, but I don’t wear them because I don’t want to. We just always go out [P.F. Chang’s]. We go to movies. Sometimes he picks me up from school. We just chill.

Interviewer: You’re giving him another year, a couple of months? When are you going to break up with him then?

Maya: I don’t know. I’m planning not to break up with him, I’m just going to stop talking to him. Just be like [hit] delete. When you call me, your number is not going to be on my phone. I don’t answer people’s number that I don’t know. Unless I know it’s from my job or something, I won’t answer. If he pop[s] up at my house, I’ll just be like, tell my brother to tell him I’m gone.

Interviewer: You don’t want to date in college?

Maya: No. That’s a distraction, in the field I want to go into I need to have all my sanity. I don’t need to be worrying about what he’s doing or where’s he at?

Media and Representation

Maya says that she does not often see people who she feels represent her on television or the Internet.

Interviewer: Do you feel like you see girls that look like you in general? Let’s say you’re sitting there watching TV or you’re thumbing through your phone?
Maya: I think people are scared to show themselves, so they just don’t.

Interviewer: Imagine I’m the magazine executive I’m in charge of advertising and you want to make the recommendation, what would you tell them?

Maya: I would just say have diversity. You can have a whole picture with an African-American, a Hispanic or Caucasian, a Muslim or somebody from Islam, just have a whole picture. Because we’re all united anyway. Just have the whole picture with every different race. Put them in your magazine and people will...feel okay and be like, oh I like this magazine. I’m going to keep reading it. Or I’m going to keep buying it. I’m going to subscribe to this magazine because I see people like me.’

Interviewer: Why do you think they don’t?

Maya: I think [its] money. Because if you have a magazine without a skinny girl or with just all Black girls, but all Hispanic girls, I’m sure somebody wouldn’t buy it.

Interviewer: Interesting. If the magazine has all Black girls or Hispanic girls somebody wouldn’t buy it, but what about magazines that have all White girls?

Maya: People buy that. I don’t know why, but people seem to buy it. I think it’s because it’s just [the] social norm I guess. People are so used to it, they don’t think about it. They just say, oh yeah, I’ll get this magazine.

Maya does not watch the news. She feels as though it does not cover enough of the local issues that cares about.

Interviewer: Do you watch the news, the weather?

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Maya: No. It’s not local enough, it’s too worldwide, I don’t want to know about what’s happening in Iraq, I’m in [this city]. No. I don’t really watch for [the weather] either. I only watch the news to see when school is closed.

If she wants to know what is happening in the world, Maya looks at Twitter.

Interviewer: Do you look at what’s going on? Do you follow the news site through Twitter?

Maya: Yes, I follow [the local news] on Twitter. They never really tweet anything but when people get shot. I don’t know how to feel [about that]. I just numb myself to anything about somebody getting shot.

Maya says that girls have it worse when it comes to bullying and connects bullying to the media.

Interviewer: Would you say that bullying is more of a female problem?

Maya: I think it’s both. I don’t think it’s not—it doesn’t discriminate, but I think females do have it worse because you’re not the same color as this one, [or] you’re not the same size. [For example], like skin tone, or like you don’t have the same stuff as them. You’re a different size; you’re a different shape. Everybody comes in different sizes but people don’t believe that. Males bully, but they fight too. Females, they talk a lot. It’s easier to talk about somebody and bullying them rather than —when boys, they say one word, they’re just ready to fight. I do not know [why that is]. I wish I could tell you, but I can’t. I just see everybody as one. I think it has everything to do with the media. You see
your role models. The people I look up to look like this, so you want to look like that and if you see somebody that doesn’t look like them, you’re like, why do you look like that? You can do something to change or to help yourself, better yourself, but sometimes you don’t have that guidance. You really don’t know what to do. Sometimes you like yourself how you are. Everybody [is] beautiful in [their] own way. I’m not trying to change it for nobody.

Maya offers her thoughts on seeing young girls fighting on the Internet.

Interviewer: How do you feel, talking about the media, talking about the Internet, when you see girls fighting? Especially on sites like Worldstar or the young lady who was beat up at a McDonald’s in Brooklyn and it was all over the Internet?

Maya: I don’t know. I feel like people fight to protect themselves, but some people take it too far. You do not have to beat her to the point where she’s just all messed up. I feel like fighting for a girl is not okay. You don’t want to be known as, oh she’s always out there fighting. She ain’t got nothing else better to do with her life. She’s always starting drama.

Interviewer: If they were guys it would be okay?

Maya: Not really, but people say it’s okay. People make it okay because of masculinity. Boys are supposed to be macho and so tough. If somebody disrespects you, [it] automatically leads to fighting. And females are
supposed to be calm and sweet and nice. They shouldn’t have foul
mouths, so they’re just supposed to let things go.

Interviewer: Thinking about how boys are supposed to act and how girls are supposed
to act, how would you describe yourself?

Maya: I think I’m a little bit of both. Because I can be loud, and I can be hard,
and I can be mean, and I can fight. I also know how to turn it off … when
I’m done being mad or angry. Then I can just be calm and nice.

**Beauty.** Maya offers her perspective on beauty both personally and in the media.

She critiques the images of the women that peers consider beautiful and places a
particular emphasis on natural beauty.

Interviewer: What famous person would you say is most beautiful?

Maya: I don’t know because I’ve never seen them normal. I only see them with
their makeup [and] their weave. I really couldn’t give you an honest
answer because I want to see their natural beauty. I think they’re [girls]
hiding something; they’re covering up something. They don’t want to be
themselves because maybe they’re not okay with themselves. They just
see one flaw and think everything is messed up. They want to put on
makeup to disguise it, to try to be someone new. You’re still yourself.

You just have on a lot of makeup.

Maya says the women that girls believe are gorgeous are not, in her words,
everything. She specifically names Beyoncé, Rihanna and Nicki Minaj and says that she
does not understand why girls want to be like them.
Maya: Beyoncé. To me, she looks normal. I don’t think she’s like oh, everything. Like the Beyoncé’s, the Rihanna’s, to Nicki Minaj’s. It’s like everybody wants to be like her. I do not know why. [For example], Nicki Minaj. It’s not realistic for you to be a female rapper. It’s not. Instead, girls should aspire to a more realistic profession. I’m not saying because school is not for everybody. I’m not saying go to school and do this, but you can be a doctor, like a nurse or work at [being] a teacher. A teacher is real realistic because…a lot of people can be teachers, but being a female rapper is not realistic.

Maya continues to critique the image of women like Nicki Minaj’s and their positions as a role model. Instead of looking up to a woman with a fake body, she suggests girls look up to women like Madame C. J. Walker and people who have had a positive impact in their communities.

Interviewer: You said that everyone wants to look like Nicki Minaj or everyone wants to be like her?

Maya: Be like her. She’s got a nice body. But it’s like fake. People want to have that same figure as her. I don’t think you should look up to her. You can but you shouldn’t want to. Madam C. J. Walker. People that really change the world for the better. Even like somebody that’s local that really helped you out or like helped your community or just helped change people’s lives just because.
Maya’s choice of a historic role model was intriguing and she was asked to choose a contemporary, prominent figure.

Maya: Michelle Obama. It’s just everything about her. She just trying to change people’s lives for the better. It’s not no front. She’s not trying to [be] fake. She really cares about people and really wants to see people change, So, she’s trying her best, s why not try your best? I think by going for the kids or healthy eating habits, everything starts with the kid. They can persuade their parents to change this or change that. I like how she goes for the kids first. She really wants to help them out because most stuff is to help adults. There’s really not a lot of programs to help children, so when she said that whole eating healthy stuff it really helped change kids’ lives. There’s not a lot of programs because… you got to have money to have these programs. You don’t know if kids aren’t eating so you got to have food. You don’t know what resources they need. I think it’s connections also. You got to have connections with certain people because that way you can get resources.

Maya does not initially speak to Michelle Obama’s physical appearance but her comments about this lead to her thoughts on gender roles and women being independent.

Interviewer: Going back to Michelle Obama, do you think her looks are something that should be looked up to?

Maya: Yeah, because she dresses like—she doesn’t show. She doesn’t have to show off her body to be beautiful. She just dresses how she wants to.
don’t think she wakes up in the morning like oh, let me put this on because I want to look cute for them. She dresses how she wants to.

I’ve seen that [article] too and I’ve seen this one where it said the republicans want to change how the first lady and [her] daughters dress. What? They dress normal to me. They dress nicer than some of us.

Interviewer: What was the critique that she’s the same height as her husband but she wasn’t wearing heels, wearing flats so that she could be shorter and submissive to him. What do you think about that?

Maya: I feel you shouldn’t submit to anything that you don’t want to. I know that’s your husband, but if it’s something that you don’t want to do you don’t got to do it because you’re your own person. Going back to men like controlling things and wanting to be dominant of females. It’s like a female can switch roles and be dominant over a male. But she shouldn’t be dominant over anyone because you’re all the same. You’re all equal. You just a female and he’s just a male. She can be the

She can be the dominate one in a relationship if it was like — people don’t expect women to be dominant or they expect women to submit to everything. Women can do the same thing that men do.

Maya has a strong dislike for Kim Kardashian because of the way she became famous. She says that her friends look up to her and it upsets her. Maya shares her views.
Maya: I don’t like the way that she got famous. I don’t like how she’s showing other females that it’s okay to have so many fiancés or husbands, and it’s okay to make a sex tape. You can get rich and you can put your whole family on. People really look up to her. My friend really looks up to her. I’m like, are you serious? I think she just likes that she has everything, and she got everything from something so little, something that you wouldn’t even think would make you famous. You’re degrading yourself. You just literally showed your whole body to the world just to get famous. She still does it. You’re still doing it? You already made it. Your family has lots of money. You don’t need to be taking pictures like that. I don’t know.

**Social media.** Maya uses Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. She tweets her throughout the school day, especially when she is tired and ready to leave for the day. Her classmates are on Twitter as well. She does not like Facebook because she feels like she outgrew it. She does not watch the news on television but instead, gets her information about current events and school closures from Twitter. She plays Kim Kardashian’s game even though she disapproves of her in reality.

Maya: I’ll be on Twitter or Instagram and Snapchat. I don’t get on Facebook, I don’t like Facebook anymore. I feel like I just got too old for Facebook. Everybody tweets now. I’ve got 21 point something thousand tweets. I play games on my phone. I have the Kim Kardashian game,. It’s just a
game where you’re yourself, but you’re famous. You’ve got fans and all this stuff. I don’t like her as a person but her game is fun.

Magazines. Maya reads magazines but takes issue with the representation of women.

Interviewer: When you do see Black women on TV and in magazines, how do you feel about what they look like, beyond the make up?

Maya: I’m happy for them but then some of them have to pose nude and stuff. I’m like you should have said no to that job because you’re worth way more than that.’

Interviewer: Is that what’s in XXL?

Maya: No, that’s a hip-hop magazine.

Interviewer: When I think hip-hop magazine, I think XXL, I think there’s got to be some type of ad at some point of some half naked woman, is that right?

Maya: Yeah.

Interviewer: How’s that make you feel?

Maya: I don’t even look, I just be like, okay I’m done. Because you should not have to show your body off to make money and you shouldn’t want to. There are so many other ways you can make money, but showing your body, no. That’s your sacred place. That’s something that means so much to you.

On Being an African American Girl

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When asked if she is African American or female first, Maya says that she is African American. She then says that she gives the two equal weight.

Interviewer: If someone were to ask you if you thought that you were Black or female first what would you say?

Maya: I’m Black first.

Interviewer: Is one more important than the other?

Maya: No, they’re both at the same level. I’m Black and then—I’m a female.

Interviewer: If they’re both at the same level then would you be Black first and then female or Black and female at the same time?

Maya: Black and female. Because you cannot be Black if you’re already Black. You can turn into a male but you’re still going to be a female regardless.

Maya says that African Americans are unique and that she would not trade being an African American girl for anything.

Interviewer: Do you think there’s anything unique about being Black?

Maya: I think we’re just all unique individuals. Our whole race is just unique. Because everything we went through, we still managed to come out of it, still managed to survive and somewhat be on top. Because a lot of people—like Indians for instance. They—moved them to a whole little—they have their own Indian reservation. Where Blacks, we’re everywhere. Real Indians are in two states, North and South Dakota, I think. But Blacks are everywhere.
Interviewer: Do you think there’s anything unique, special, about being a Black woman or a Black girl? Would you trade it for anything?

Maya: No, I would never trade it. You couldn’t give me the most money in the world. Just because of what our circumstance is like. Nobody ever thought there would be a famous Black person that invented this or invented that. Nobody ever thought that Black would be—I don’t want to say superior but a dominant race or amount to anything. We proved them wrong and we can keep proving people wrong.
Olivia Reese

Olivia Reese is a fifteen-year old honors student at Northwestern Tech High School. She was interviewed individually over the course of three weeks with three forty-five minute interviews. She also participated in one group interview. Additional data was collected from two classroom observations during Chemistry and Math.

Background, Family Life and Early Experiences

Olivia’s family left their home in a West African country in 2009 to live permanently in Northwestern City. At the time, Olivia was the only child in the family. She now has a brother who is six and two sisters who are three and four respectively. When they arrived in Northwestern City, Olivia was placed in the fourth grade.

Olivia: The school system in [my home country], is kind of fast. We start school when we're two. I was supposed to be in high school when I first came here. The grading system was like a shock because my parents are like, ‘She's supposed to be in high school.’ I was back in elementary school basically. I started going to fourth grade; the compromise was that I was going to fifth grade.

As a result, Olivia is now one of the youngest students in her grade. She has felt the age difference but it has not been significant. While they ask why she is so small, the comments are often made in a light-hearted manner.

Olivia speaks fondly of her time in her home country. She has particularly positive memories of her time in private school. When asked to talk more about her experience there; she recalls:
Olivia: It was good. That was the best back time I had in school. Everybody got along. There were no bullies. It's only when I came to America where I know [about] bullying. I remember we had a new person come to our school at some point. The first day he came, we were all fighting over him to be in our [particular] group. We embraced him. It wasn't like you're the new kid; get out of here. We didn't do that. My dad was on the board for the thing, so I got special privileges. I had a really good time. I had a good life there.

Olivia’s description of her years of schooling in her home country is in stark contrast to her time in the United States. This is particularly evident in terms of the sense of congeniality among her classmates. She recalls her early classmates being much more open, caring and accepting of new students than her classmates in the United States. While she was in elementary school, she sometimes questioned why her family ever left.

Olivia: Sometimes when I came here and like I was like in elementary school and was like why did my parents come here. I really didn't understand why they left their life and started to do things like they would never have done. I just know that I used to think, why did I even come here. Why did my parents decide to come to America? It's not as good as people say it is. I just really loved it there. There was never that hate. I never really felt that hate that I feel when I am in America. I never really felt discriminated against. I just felt like I was a community, and life was happy, and fun, and adventurous. America's boring. You can't talk to
your neighbor like that. In [my home country], my neighbors were basically family.

Olivia describes her neighbors as being open and involved. She notes that this sense of community has shifted since her arrival in the United States.

Olivia: They were a little too involved in our lives, a little bit. Their doors were open. You can go in there whenever you want. You can eat their food. It's so crazy. You can go to the neighbor—it's not just neighbor like next door neighbor, it's like the lady that lives down there; you can go there. You know you can trust everybody that you know. You knew everybody. Here it's so formal. Even the people that are in your own culture you can't have that relationship that you might have if you were back in [my home country]. They have that like after awhile you start to go down that kind of mentality of distance. My parents too; they kind of grew. When they first came here, our house used to be packed with the most random people. My parents just had that idea like, oh you know, we have to band together and help people out. Now, since time has gone, they want to have their own space. My parents want that privacy kind of thing. We never really had that in [my home country]. It was just kind of like whatever.

When asked if she would still be in her home country if she had the choice, Olivia responded as follows:

Olivia: Everything is going the way I want it to go. I'm getting good grades every week. Everything that I want is happening. I'm involved. I have friends.
It's very stable. I look back at [my home country] and see the opportunities that I have here that I probably might not have had there. I'm fine with it now, but before I was kind of like, I want to go back. I feel like I fit in more now here than I would back in [my home country]. I feel like I would stand out. It's like I’m not going to fit in, because I've not been there for the past seven years.

Olivia’s point about opportunity is a salient one; during the interviews, she mentioned how her parents moved to the United States so that she could have a better future. In their home country, Olivia describes her parents as making ‘good money.’ She says that to her recollection, her father may have completed two years of college and her mother did not complete high school. While in her home country, she says that her parents made ‘good money’ and were ‘comfortable.’ In the United States, her parents are both employed as caregivers to people who have special needs. Olivia acknowledges that because her parents made the decision to come to the United States for her, she wants to make college and career choices that will make her parents proud.

Olivia: I feel they came here mainly because of me. I was the only child when they came here. I was like ten. They were very well off in [my home country]. My parents did make good money. They were comfortable. I went to a really good private school and all. They were like, we just want you to have more opportunities. We want you to know—see more stuff than you would in [my home country]. I feel like they came here mostly for me. They left their whole lives because of me. I want to do stuff to
make them happy and feel okay about [their] decision, and all the time they invested in me. I wanted to make it seem they did the right thing. I feel like my parents are pretty supportive. They might not be happy about it at first; it's all about making you happy.

Discrimination and bullying. The discrimination that Olivia is referring to came in the form of bullying and a general lack of cultural awareness that she experienced among her Black classmates. She recalls that starting in elementary school and getting progressively worse in middle school, her classmates were particularly cruel and taunted her because of her accent, hair and facial features. They also held preconceived notions about her intelligence and her background because of where she was from.

Interviewer: Do you feel as though the perceptions that people have of you might be related to your culture?

Olivia: When I first came here, a lot of the kids expected me to be this girl that's—like I'm uncivilized. They're like, oh, did you live next to a lion? Did you live in huts? Did you dress in grass skirts? It was kind of like, seriously? I lived in a normal house. I mean we weren't that back into the world. It was kind of like that. I feel like people view (when they see Africans) they don't expect somebody smart. I don't know why. They're like [saying], oh, you're African. You probably don't speak well of English. You're probably not that smart. You're probably not this or that. Hey also view me as—not a lesser being, but like, oh, she's probably poor. She's probably this. It's like, no!’
When asked where she thought her classmates may have gotten these ideas from, Olivia says, without hesitation, ‘The TV commercials.’ She is quite aware of the impact that the media has on influencing the thoughts of her peers.

Olivia: The TV commercials. The ones with the kids starving and $1.00 a day will save—not even $1.00, like ten cents a day would be fine. I think the media. I mean, it's great that they're doing those things, but it's like I think they kind of clumped all of Africa into that one country where they all have starving kids, and wars, and stuff like that. Well, it's not all like that. We actually have lives. There are actually houses, not just huts. The Zulu. I don't know where they got [that idea] from, but, maybe those shows from the 70s.

Olivia says that the majority of her bullies in elementary school and beyond were Black.

Olivia: Most of them, weirdly enough, were Black, not White. Most of them were Black. I was in my elementary school; it was always mostly Black. My middle school was mostly Black. My high school is mostly Black. That's the weirdest thing. Most of the people I found to be really ignorant cultural wise are Black people, especially to other Africans. One time this boy on the bus was like, oh ya'll Africans got to go back to where ya'll come from. Ya'll don't live in houses. He was saying some stuff and I'm like, really! I don't understand why it's like that though.

Another incident with that same boy on the bus continued:
Olivia: We argued a lot. He always had little comments about Africans. They live in jungles. They don't belong here in America. I can't remember the specifics, but he said really ignorant comments. That it's not something you've heard. You're in high school. You should—you would think you'd be more culturally aware. It's not—he's not.

Olivia points out that cultural perceptions and stereotypes were not one sided. When she started school, her mother suggested that she befriend the White students instead of the Black ones. She referred to beliefs that ‘Africans’ held about Black people such as them being ignorant and criminals. She suggests that perhaps these beliefs may have come from ‘gangster movies’ from the 1990s that her parents may have grown up watching.

Olivia: The funny thing is that Africans also feel the same way about Black people. I know if you ask my parents, my aunt, like most Africans, they don't, for some reason, like Black people. They think they're the most ignorant people out there. They believe most of them are criminals. They're sneaky. You should not be anywhere around them. When I first came here my mom was like go hang out with the White kids. Don't hang out with the Black ones. They believe they're the baddest people on Earth, they're criminals and they're up to no good. I guess it's because of those gangster movies that they show in [my home country].

My mom is like late 30s, my dad is like 40s, mid 40s or something like that. Maybe they grew up in that time where Black people were like the
gangsters. They believe that whole don't hang around Black people.

They're going to corrupt you.

Olivia’s parents told her that the White students would be more educated and nicer. Olivia notes that she found her White classmates to be significantly more tolerant and accepting of her and her culture.

Olivia: They're [white counterparts] educated. They're nice. The weird thing is that most White people are more culturally tolerant than Black people are for that—that I've met. Most of the Black people that I've met are kind of—they're a little bit insensitive and uncultured, like culturally unaware. They're not nice. Most of the bullies in middle school were Black themselves, that would make little jokes that they thought were funny like, oh, you Black. You can get burnt.’

Olivia says that her bullying worsened in middle school. It was during this time that her classmates teased her over her appearance. While the comments about her skin tone such as the one above were made, Olivia says that the majority of the harassment was directed at her hair, facial features, and accent. The bullies were mainly Black girls. While she had friends in middle school of varying ethnicities, she remembers the Black people as being ‘mean, ghetto people that are the bullies… a lot of them were girls.’ The torment from the bullies made Olivia question her appearance and accent to the point that she became extremely self-conscious about it. This self-consciousness led to her wanting to permanently alter these aspects of herself. Olivia says that her accent fading just kind of happened over time. While interviewing her, I did hear the trace of an accent. When I
asked her for her last name, she told me the American way to pronounce it. With prodding, she shared the way it is pronounced in her home country.

Olivia: The girls in middle school, they were mean. I was so self-conscious because I had the African features. They're like, oh, your nose is like this. Your mouth is like—why are your lips that big? They picked at everything. I remember I used to look in the mirror and I wished I could cut off my nose a little bit. Cut this part off, cut this part off, make it smaller. You know, make my nose a little bit smaller, make my lips a little smaller. Those girls would pick at it a lot. It was kind of self-conscious. I was also short. I was 4'9”. I was the easiest target to pick on. I was also a year younger than the people in my grade. It was like she's the easy target. They kind of got me on that.

Then the thing is that I've always been self-conscious about my accent a little bit. I was made fun of about it in middle school. People like when I talk they're like, oh, I didn't know you were African. Apparently they expect some really thick accent that's like you're really African. If I tell them I'm African, [it’s] I didn't know you were African. You don't have an accent. I'm like, yeah.

Interviewer: Did you work hard to get rid of that accent?

Olivia says that now that she’s in high school, she cares less about what the bullies have to say.

Olivia:  Now I don’t care. First of all, we wear uniforms. I don't know, I'm tired. I'm more focused on my grades. Middle school, I was more focused on fitting in. I was kind of, oh, there's the popular kids and I want to be part of them. Where now, I have friends, but it's more like most of my friends are all about their books. I guess there's not really anything to look at.

When asked at another point in the interview, however, if she felt beautiful, Olivia admitted that if she had the opportunity to get plastic surgery one day, she would take it.

Olivia:  I don’t know. I never use those words for myself. I mean I feel like I still have that issue. I just don’t think I'm that pretty or anything. I'm just kind of okay with it, because I can't change it. Even if I do have plastic surgery, I've seen people with plastic surgery. They’ve changed her face. It was just like a weirder version of yourself. I mean I've accepted it. It is what it is! I can't change it. If I did have the chance to change it, I might probably change it honestly.

I don’t know, like my nose or my lips. I just feel self-conscious about it because like I see everybody and I'm like, oh, her nose is small.’ Mine's like huge and mine's like this or like—I mean I don't say it like I'm ugly or anything, but I don't say I'm pretty at the same time. I'm there.

Although she infers that the transition to high school has helped, it is clear that the wounds of the bullying have cut deep. During her second classroom observation, the
bullying about her background was observed firsthand. During the period, the class was tasked with completing a set of algebra problems. They could work individually or as a group. Although she asked for the teacher and the students closest to her for confirmation on a few answers, Olivia worked independently for the majority of the time. About fifteen minutes into the class period, a group of African American girls who were sitting in a group of four across the classroom began talking to Olivia. One of the girls asked Olivia if she could speak different languages. Olivia responded, ‘There is more than one African language.’ The girl said, in a contemptuous tone, ‘[Another student] has you beat. She speaks four to five languages. Kids in Africa be smart for real.’ She then began naming students who were African and thus smarter than Olivia because they could speak more languages. Olivia looked at them in frustration. The group of girls started speaking amongst themselves and Olivia went back to work.

**Cultural Values and Identity**

Olivia describes herself as crazy, intelligent and creative.

Olivia: I am smart. I can come up with different ideas. I sometimes actually say I'm, instead of creative, I'll say I'm—I like to look back on myself. I forgot the word—Introspective.

Olivia says that her family, getting an education, being happy, and doing what makes me happy are important to her. She has pride in herself. Although Olivia says that she is happy with herself, she finds it difficult to accept compliments when it comes to her appearance, which could very well be linked to the bullying.
Olivia: I guess. Some people give me compliments like, you look nice today. You look pretty. I'm like, okay.

Interviewer: Like your classmates?

Olivia: Yeah. The weirdest part is like in middle school. I used to get compliments from old people. It was like, you're almost blind anyway. You probably don't even know what you're looking at. These old folks, they're like, oh my gosh, you're so pretty.' I just look at them like seriously, an old—no offense, lady's giving me a compliment, gee thanks.

Then like a teacher here, she's a female. She's the Spanish teacher. I've never had her for Spanish. She saw me and she's like, my gosh, your features. You could be a model.

Interviewer: Do you think it's hard to accept compliments?

Olivia: I feel weirded out about it. I've been so used to the middle school life where I didn't get complimented a lot that it's weird when somebody compliments me. Even my parents tell me they love me, I'm like, stop. It's sweet, but it's kind of like, why would you even say that. I don't know; I just get weirded out by it.

Olivia says that she is comfortable with herself because she has accepted that she cannot change herself.

Olivia: I'm comfortable. I'm just like—I've accepted it is what it is. I can't change it.

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On her screening questionnaire, Olivia self identified as African. I acknowledge that there are cultural nuances present in the racial classification of African-American. African-American girls are not a homogenous cultural group. The notion that African-Americans identify as one cultural group with shared experiences is a fallacy. The inclusion of Olivia’s story is a direct effort to present a multi-layered lens to what it means to be an African American female student in terms of self-identity, perceptions and expectations.

Olivia and I spent quite a bit of time during the interviews exploring her time in her home country, her transition to the United States, and how she and her family have adjusted. I will note here, for the ease of clarification, that Olivia refers to herself as African and her friends and classmates that are not African as Black. When asked if she would ever identify herself as Black, Olivia said she only did that on the legal papers. She was less willing to identify herself as African American, and said that if she had to choose, she would say she was African. Olivia makes this distinction throughout her individual and group interviews.

**Cultural values.** Olivia reflects on attributes that are valued by her culture.

Olivia: The type of people that surrounds me are very confident. They know what they want and don't want. They value the whole submissive thing even though you're strong, you get yourself ready to be a wife. My mom is like, oh, you have to learn how to cook. Not because you need to learn how to cook to survive, it's because nobody wants to marry if you can't cook and stuff like that. So like, I think they value the whole if you're a
girl, you can be yourself. You can be your own, but at the same time the biggest thing that you should look forward to is getting married, being a mother, and stuff like that. That's what they value the most.

I don't like it. I kind of rebel a lot. Cooking is not a big problem for me. The reason why my mom wants to make me learn how to cook so I don't do anything. When I get home, she might tell me to do something. I'm not going to do it because if she tells me to do something, I'm going do it. If she tells me to cook, like I don’t know how to cook, I don't want to learn. I don't want to do it for the reason that she tells me to do it. I make it seem that I'm unable to do stuff so that she doesn't have to bother me with it. She tells me everyday you're never going get a husband, and my dad tells me the same thing. Okay, whatever. I don’t like it because I feel that should not be the reason why I should learn how to cook, or clean, or anything. I'm like a big feminist and I don't like it at all.

Olivia says that she always knew that ascribed to tenants of feminism and tries to discuss it with others.

Olivia: I mean I kind of always had that thing about me. The whole like against the whole traditional African girl kind of thing. I always judged it and didn't identify myself as it. Late last year, earlier this year, me calling myself a feminist and actually realizing it, is actually a good thing, not a bad thing. I'm cool with it. I don't care what anybody says about it. I'm comfortable with saying it out loud now I'm a feminist. I'm a
feminist. Okay, whatever. I mean some people don't know what a feminist is in the first place. I do this program with Planned Parenthood. We talk to different girls about sexual health and stuff. We talk to people in our school [about] knowing what a feminist is? One girl gave me a response, isn't a feminist a guy that is kind of gay, but not really? I like to hear what people think about feminism. It's kind of weird because I would think they would say they're those crazy girls. They don’t even know what a feminist is. They're way out of the ballpark. I tell them that's not even close to what it is. I ask them if they believe in equality, if they believe that they should be equal. They're like, yeah, of course. I'm like, well, you're a feminist then. They don't identify. They think it's common sense that they should be equal, but they don’t really identify themselves as feminists, because it's not a big thing.

**Academics**

**Elementary school and middle school.** Olivia attended a neighborhood school for both elementary school and middle school. She speaks of her elementary and middle school experiences in terms of social interactions. The discussion of grades and curriculum comes into play when she reflects upon her high school experiences. She was in the gifted and talented program for English and Social Studies in middle school.

**High school.** At the time of data collection, Olivia was enrolled in seven courses: Chemistry, Globalization, Spanish 4, AP United States History, AP English Language and Composition, Common Core Math 3 and a course for college credit taught by a
professor at a nearby college. She acknowledges that this is a heavy course load. Olivia
does not have a designated lunch period to accommodate her schedule. She eats lunch in
her fourth period Spanish class. Olivia has a grade point average over 4.0 and makes the
honor roll consistently.

Northwestern Tech was not Olivia’s first choice for high school. She did the
lottery and was placed on the waitlist for the two high schools that she really wanted to
attend. If she had not chosen Northwestern Tech, she would have been forced to attend
the high school that everyone from her middle school attended and she did not want to
continue with those students.

*Classroom observations.* During both of her observations, Olivia sat at the front
of the classroom, in an aisle seat that was closest to the teacher’s desk. Also, at the end
of both classes, Olivia was the last and only student still working when the bell rang. In
the first observation, her class was taking a quiz in Chemistry. While she waited for the
teacher to arrive, Olivia held her chin in her hand and then put her head down. When the
teacher arrived and reminded the class that they would be taking a quiz that day, many of
the students in the class groaned. While Olivia did not groan, she informed the teacher
that she did not have a periodic table to use for the quiz. Her teacher allowed her to
borrow one and asked the students to spread out. Olivia and the three girls in her row
stayed in the same place. During the quiz, Olivia had her hand on her face and then put
her head down on the table while she was working several times. Her body language
prompted me to ask how she felt about testing in the interview that followed. Olivia
revealed that she did not do well on standardized tests and although she gets A’s on her in-class tests, she does not like taking them.

Olivia: Oh God, I do bad at them. I go blind when I'm testing. I don’t know regular testing. I know the material if it's like, let's do this problem together and let's just work on it. I don’t know. There's just something about that environment of the ACT. It's such a serious test, and it's so quiet, and you can't talk to anybody about it. You have to sit in one place. It's like three hours long. There's something about just taking a standardized test that just like makes my brain—like I might not be worried, like I'm not panicking, but it makes my brain shuts down. I don’t do as good as I know that I could, [when] I take the classes for the ACT. I look at the questions and I'm like, this is easy. I know it's easy. I can answer. I'm getting all the questions right. Once it's, let's be quiet, three hours, let's do this, I blank out. Even though I feel like I'm doing the right thing, sometimes I get the test back [and] I'm like, why did I really put that answer? I go blind; I don't know what I read.

Interviewer: Do you think you're nervous?

Olivia: No, I don't feel it. That's the thing. I never feel like I'm nervous or anything. I just feel really calm. I don’t know, there's something about my brain. It's not even just standardized tests. It's regular testing too. I mean I might get an A, but like I knew all the materials that's on that paper. I know it. I know how to write the answer. In the worksheets and
stuff, I would do it, like I can finish the paper in five minutes. As soon as they were tests, it's like I don't know. It's up in the air.

**Expectations and perceptions.** When asked if she felt as though she put a lot of pressure on herself, Olivia said that she does not.

No. I just don't feel like I put a lot of pressure on myself. I feel like it's a no brainer to get a good grade. I don't feel like it's a lot of pressure. I just feel like it's a no brainer to make myself want to do stuff. It’s natural for me. I mean, I'm naturally like that. You should have that mindset. I don’t think it's like I'm putting pressure on myself like, oh, you have to, you have to.

While she may not feel as though she puts pressure on herself, she does acknowledge that pressure comes from the expectations and perceptions that are placed upon her by her classmates and teachers. She does not believe that pressure comes from her parents, who she describes as expecting her to get good grades without being overly involved. She acknowledges that school is her job and her only responsibility is to do well.

Olivia: My parents [say to] get grades. They don't really—that's why I like my parents. I hate parents who are over involved, like helicopter parents. What I realize is that if you tell me what to do and you're over involved in my thing—like in middle school, my parents were a little bit involved, I never did great. I have this idea that if you tell me what to do, I will do the opposite. My parents just expect that I do great and get As. That's
what they expect and that's what I do. They don't put the pressure on me, and that's what I like. They don't tell me this is your grade. I looked on infinite campus and this is what you got. I put that pressure on myself to do great. At the end of the day, it's not their life. They're already living their lives. It's mine. It's my job to do so.

When asked if she perceived anything to be negative or positive about this, Olivia said that while she wished that her parents rewarded her more for efforts, she understood that school was her job.

Olivia: Negative things are going to be, oh, I wish my parents would [this], because I hear about some kids they're like, I got $100.00 for getting As. I went to Red Lobster. I went to this, I went to that. It's kind of like, I wish I had that, because I wish I got rewarded. Sometimes I they don't really recognize how big of a thing that I did, how big of a big deal [it] is about the stuff that I'm doing. The good thing about that is at the end of the day, it's not—for every good thing that you do. You're not always going to get rewarded. It kind of prepared me for that. It's your job. It made me realize that. Getting good grades is not something that you're supposed to get rewarded for. That's why you go to school. That's the good thing about it.

Instead of her parents, the pressure and expectations come from her classmates and teachers. In discussing her plans for the future, Olivia says that she is still undecided about choosing a college and a major. Her classmates and teachers ask her about it
regularly. When she expresses that she has not yet made a decision, she is met with disbelief and contempt. She mentioned a number of exchanges with classmates where they called her a liar for not knowing what college she wanted to attend or what she would be majoring in. Olivia doesn’t frame these exchanges as being judgmental. Rather, she says it’s a matter of expectations.

Olivia: I'm still very undecided. The thing is that a lot of people actually believe that. They see me as a person that has planned out their whole life ahead. Most people will ask me, my gosh, do you already know what college you want to go to? Do you already know what you want to do? Do you already know everything? They're surprised when I tell them no, I don't. I don't know what I want to do. They're like, you're lying. You're a liar. I feel like that's kind of a pressure, a little bit, to be like they see me, the smart girl that she has her stuff together. It's a little bit of pressure to have my teachers also ask me do you know what college you want to apply to? I don't, honestly. I don’t know.

I mean I don't think they're judging me, but I feel like they don't expect it from me. When people see me in class, I look like a very put together person, like the smart girl who does everything. I look put together, but they don't know that it's honestly not. I'm not!

Olivia makes it clear that these perceptions and expectations are not in line with her actions. The perceptions that others hold about her have led to feelings of guilt because she feels as though she is not living up to their expectations. This guilt is
expressed through the following vignette in which she compares herself to another
student in regards to what it means to be a good student.

Interviewer: Do you think people perceive you as this person who has it all together
and knows exactly what she wants?

Olivia: I'm a huge procrastinator. That's the funny part about it. I feel bad because
like teachers [say] you guys should be more like Olivia; she does her work
on time. I'm a huge TV addict; I watch television before I do my
schoolwork. When I do [homework], it's probably like three in the
morning and it's rushed. In college you’re not going to have time to do
half ass work. You’re going to have to work hard and study. I hate
studying! I hate rereading. I have a really good memory and it's in my
head. I'm like, why am I doing this? It comes easy.

It should be noted that although Olivia does not believe that she puts pressure on
herself, when combining the perceptions held about her with the belief that it is her job to
do well in school, the data shows that Olivia does, in fact, place a tremendous amount of
pressure on herself. She says that she panics when thinking about choosing a major.

During the course of the interviews, she attended a college tour to the local university.
She chose to follow a neuroscience student when she really wanted to follow someone in
the theater department for the day.

Olivia: I was panicking inside a little bit when I chose neuroscience. Every time
I do something I always freak out, like what about if I don't like it? I
applied at [the zoo]. As soon as I hit the apply button, I think what if I
hate it there? That's the thing with picking a major, like pre-med. I wanted to because it's the safe choice. There's a guarantee that you're going to get a good job and you make good money if you follow through it. What I really like is theater. I'm scared. What is there really for me to do from theater? Be a theater teacher? I don't want to be a teacher. I don't really see any options.

Interviewer: Do you think that if you pick a major when you first start, that's your end all, be all and you have to stick with that?

Olivia: I hate quitting on stuff. I feel once I pick a major, that's what I'm going—it's a bad habit not to like quitting on stuff. Once I do something, I like to see the end of it. I don’t know the idea of quitting something—that's why I have such anxiety over.

Interviewer: If you quit would you feel like a failure?

Olivia: I mean like I would say [it} wasn't worth it anyways. Whatever. You didn't really like it anyways.’ Then like that's the thing, I hate what ifs. Maybe there's another possibility to it. I hate what-ifs.

Olivia says that her parents would support whichever decision she makes about choosing a college and a major.

A typical day. Olivia describes her typical school day in a very matter of fact manner.

Olivia: I wake up, get on the bus, and I just got to motion through my classes. Literally, like autopilot, really. If it's a regular day, I probably would go
home and I watch TV, play with my sisters a little bit and then I go back to
sleep. I do a little bit of homework and I go to sleep.

Olivia used to enjoy reading. She does not as much now because of her
schoolwork. She is, however, quite descriptive when it comes to describing the books
she enjoys reading.

Olivia: I used to [enjoy reading]. Now I don’t have time to because of school. In
middle school I used to read a lot. Ninth grade in the summer, I read a lot,
but then it just went away. I really didn't care about books. You have to
focus on one thing. You can't really multitask with reading and doing
your homework at the same time. I just stopped reading. I got bored. I
read so many books over the course of nine months that I just needed a
break from

Interviewer: What kind of books were you reading?

Olivia: Teenage adventure books, like The Hunger Games, Insurgent. Those kind
of young adult novels.

Interviewer: Did you say you liked to read in elementary school?

Olivia: Oh yeah. I used to be a big fan of reading. One day I'd just sit down and I
would not get up. I would read the whole day. That's not me anymore. I
mean it probably is, but I haven't showed that part of me [in] awhile.

Extracurricular activities. Olivia is a member of the International Club as well
as a program that is run through Planned Parenthood that teaches students about sexual
health.
Olivia: It was earlier this year in health class. The Planned Parenthood people normally come in and teach us about the HIV, sexual health, and stuff like that, and STIs. The health teacher [said], ‘They're also having a program that they pay you,’ and that's the thing that got me. Oh, they pay you?

Olivia is unsure if this is related to what she wants to do when she graduates from Northeastern Tech because she is so undecided about her career path but she enjoys the work.

**Peer Relationships**

Olivia does have positive relationships with her peers. She says that her closest friend at Northwestern Tech is also African. Most of her other friends are Black, although she has a couple of White friends outside of school. She met her other friends from middle school. They hang out together at a popular outdoor shopping area in Northwestern City.

Olivia: We're lame, we don't go anywhere. I mean like we go out to eat and I don't shop with them. It's not something like 15 bags or something. We just—just walk around.

**The Ideal School and Curriculum**

Olivia does not feel as though what she learns in school represents her or her culture as an African girl. Her comments reveal that this is also the case for Black people in general and suggest that the history of Blacks has been watered down or erased entirely.

Interviewer: How do you feel that what you're learning reflects you and your
Olivia: I mean the people that write the history, [are] the winners. I don't think we allowed Black people to be the winners in the history books. I don't think it's like my history. I'm learning other people's history, even if they're Black, because I wasn't born in America. That's not what my ancestors faced. I don't know anything about [America’s] history except for their Independence Day. That's the funny thing, I really don’t know. I was watching a movie, *Half the Yellow Sun*. It was supposed to be about the war that happened. I never knew that happened. I always say I'm the worst African because I don't know any history about [my home country]. When I was a kid in [my home country], I liked all the classes. There wasn't really anything about history. I don’t know anything about [my home country’s] history.

**Media and Representation**

Olivia is, in her words, a self-diagnosed television addict. She does not have a favorite show but watches several, including *Pretty Little Liars*, *Scandal*, and *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. We spent quite a bit of time discussing *Pretty Little Liars*. During the discussion, we discussed the ethnicity of one of the show’s main characters.

Interviewer: Did you know that Spencer in real life is actually Black?

Olivia: Oh, really? She looks all the way White.

Interviewer: Clearly, that's how they play her up. I guess she has just enough color in her skin to play an Italian character.

Olivia: She has an Italian name.
Interviewer: I think her mother might be African American and White. I think her dad is White. Her mom clearly looks African American. Interesting, right?

Olivia really likes to watch reality shows and especially competition shows. She likes to watch people being sneaky and intrigued by the game playing.

Olivia: I watch a ton of shows. Like a ton. Survivor, Vanderpump Rules. Bravo, a little bit, and then most of them are like competition shows. I don't know, I just kind of like how sneaky people—Big Brother's my favorite. I like watching people backstab—not backstab, but kind of like the whole game playing. I do that.

**Social media.** Olivia is not on her phone regularly. She can do without her phone and is not interested in the drama and shallowness of social media.

Olivia: I can live without my phone. I mean, I guess Facebook. My friend kind of created that for me. That's the only thing that I have that is maybe like a big social media. I don't have Twitter or Instagram. I'm saving myself from emotional damage from that.

Interviewer: Do you have Snapchat?

Olivia: No. Emotional damage.

Interviewer: What emotional damage?

Olivia: No, I'm joking, not like real emotional damage. It's just like I'm not going to really care about it. A lot of kids have Instagram and then stuff happens and it's kind of like, oh, you could've just not had it in the first place.’

Interviewer: Like drama?
Olivia: Yeah, I don't want to put myself in there and then have to worry about not having enough followers and I'm a loser because of that. Plus I'm lazy. It's hard trying to keep up with that stuff and keep followers. My Facebook, I have three pictures on there. I have a MySpace. I don't know what the password is or anything to it. I was on there for like one time. That's the time my friend created it for me. I have one friend on there from middle school, [none] from elementary school.

Interviewer: Do you think that people act a certain way to get likes and popularity?

Olivia: I guess, yeah. You want to look like you have the best stuff. You want to look like your life is exciting. That's also the reason why I don't do social media because my life is not exciting. Like there's going to be the same posts, sitting on the TV—got to watch this show, got to watch this other show, got to watch this. I don't have anything exciting going on in my life to be like social media. It's kind of hard to—that kind of takes over. It's kind of like a job because you have to keep up with it a little bit. I don't want to give myself a job that I don't have to have. I also find it boring. It's just pictures of you.

Interviewer: Do you think that other people are conceited or that social media gives them a big head?

Olivia: Yes. A lot of people think, I got this [many] followers. A lot of people in this school are so materialistic in so many ways. I look at them—like I'm not judging, because I like a good pair of shoes. It's like they're selfish.
They're way too selfish than they need to be. It's all about how cute you look on the pictures and nobody really cares about, oh, you're smart. Oh, you don't have this [many] followers so I'm not going talk to you. You become so superficial. One girl, apparently her brother is like a big basketball player. She has tons of followers and that's why a lot of people like her.

Interviewer: They're not liking her for anything authentic? People kind of build their popularity around—

Olivia: She’s nice, but that’s what they talk about. I’m not into that. I find a way to be friends with people without [being] their social media friend. What I hate the most is when you meet somebody now and it's like, oh, follow me on Instagram, follow me on Twitter. Like you didn't even tell me your name. I don't know who you are. That happens all the time now.

**Conversations with Maya and Olivia**

Maya participated in a group with Olivia, and briefly, Taylor. Their schedules were aligned and as it turns out, Maya and Olivia were in quite a few classes together and knew each other well. A number of topics were discussed but the overall goals of the session were to hear their thoughts on how African American girls were being represented in society and what their needs were in education. We began by discussing the representation of women in the Black Lives Matter movement. Maya was not familiar with the movement. Once the background was explained to her, Maya said that she had
seen a picture on Twitter and, five females were represented as victims of brutality along with Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown.

We discussed the shooting of Renisha McBride and her killer’s subsequent conviction. Maya said that the case sounded familiar and reacted strongly when she learned that he did not receive life in prison.

Interviewer: He was convicted for it.
Olivia: Hm-hmm.
Maya: He got life?
Interviewer: I don’t know if he got life.
Maya: [Sucks Teeth] What?
Interviewer: He was definitely convicted for it.
Maya: How do you not get life? You just killed somebody for no reason.
Interviewer: He got 17 to 32 years.
Maya: That’s not even life. He can get out after 17.
Interviewer: There’s also footage of a woman being attacked on the side of a road by a state trooper. I don’t know if you’ve seen that floating around on the Internet. There’s a lot. A lot of this stuff is floating around social media. But the focus and the attention goes to the Black boys and the Black men. I’m curious as to how you feel about that. Do you think that that sends a message that Black girls and Black women aren’t important?
Olivia says that what is happening to women in terms of brutality is reflective of a societal issue. This led to a discussion on sexism, masculinity, patriarchy, gender roles, and the treatment of women.

Olivia: I think that it’s a society issue. It's not even just about race in them terms a little bit. It’s just like women, in general, are understated. They're not really taken like an everyday issue. It's not something that needs to be brought to light. Women are being seen as, well, like, it’s a culture. It's not really a new thing for a woman to be beat up. So it's just another day in the courtroom. But with the men, a young man like Trayvon Martin, it’s kinda like, whoa! This is actually a guy getting beat on. That’ just how women’s lives have been for the past decades. It’s nothing new, basically. It’s a sad thing, but it’s nothing new to society.

Interviewer: Okay. Are you saying that women are kind of on the bottom on the totem pole?

Olivia: Yeah. They’ve always been. It’s not something—it’s nothing new.

Interviewer: Okay. So there are scholars that would say that women are at the bottom of the totem pole, but women of color, especially...

Olivia: Far lower.

Interviewer: Especially Black women, at the bottom. They argue that because of patriarchy, the fact that men can still get their way because we live in a society that is focused on the needs of men, which is what Olivia was just
referring to. So it's nothing surprising that women are kind of at the bottom of the totem pole.

Alright, so women being at the bottom of the totem pole is nothing new. Olivia made a comment that you don’t think it’s race-specific. Can you tell me more about that?

Olivia: Black women are attacked and stuff like that. It's like, everyday, it could be different. Attention is not going to be brought to it. [However] Black men beating up White women, that could bring more publicity to it because it's White women. It doesn’t matter about race, because women are at the bottom. It’s just like a general idea. I mean, it’s bad now. Society frowns upon it now. But back in the day, when I was reading, *Their Eyes are Watching God*, dominance over your wife. That’s where it is at.

People believed, because the Bible, I don’t even know if the Bible actually says it, but they think that because God made Adam before Eve, he has dominance over her. And to show that dominance, you have to beat a girl [or] a lady, to show that I’m in charge, and stuff like that. So, I guess that’s why race doesn’t matter. If a Black man does beat a White woman, it might get more attention. Let’s say, it’s going to get more attention because it brings back the whole slavery idea.

That you know, the Black man is, he's barbaric. He’s uncivilized. And this is why innocent women are being beaten upon. It's that idea of this
innocent, beautiful White girl, how she’s now bruised violently by this animal. It will get more attention. In general, it just doesn’t get that much attention because it’s a woman.

If a Black man beats a Black woman, it’s just like the Black community, it’s like that. I mean...

Interviewer: You mean they just wouldn’t be surprised?

Olivia: Yeah. Just like I was saying, Back in the Deep South, there’s something weird about the Black community. It's just that there's still that idea that you have the husband. The husband is on top. That idea hasn’t changed yet. It hasn’t evolved all the way.

Maya: I feel like if it was the other way around, and Black men [were] beating White women, it would be way worse.

Olivia: That’s what I just said!

Maya: Oh. I thought you were saying like—

Olivia: Like, yeah, I realized it as soon as it came out of my mouth.

[Laughter]

But, it's like, no. I feel like it’s going—with the White women, like I said, the reason that women are like—it doesn’t matter about race is because, it's like women are at the bottom.

Maya: Yeah, like women have been getting beaten for the longest—

Neither Olivia nor Maya had heard of President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative. Maya suggested that boys got more attention because of their actions.
Interviewer: Do you ever feel like boys get more attention and therefore their needs are seen as more important than the girls?

Maya: Yeah, I think boys get more attention just because they’re boys and they do stupid stuff. We as females, we know how to take a step back and be like, oh no we shouldn’t do that. They don’t care,—we take risks, but they really take risks.

When ask for suggestions on how to best serve girls, Olivia said that leadership was key.

Olivia: Yeah. Leadership. They also need, stuff career wise, like finding new ways of like career. There’s different fields that they can work with. If [you] do want to be a housewife, you can do that, but that’s different options. [They need] role models. I know. I don’t have a female role model, especially in the field that I want, neurosurgery. They need to show more of women of color doing different things in society. And then there’s also the thing with self-esteem and like the way girls see themselves in society.

Maya specifically requests a program that addresses self-esteem.

Maya: We don’t have a lot of people that come and speak. Like our school is really like high up there, but we don’t have speakers.

Olivia: There’s also the thing with self-esteem and like the way girls see themselves...

Maya: They carry themselves...
Olivia: ... in society. Like you know a lot of girls feel like they have—I mean I’m not shaming girls who have weaves or eyelashes. Like they should maybe have something about girls having you know not being who they are and embracing who they are as themselves and self-esteem and not having, wanting, needing a guy to tell them...

Maya: That they’re beautiful.

Olivia: That you’re beautiful.

Maya: Like you should know.

Olivia: Like you should know you’re beautiful.

Maya: Right. Look in a mirror and be like, dang, I look good today!

[Laughter]

Maya: I feel like Black girls looking for love, they’re looking for that father figure.

Maya: Because some people’s father is just not there, just because. Or in my case, my father passed away. Or they’re in jail. So it's like they're looking for somebody to be their dad, but also be their lover. So they're willing to take on any relationship where a man is willing to baby them and to treat them like a little baby because they never had their dad to be like, oh, I really love you. Just, say it just because.

Olivia: And you should not need anybody to tell you what you are.

Maya: You shouldn’t, but, you, people do.

[Slight Laughter]
Olivia: Yeah. We all do. We’re human. But it's like a lot of girls I see in this school…

Maya: They just really need a hug or they just need a father.

Olivia and Maya agree that girls have a lot going on in their lives and used a classmate as an example.

Olivia: Yeah! They have a lot of stuff going on in their lives. Like a person at home—when I listen to some girls, like their mom, they have an issue with their mom. And they’re not at living home. They’re getting kicked out of the house and stuff like that.

Maya: Yeah.

Olivia: Or they live with their grandma. Or you know they have to live with this person because they don’t have—like they’re hopping from home to home to home. And they see that when it come to school, they’re not able to— they feel like that in order to get that attention, they have to do some crazy.
Taylor Barnes

Taylor Barnes is a seventeen-year old senior at Northwestern Tech High School. She was interviewed individually with two interviews that were an hour and hour and twenty minutes in length respectively. She participated for a very short time in one group interview. Additional data was collected from one classroom observation during her Advanced Placement United States Government and Politics Class.

Background and Family Life

Taylor lives between her mother and father’s homes. Her parents are divorced and she and her brother alternate weeks living with both parents. Her mother and brother live with her at her mother’s home. At her father’s home, she lives with her father, brother, and uncle. She says that she is comfortable with the situation and although it was difficult to adjust to at first, she has grown to accept it and feels that this arrangement is better.

Taylor: They first split up when I was in kindergarten, so it’s been a while.

When they were married, they didn’t really get along that well. They argued a lot. They’re really good friends now, so I think it worked out better for everyone like this.

When she stays with her mother, and is not at sports practice or work, Taylor does homework and spends time with her mother. When she is at her father’s house, she says she normally does homework. This arrangement is less strict now that she is older and drives and she goes between houses when she chooses.
Taylor has a strong relationship with both of her parents and depends on both of them. In her first interview she spent a significant amount of time discussing her relationship with them. Although her descriptions of her mother portray her as the disciplinarian she is particularly close to her mother, identifying her as her ‘bestie.’ She appreciates her enjoys and their relationship. On the other hand, her father is more lenient.

Taylor: I depend on my mom a lot. That’s one of my besties. I like being around her. I feel like I’m a baby. If I want something and she doesn’t give it to me, I’ll just ask my dad. Say if I don’t want to drive to work one day, I’m like, ‘Dad, can you take me?’ He’d be like, ‘Sure.’ Now, if I asked my mom, she’d say, ‘No, you have a car. That’s what your car is for.’

Interviewer: Why do you think they’re different?

Taylor: I really don't know. I feel like it’s just the type of person. My mom, she’s more the type that pushes us. She feels like we need to do a lot of things on our own. Not saying, she still does a lot for us. I feel like it’s what they have to do. My mom works more than my dad, so maybe she might be tired. She’s like, ‘I been running all day on a Saturday.’ She don’t take me to work during the week because she’s at work. But my dad—I feel like, since I spend more time with my mom, if I ask my dad to take me, he will. When I was little, my mom was the type to, if I got in trouble, she was the one I got in trouble with, maybe. My dad, I’ve never got a whooping from him, ever. My mom, the stern one, I always get one from
her. I’ve never gotten one from my dad. I just feel like it’s the type of people they are. My mom’s more stern—she’s cool, though. She’s a more stern person. She’s not a strict person, but she’s more strict than my father. He’s more lenient.

Interviewer: Would you call your dad your bestie, as well?

Taylor: I don’t know. No, because I’m not around him as much.

During Taylor’s sophomore year, she was unable to spend the same amount of time at the home of her father, because of some home reconstruction that occurred in his home, specifically in the bathroom. Because of this work, apparently the bathroom was unusable and therefore instead of shuttling between parents, Taylor and her brother stayed exclusively with their mother for several months until the work was completed. For Taylor one of the major challenges in returning to her Dad’s home was the fact that, as she put it the majority of her ‘stuff’ was at her mother’s house. Nevertheless, her relationship with her father is still strong and secure. As she reflected on her father and her relationship with him, her description is of a more gregarious and more outgoing person, similar to herself, as compared to her mother who is more reserved and quiet.

Taylor’s mother works in the medical field and her father works in education. Her father’s schedule is more flexible, which is why she says she can go to his house and do homework when her mother is working. Taylor enjoys spending time with her family when she has the time and her mother is not working. She and her mother do activities like going out to eat. Her father joins them as well, creating the impression that their parents are not divorced.
Taylor: Right now, I stay with my mom most of the time. Well, more so, because girls like being with their mom. My mom works a lot, so I’m not really with her that much. When we are together, we go out to eat a lot. We might go shopping, or to a movie. With my dad—well, he hangs out with us, too. It’s weird. People don’t really see that they’re divorced because we’re always—we were together this weekend. We went dress shopping for prom.

Taylor says that if her family could describe her, they would say that she is a talkative person, outgoing, and a busy body. She feels as though this description is accurate because she likes to participate in a number of extracurricular activities. Moreover, from her perspective, she has strong family support for all her endeavors.

Taylor: [Family] is important because they’re in my life a lot. I’ve known them forever. They help me. They push me to do good. They motivate me. They love me. They support me in everything I do. They come to my sporting events. They ask about school and stuff. My cousin and are both seniors. We’re in a group chat with our aunt. She’ll send us links to scholarships and stuff.

Identity

Taylor self-identifies as African American. She describes herself as beautiful, intelligent, outgoing, funny and social. She lists education, family, God and friends, in that order, as being most important to her. She has a very open personality and was
extremely willing to share her experiences and details of her life during the interview process.

Taylor notes that she has gone through a change recently and described this change as having ‘glowed up.’

Taylor: I think I’m beautiful and intelligent, outgoing, funny. Social.

Interviewer: Why do you think you’re beautiful?

Taylor: Because I don’t know. I just think I’m cute. You should think—you should think yourself is pretty. Some days I’m kind of rough. It helps me. I feel like I feel so much better. Have you ever had a day you just like man, I’m struggling. Then somebody tells you, you look really pretty. I think that’s the best thing ever. I feel like—have you heard somebody say ‘glow up?’

Interviewer: Glow up? No, what’s that?

Taylor: I feel like I’ve really glowed up. Glow up is like your come up. You know what I’m saying? They say come up.

I think I started getting cute maybe in the end of last year. I had braces until the middle of last year. My braces were cute, but I don’t know. I got my hair dyed. I have been dying my hair, but I feel like this color looks really good on me, blonde. I got blonde. I was like oh—I thought I was really cute. Got my braces off. My teeth were all straight. I feel like—I don’t dress like nothing at school. When I come to school, it’s just like I’m just here just to learn. I don’t really care what I look like. I don’t
really do my hair or nothing. When I go out, I’ll look cute. I just feel like I glowed up. You lose your little chunky face a little bit. That’s all. I glowed up. I don’t know.

When asked if she sees herself as African American or female first, Taylor grapples with the question. She does not think that she can separate the two and is proud to be an African American girl.

**Academics**

Taylor says that elementary and middle school were easy in regard to academics. She discussed grades, teachers and classes in the context of high school.

**Elementary school and middle school.** Taylor attended the same school for elementary and middle school. This school is a feeder school for Northwestern Tech. She recalls that elementary school and middle school were both academically easy.

**Interviewer:** When you told me about elementary school, we talked about what it was like socially. As for the schoolwork, do you remember it being easy?

**Taylor:** School’s always been easy to me. I guess I just caught onto things easy. If somebody shows me something, I usually can catch on pretty fast. Elementary and middle was really easy, actually.

**Interviewer:** Was there anything that you really liked about it?

**Taylor:** Math my favorite subject. I didn’t like Science in middle school. I started liking it in high school and now I stopped again. It was never hard. It was just not interesting.
High school. Taylor is enrolled in six classes: AP Calculus, Physics, AP US Government & Politics, French 4, Globalization, and Issues in World Literature 12. At the time of the interview, Taylor had made the honor roll for the third quarter, and had been accepted into a state college, where she will begin in the fall. While her favorite subject is still math she finds science challenging. Enrolled in Chemistry the previous year, to use her words, she ‘stopping liking science’ and in the current academic year she was dissatisfied with Physics. Interestingly enough, she liked the math element of Physics, however, she took issue with the way in which the course is taught.

Taylor: I am taking Physics now. I started in chemistry. Chemistry last year is when I stopped liking science again. Now, it’s becoming hard, chemistry and physics. It’s easy, the math part is. It’s just, think it might not be the subject. I think it’s the teacher, the way she teaches it. We take notes. About all we do is really take notes. We do labs and stuff. I liked doing projects in tenth grade. Projects help me learn. I have to write about it and present it. We do Power-Point. That’s just copy and pasting, really.

Taylor’s last two years of high school have been more difficult for her than previous years. She attributes this difficulty to senioritis and missing school because of some familial obligations and other issues beyond her control. Missing school means making up work which is always challenging, especially since Taylor is ready to start something new—going to college.

Taylor: [School] didn’t start getting difficult until maybe last year. You get senioritis and you’re ready to go. Then, all these AP classes—well, AP
Government’s not that bad, but AP calculus, you really have to work on that. This has probably been my hardest year. I’m still honor roll, so that’s all that matters. Right now my grades are pretty bad. It’s like a 3.0, so my cum is going down this year. Cum from the past years is a 3.7. It’ll probably be a 3.4 now or something. Well, I’ve missed a lot of school. It’s hard to do makeup work. It’s hard to do all that. Then, I just don’t want to come to school. I’m just tired of it, ready for a break, tired of coming everyday. I’m ready to go to college. Start something new.

Interviewer: When’s the last day of school?

Taylor: I don’t know. Seniors get out a week before everybody else. Our graduation is May 30th. Then probably May 22nd. That’s the Friday before, so probably then. I just don’t like being here. I just never feel like coming.

Interviewer: Okay. How do your parents feel about that?

Taylor: It’s not really option. I don’t have an option if I want to come to school or not. It’s almost over. It really doesn’t matter. I got two months left. It’s not like I just miss school. It was for reasons I didn’t come. We went out of town for a funeral. We were gone for a couple days. My second quarter was really bad. It was still honor roll, but to me it was bad. We went on this church retreat, me and my mom. On Thursdays, seniors don’t come to school, so that’s already missing school. Then, we had some events with drill team, like Veterans Day Parade, which is during the
school day. It was just a lot of stuff going on. homecoming court. I just didn’t miss school. I had things to do. It’s just a busy year, really busy.

Despite the difficulty, Taylor does not hesitate when she describes herself as intelligent. She is also very hard working and determined. Even when her grades took a turn for the worse, receiving D’s and F’s on assignments, she fought back and still managed to make the honor roll for the grading period.

Taylor: Why do I think I’m intelligent? Because I am. I get good grades. I told you right now it’s kind of rough. I think, for me to be honor roll still—my second quarter, when I was missing all that school, and before we went on winter break, my grades were trash. I had Ds and Fs. I was up ‘till two every night doing makeup work. If you really want to be honor roll, you can. I made honor roll that quarter. I feel like, if you really want to push yourself, you will. I think I’m intelligent. I comprehend stuff really well. Like I said, school’s been easy. That’s why I think I’m intelligent. I like it. Well, not as much anymore.

Taylor says that she used to like to read before she started high school. She does not enjoy reading as much now because she is compelled to read, from her perspective, a lot of reading, mostly American literature i.e, [plays and novels], including African American authors.

Taylor: Not anymore. We have to read them all the time. We had summer reading projects when I came to high school. We have to read books quarterly and stuff. Right now we’re reading Beloved in literature. Every
quarter, for our literature—it just depends on who your teacher is—we have this thing called a book talk. We have to read a book every quarter, and do a book talk. Last year we read *Scarlet Letter*, *Poisoner’s Handbook*, and *A Streetcar Named Disaster*.

Interviewer: You’re reading *Beloved* now. Do you normally read books that have Black women or Black people as the main characters? Do you think your teachers are doing that on purpose to make you interested?

Taylor: I think it is equal. I don’t know why we’re reading *Beloved* right now, but I like it. Sophomore year, we read about—oh, what was that book called? I don’t know. It was about this tribal thing in Africa. I think it was really good. I liked the book, though. We read this thing called *Animal Farm*, but that’s more so about politics. Have you heard about *Animal Farm*? I didn’t really like that, though. It was weird, to me. I just feel like I had to read something today. I was supposed to read up to a certain page. I’m not really fond of that *Animal Farm* so let me talk about another. Is there another Black book we read? Because I’m not really far and I can’t tell you about that.

At one point in the interview, Taylor mentioned that she read, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, and loved it. As Taylor continues, it is apparent that she likes to read topics that gain her interest. And, while she may not remember the specifics, she remembers the impact and feelings she gained from the experience.
Taylor: That book was good. Man, that was a long time ago. I remember I really liked it. I actually read the whole book. Usually I don’t read the whole book because it doesn’t get my attention. That book was really good. I think it was just interesting, the journey he went through and stuff. I can’t remember exactly what he went through. I know something happened. He got sent out of his tribe or something. I liked it, though. It’s not just Black books that get my interest, just books.

Classroom observation.

Taylor was observed during her advanced placement US Government class. During that period, the class was watching an alternative perspective film on September 11th and the events that occurred afterward. The task while watching the movie was to take notes for a discussion. Taylor sat next to her friend, Brittany in the back center of the classroom. Their seat was directly in front of the teacher’s podium. Taylor and Brittany talked amongst themselves until the movie began. Taylor actively watched the film and asked her teacher questions until the middle of the period when she grew tired and began to doze off. Her behavior matched how she described her current feeling about school: she is still engaged but very much ready to graduate.

Institutional rules. Taylor feels safe at Northwestern Tech. She can be herself because she does not care about what others think about her. She takes issues with certain rules that she does not think are fair and attributes them to having a new principal. However, she has never violated any rules so to be suspended.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the rules that are in place at Northwestern Tech?
Taylor: I don’t really like it this year. We got a new principal. He just took a lot of things away that past seniors have had. I feel like it’s messing up our senior year. We didn’t have a senior trip because he got mad. Even before, if they would get mad, we would still have it. You know what I’m saying? Or maybe some students would get it taken away. We didn’t have a senior trip.

Interviewer: What happened?

Taylor: I don’t even know. They don’t tell us anything. He used to be our assistant principal my freshman year. He’s principal now, and he feel like he needs to be more strict. I don’t know. It’s just messing up my senior year.

Taylor reported hearing about fights in school, but never witnessed them. When asked if she noticed particular treatment in regard to discipline for her female classmates, she was unable to provide many specific examples of gender related discipline. The school dress code requires that students wear uniforms.

Interviewer: This is piggybacking off how you feel about the rules. One, do you ever hear teachers tell your female classmates that they should act more ladylike?

Taylor: Not that I know of. Not that I can think of, off the top of my head.

Interviewer: Do you ever hear teachers say, ‘Maybe you should pull your skirt down; it’s too short?’ What about adjusting their tops?

Taylor: No. We wear polos, but with the skirt length and short length.
Interviewer: Okay. What about telling them to talk more quietly?

Taylor: Mm-hmm. You need to lower your voice. That’s not just with girls, with anybody, if the class is loud.

A typical day. Taylor participates in a number of sports related activities, and has also participated in Northwestern Tech’s dramatic productions. She likes to stay active and does not like to be bored. She also holds a job at a local store. Taylor explained that she has two typical days; one day when she has school and then a job and the other day when she just has school. On a work day, she gets up, gets ready for and drives herself to school, comes home, takes a nap and then gets ready for work. She works from 4:30pm to 8:30 or 9:45pm, after which, she comes home, does her homework and then goes to bed. On the days that she doesn’t work and doesn’t have practice, after school she comes home, eats, does her homework and then goes to sleep.

Interviewer: Around what time do you say you get your homework started?

Taylor: It depends if I have work or practice. If I have work, probably ten. If I have practice, about seven.

Interviewer: Okay. What sports did you say you were playing?

Taylor: Right now, or throughout the year?

Interviewer: Throughout the year.

Taylor: Drill team and softball. I do theater.

Interviewer: Right now you’re doing softball?

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Okay. How long is your practice normally?
Taylor: 3:00 to 5:30 or 3:00 to 6:00. Just depends if he wants to let us out early. Since freshman year, I’ve done something every season. Fall I do drill team. Then, winter freshman year, I did swimming. Sophomore and this year, I did the musical. Then, in the springtime I do softball. In the summer, drill team starts again, practice and everything. I don’t like being bored or anything, so I like staying active, or going out with my friends, stuff like that.

Interviewer: Which productions have you been involved in? What roles?
Taylor: The Color Purple and High School Musical. Just ensemble, dancing and singing in the background. I just like

Outside of school, Taylor is involved at her church. Her family goes to church every Sunday and she says that she would like to be more involved but her work schedule prevents this.

Taylor: I would say I used to be more [involved with Church], but now that I work—we go to church every Sunday, but when I was younger I used to usher and sing. I can’t sing, though.

Interviewer: How young?
Taylor: Younger, like not even a couple—until a couple years ago, until I started working.

Interviewer: Okay, so until you were, what, 16, 15?
Taylor: Yeah. Well, I probably say more in middle school because I play sports and stuff now. They have rehearsal during the week, and I have practice.
Then, we have Mime Ministry at our church, which is where work interfered with, because I work on Saturdays, and that’s when the rehearsal is. I like doing that. We still go to church every Sunday. My mom made me be in choir. I didn’t like that at all. I tried to tell her, ‘Mom, I can’t sing.’ I don’t know why she had me in.

**Expectations and perceptions.** Taylor says that she has good relationships with her teachers. She says that she does not know if teachers push her to do well because the motivation to succeed should be internal. She believes that the teachers would describe her as smart, but at this point in the academic year, not completely vested in her work.

Interviewer: What do you think your relationships with [the faculty] are like? Do they push you to do well?

Taylor: I don’t know. Good. I talk to them. I feel like, at this point in the game, I have to push myself. You have to learn how to motivate and push yourself. I think [teachers] are helpful when we need help. Maybe now they’d probably say I’m smart, but I’m slacking maybe, or I’m procrastinating. I know how to do this stuff, the material. I just don’t ever feel like doing it. I just am ready to go.

Taylor commented that while parents do not supervise her homework as they have in the past, because at this stage in her life, they expectations are that she is to do well.

Taylor: Not as much as they used. They feel like we’ve been doing it this long. Like I said before, they don’t really sit us down and do homework anymore. They already expect us to do it.
Peer Relationships

This topic is significant for Taylor. A great deal of her two interviews is devoted to discussing her relationships in middle school and high school.

Elementary and middle school. Taylor recalls that she got along well with her classmates in elementary school. She enjoyed elementary school and stated that everyone, her included, was friends. However, in middle school, her classmates began to form cliques. This was particularly difficult and alienating for her because her cousin that she is very close to went to a different school. There was a group of popular girls in middle school that made life difficult, especially in the 6th and 7th grades. They had bold personalities and wore clothes and jewelry that made them stand out. Her style did not particularly match or fit in with that of this popular group. During this time, Taylor was wearing braces and had a puffball hairstyle. To make matters worse, these were the girls that the boys like.

Taylor: First of all, I wanted to go to school with my cousin, and my mom wouldn’t let me. She went to [another school]. She was always telling me stuff about that. I’m like, ‘Man, that sounds fun.’ [My mom] wanted me to stay in [my school]. She thought [my school] was a good school. She thought if I go to school with my cousin, I’m going to be distracted. We go to school together now. We’re both here now. [My mom] thought [my school] was a better school. I had friends there, and they’re still my friends now. They’re my best friends now. Everything that was important then, is irrelevant now. You know what I’m saying? It’s funny, looking
back at it. At the time, I was just like ugh, I’m ready to get outta this. I maybe making it sound bad. It really wasn’t that bad. No, more so in the social perspective.

I don’t know. It was a group of popular kids, I guess. It was just like—I don’t know. It felt like there was always drama at school. I thought that’s how middle school is. You know what I’m saying? When you get to high school, nobody really cares. Well, I don’t care. Just getting into middle school, you get any of that oh, I’m in middle school now. You think you’re older, and it’s really not. I’m looking back now, I was really young. Some of the people, I would say, were not intimidating, but maybe popular. I talk to them now. We’re all cool now. We eat lunch together and all that stuff. It was just like—I don’t know. I think it was a phase in middle school.

Interviewer: What made them intimidating?

Taylor: I don’t know. I don’t know how to describe it. They were just a group of girls who were like—maybe they had—well, in middle school it’s different than now. Everybody wore all the little jewelry and everything. I wasn’t really into that, so I guess it really didn’t matter. Maybe they were more like the more bold girls or something. You know what I’m saying? Their personalities were more bold? Maybe more outspoken or stuff like that. I don’t know. No, not really. I still don’t really bother. They wore all the big bracelets, and the big hoop earrings. I’m not really a
girly girl. I guess. Middle school [is] just a rough stage. I had braces. I used to wear a puffball. Eighth grade I started getting my hair flat ironed, so I was feeling myself. They’d be like all the girls the boys liked and stuff. They wore all the big bracelets, and the big hoop earrings. I’m not really a girly girl. Yeah, I guess. Middle school just a rough stage. I had braces. I used to wear a puffball. Eighth grade I started getting my hair flat ironed, so I was feeling myself. They’d be all the girls the boys liked and stuff.

Interviewer: Why do you think the boys liked them?

Taylor: Well, I feel like they were more—they communicated with the boys more. They were more bold. They were really and willing to talk. I feel like, in middle school—it’s just different like that for me. I’m not going talk to you, really, unless you get to know me. I might be shy at first. Which is hard to believe, once you get to know me. I’m a very—now I’m not really. I don’t think so. I might’ve been more quiet in middle school. Once you get to high school, it’s like it doesn’t really matter. I’m not going to see you guys in a little bit. Just whatever. You develop your personality more, your character. You learn more who you are and stuff like that.

**High school.** Taylor says that her personality and interactions with her peers have changed slightly since middle school. She is more willing to open up with her peers but remains guarded at the same time. She regards herself as a very active person within
the school, maybe not popular but known, which she attributes to the fact that other
students speak to her by name as she walks down the hallway. Outside of her family and
extracurricular activities, Taylor spends her time with a core group of four other girls
with whom she’s in constant communication. Taylor and her friends engage in many
social activities, from attending and participating in school athletic and social events, as
well as going to movies, eating out together, etc.

Interviewer: Do you think you’ve changed much, from middle school to high school?
Taylor: Not much, but I think I have.

Interviewer: How?
Taylor: I participate in a lot of things. We did Homecoming Court. Maybe that’s
how people know, stuff like that. I just feel like—me and my best friend,
we’re like—if I want to know something, I’m just going to ask. Me and
my best friend, we just ask people stuff, and a lot of people we don’t talk
to that much. We just talk to people. People think we’re really funny, but
we don’t really see it. We’re just like serious, but I really wanted to know.
Because I’m not really open

Taylor: I have me and a group of girls. We’re really close. We are in a group chat
together. We talk every night in a group chat, even during the school day,
just about things going on. Two of the girls—well, three of the girls—it’s
five of us, including me, so four other people besides me. Three of them
I’ve been with—well, the one who I’m very close with—like I said, we
always ask questions to people—we’ve been in school since kindergarten.
We were best friends for elementary, kindergarten through third. Then we split up, kind of. Then, we’ve been best friends since sixth grade until now. Me and her, I think we’re very similar, actually, which is a good and a bad thing. We’re both very talkative people. We’re outgoing. She’s just a very bold person. I don’t know. I think we’re really similar. We do a lot of things [together]. Usually we go to basketball games together because one of my best friends, she’s a cheerleader. The other two are basketball managers, so they have to record the game. We all just meet at the game. Then, after every game, we always go out to [a restaurant] because it’s right here [by the school].

Taylor: Yeah. We do that every Friday, every other Friday. Then, if we don’t do that, we probably go to the movies sometimes, or we all just meet at each other’s house. We just make all the move from there.

Interviewer: Okay. It’s normally basketball games and movies. Shopping?

Taylor: Shopping, yeah. Or football season, because my other friend, she cheers football, too. I do drill team, so everybody goes to the game. Then we go out to eat again. Yeah, that’s really all we do.

Taylor has support from her friends and they challenge and motivate each other academically. One of her friends in particular, her closest/ best friend, like Taylor is academically competitive and works to get high grades, while two of her other friends aren’t academically competitive, yet they all remain supportive of each other in various ways.
Taylor: Me and my one closest best friend, I feel we’re competitive, which is a good thing. Maybe at academics. We’re trying to both get the good high grade. I feel like that’s a good thing. The other two [friends] are not really competitive like that. I feel like they support me in other ways, like during football season. They come to the games. When I’m out there dancing, they’re cheering for you.

Then, the other—I haven’t really talked about the other one that much. When me and my closest best friend were homecoming court together, all the other three, they made signs for us. They just support us and cheer for us. I think they’re really supportive. I don’t know how to put this. I feel like I’m getting off topic.

Interviewer: So they’re supportive. Do you ever feel like there’s jealousy? Could it be motivating?

Taylor: No, not jealous. Maybe they might feel like we’re in competition, which I feel like is a good thing, depending on what the competition is. Like I say, [competition] academically, that’s a good thing. Maybe if you feel like you need to be better than someone. Like I say, academically, that’s a good thing. Maybe if you feel like you need to be better than someone, then it’s not really good. We’re all friends. Doesn’t really matter.

**Dating.** Taylor is looking forward to attending the prom in May. She will be going to both Northwestern Tech’s prom and the prom for another high school in the area. She is friendly with the boys who will be her dates but says that she does not date.

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Taylor: I don’t really date. I’ve been around most people I go to school with since kindergarten. I went to [a certain school] for elementary and middle, and it’s a feeder school to here, so most of the people I’ve been with for a while. It’s just like I’m ready to meet new people. They’re cool. Some people stay in relationships long, I guess. I don’t really know. I don’t stay in that with people at Northwestern Tech.

Interviewer: Are a lot of your friends dating people here?

Taylor: Yeah, no, nobody. One of them. She dated a boy here, but he graduated last year. He’s a class ahead of us. He went here last year. He goes to [college] now. They’re still dating. They’ve been dating for a year-and-a-half. My other friends, they’ve dated people here previously.

Media and Representation

Taylor’s media engagement is mainly through music. She does not watch a great deal of television but she sometimes reads magazines sometimes when she is at work. She says that one of the last magazines she read featured a story about Bruce Jenner’s sex. Taylor’s social media use is linked to her friends’ activity. She does not use Facebook because her friends are not on it. She does use Twitter and this is where she keeps up with the news and current events. She sometimes uses Instagram but mostly spends her time on Snapchat. On Twitter, the people that she follow tweet quite a bit about the Kardashian family.

Television. Taylor does not watch much television. She says that she is not home enough to watch television but does watch Girl Code on MTV on occasion.
Through discussions by her classmates she learned about shows such as Empire, Scandal and Being Mary Jane, which all have African American females playing major roles.

She says that her classmates discussed Scandal in her government class because of its link to politics. Taylor mentioned that she’s watched Sixteen and Pregnant, which lead to an interesting discussion on teenage pregnancy.

Taylor: When Sixteen and Pregnant first came out, when it was popular, I started watching it, because that’s really unfortunate. I don’t watch it now. If I was pregnant, I don’t know what I would do. That’s so sad. Well, for me, I’d be sad. Children aren’t a sad thing. It’s just something I couldn’t deal with. Not right now.

Because [babies] are expensive. They take up all your time. You can’t do anything. You can, but you got to take it everywhere. Not it. Then you going to have trouble with the father. What if y'all aren’t together or something? I just really don't know. I don’t have that to do, though. Children are just a no-no. If you don’t want it anymore, you can’t give it back. You have to keep it. It would just be too much. Ugh, it’s just—no, it’s too much. I feel like everybody would look at you while you’re pregnant like, ‘Man, she’s pregnant. She’s young.’ I wouldn’t know what to do. I think I would just cry all the time.

She spoke about two high school friends that either have a child or are pregnant.

She was referring to Gabrielle, another participant in the study.
Taylor: The one, my friend right now, we live by each other. We weren’t friends while she was pregnant, but we’re friends now. Her baby just turned one in February. I’ve asked her. I told you before, I like to ask a lot of questions, so I asked her. You have to know her. She’s a really goofy person. I [asked], ‘When you found out you were pregnant, what did you do?’ She said, ‘I couldn’t do nothing but’—what would you think that would end with? Cry, right? ‘No,’ she said [with a laugh]. I’m like, ‘What is wrong with your life?’ I’m like, ‘What’s is wrong with your life?’ She said, ‘I couldn’t believe something was inside of me.’ I’m like, ‘You need to get your life together. That sounds so crazy.’ She said she thought about getting an abortion, but she’s glad she didn’t. I think, personally, it helped her, because she used to be a really loud person, and just off task. I feel like she’s focused more. She has a child. She needs to make sure her stuff is together.

Interviewer: Okay. The other friend that has the one-year-old, do you think she’s going to go far?

Taylor: Yeah, but I don’t think she’s—well, her grades weren’t ever really high as the other one that’s pregnant currently. She’s still going to school, though. I think she said she’s going to [a local school] or something. You’re still going to school, so that’s good. Some people just stop after high school. The fact that you’re still going to school, I think that’s really good.
Taylor participated in about five minutes of the group interview with Olivia and Maya before having to leave to complete schoolwork. While she was there, we discussed the representation of women in the Black Lives Matter movement. We discussed the basis for the movement and Taylor said that she was not familiar with the movement and had never heard of any women being victims of police brutality or being murdered like she had Trayvon Martin.

Interviewer: I’m curious as to how you feel about that. Do you think that that sends a message that Black girls and Black women are not important?

Taylor: I don’t think it sends that message. It’s usually about the men, like, you know. You hear about the women, barely. Like how I said that I didn’t really know about it. Or you know their names. But on TV, it makes a big deal about the men, more so than the women.

**Music.** Taylor has a few favorite music artists that include hip-hop artist J. Cole and singer Beyoncé. She names Beyoncé as one of her favorite artists and says that Beyoncé is pretty and she can sing. The hip-hop artists that she identifies as her favorites are so because she perceives that their songs have depth. She also likes music in general that she calls “trap music,” as it gets her excited. This is a particular brand of hip-hop music that is popular with African American youth. It is characterized by percussion instruments and lyrics that pertain to music, dance, and drugs and/or alcohol.

Taylor: No. I don’t have a favorite artist. I have a few of them. J. Cole. I love Beyoncé. It just depends. Sometimes I like trap music. You know what trap music is? I like my trap music, or Migos. They get me turnt.
I love Beyoncé. She’s just so pretty, and she can sing. I got her CD, so I just listened. Whenever I get ready, I listen to Beyoncé because it makes me feel like Beyoncé. I play Beyoncé when I get ready to go places. It makes me feel prettier when I’m getting ready. Yeah, this is Beyoncé.

Interviewer: Do you think she’s a positive role model?

Taylor: Yes. Because she’s a successful Black woman. That’s a good look for us, I feel like. She’s successful. She’s married. A lot of people might think Black people, they just have kids. They are not married. A lot of people really do get married and have kids. Some people don’t get married and have kids. It’s just another stereotype. She’s a successful Black woman. She makes a lot of money. She’s just doing well in life, I feel like. Well, we don’t really know. That’s another good thing. She’s not really in the media like that, and I like that.

Our discussion on hip-hop, the treatment of women, and the use of the n-word or other degrading labels, reveals that Taylor believes much of this is contextual, but even so, for her using negative/vulgar language is not okay. And yet, the normalization of a term, such as ‘bitch’ can be contradictory. Taylor’s comments about the rapper J. Cole are particularly interesting because even though he is considered a “conscious” hip-hop artist who engages in subject matter beyond drugs, alcohol, and partying, he still uses lyrics such as “bitch” and “nigga.”

Taylor: I really don't know about him. That’s why I like J. Cole. He talks the truth about women, he used to like his first crush, or maybe talks about his
first sexual experience with the first girl he liked. I think some men degrade women. Is it degrade? Yeah, degrade women in their songs. I don’t think it’s ever okay for a dude to be calling you his ‘bitch’, if you’re his girl. You know what I’m saying? That’s not okay. People say that song and they be like—they might not even be saying it in a bad way.

Like oh, yeah, this my da-da-da. That’s just not okay.

Interviewer: You’re saying it’s not cool for a dude to call you his bitch?

Taylor: No. I don’t think, that’s just not okay. I feel it’s just degrading. It’s making it like you’re under them or something, or they own you or something. I feel when they say that you’re theirs, it’s more degrading. I feel like, when somebody—it just depends on how someone says if you’re a bitch. I’m not saying it’s good either way, but I’m saying maybe they’re not saying it because you’re bothering them. Maybe it’s because [of] the way you’re acting. Which, it’s still not a good thing. You know what I’m saying, though? I don’t know how to explain it. I just think it’s worse.

Interviewer: Okay, so you don’t like saying ‘that bitch’.

Taylor: I didn’t like when my friends referred to that. Then, I was talking to this girl I go to school with right now. Her and her friends are the funniest group of friends. They’re juniors. If I were a junior, they’d be my best friends. They’re really funny. She was like, ‘I don’t let anybody call me a bitch. The only time I refer to myself as a bitch is when I’m saying I’m a boss-ass bitch.’ I feel like that was funny. You don’t walk
around just saying, ‘I’m the baddest.’ Females say that, though. Then they’ll get offended when someone calls them that. I don’t really know how that works. I think it just depends on the content. I really don’t know.

Interviewer: So J. Cole, for example, I’m thinking of some of his songs. He says the B word a lot. Does that bother you?

Taylor: No, I don’t think that offends me because I feel like what he’s rapping. He’s not just saying I find the baddest bitch or something. I feel like he’s not calling females a bitch just to be calling them a bitch. I feel like everything happens for a reason. Maybe he started calling them that for a reason. Not trying to defend him or anything. You know what I’m saying? I feel like he’s rapping about life. I feel like he felt some type of way about it. When Lil Wayne just rapping, like da-da-da, she my da-da-da. You know what I’m saying?

Interviewer: Maybe when Lil Wayne raps about it, female becomes synonymous with bitch, but when J. Cole does it, there’s a meaning behind it? Is that what you’re saying?


Interviewer: There’s no judgment. I’m just listening to what you say.

Taylor: Yeah. I feel like—yeah, probably. It sounds really weird. It’s okay if he does it, but not if he does it. I think it’s the content used, how it’s used.
Because then again, it’s just another word to me, honest. I think it’s how it’s used.

Interviewer: Okay. How do you feel about the ‘N’ word?

Taylor: I know some people get offended by it. … That’s crazy. If a White person called you the [n-word], you’d be upset, but if a Black person—I think it just depends on the content, again. Some people don’t like it at all. Which, I understand if you wouldn’t like it. I just think it depends on the content. If they’re saying that’s my [n----], or a White person saying you the [n-word]. I don’t know. It just depends on the content, I think. Then, if you have a White friend that calls you a [n---], if you’re okay with it, then that’s fine. I’m just saying it just depends on the content. A Black person could use the [n-word]. You’d be confused, like but you’re Black, too.

Interviewer: Okay, so you’re saying there’s the distinction between the [n-word], with ER, and [n---] with a A?

Taylor: Kind of.

Interviewer: Depending on the context?

Taylor: Yeah. I think it depends on the content. People refer to the [n-word] as back in the past, when we were—when Black people were slaves. They didn’t call us [n---] back then. They were like the [n-word].

Interviewer: Is [n---] more friendly?
Taylor: No. I think it just—it’s just how people use it now. It’s a slang, more of a slang term. I feel like, if it never became a slang, people still call people the [n-word]. It would still be—it’s just in the content, I feel like. If that was still popular, people still said that popularly, but they would still call them, like Black people call each other that. I think it’s just—

**Beauty.** In addition to Beyoncé, Taylor names Angelina Jolie, Taraji P. Hensen and Rihanna as being physically beautiful. She also names attributes that make them beautiful that are not related to their appearance. Later on she also contemplates on the price and/or cost of fame.

Taylor: Besides Beyoncé, I think Angelina Jolie is so beautiful. I think Taraji P. Henson is really beautiful, too. Rihanna, she’s pretty.

Interviewer: Okay. What about their character?

Taylor: I don’t really know much about—well, I think Angelina, she’s the one who has the—no, who is it that usually adopted?

Yeah. I think she’s a good—well, you only notice when you hear or see about. So I don’t know her personally. I think that’s a good thing. She’s trying to help others. She’s helping kids-wise. Taraji, I never heard anything—I’ve never personally heard anything bad about her. She’s just another successful Black woman, like Beyoncé. Then, Rihanna, well, she doesn’t—she’s been through it. [Talking] about her Chris Brown situation.

Interviewer: Speaking of Chris Brown, do you like his music? Did you feel differently about him after the situation with Rihanna?
Taylor: Yeah, because it was a woman that was being abused. Not just because it was the two [of them]. Anyone that’s abused, I feel like you look at the man differently. Why would you do that? Something probably happened. I’m not saying it’s okay for him to hit her. I don’t really know the story like that.

**Being an African American Girl**

Taylor is asked if she thinks there is anything unique about being an African American girl. She suggests that all cultures have something special about them and names physical traits as characteristics unique to African Americans. She also names stereotypes that are associated with African American girls and women.

Interviewer: Do you think that there’s anything unique about being a Black girl? What about appearance, the way they act?

Taylor: I don’t know. I feel like every culture, race has their own benefits or something different about them.

Interviewer: Okay. What about appearance, the way they act?

Taylor: Appearance? They have a bunch of different pretty skin tones. White people, they don’t really—they’re all almost the same complexion. They might just be a little fairer than each other. Black people, or African American females, or people in general, can be from all the way from dark skin to light skin, anywhere between there. You don’t really see other cultures, or races, I should say, like White people, or even Indians, or Spanish, I should say. Then, we have different hair textures. Some curls
are tighter than the others. Our hair’s more versatile. It could be curly or straight.

Interviewer: What about the way Black women act? How would you describe Black women, in general?

Taylor: I don’t know. It just depends. All Black women aren’t the same. You know how there’s stereotypes? Maybe White people are more preppy or something, or Black people might be maybe ghetto or something. I think it just depends on your environment, or what you grew up in. I’ve seen White people that are ghetto. There’s a lot of sophisticated Black people. I don’t think it has anything to do with your race. I think it has to do with your environment and how you were raised and stuff.

Interviewer: What kind of stereotypes, besides ghetto, come up, when thinking about Black women?

Taylor: I don’t know. Loud, maybe ratchet. When I think of ghetto people, I think, I don’t know, people that’s rowdy and loud, and they want a lot of attention. That’s what I think when I think of ghetto people. Ratchet is. They’re all over the place with their life. Their lives not are not together. Well, it’s not. You know how people think they might have a lot of babies, or baby dads, and stuff like that. I think somebody might put that in the ratchet category. Maybe or the way they dress. Some people might categorize some people with the way they dress.
Interviewer: Okay, so if you’re playing charades and somebody pulls a card where they have to act out being a Black girl, how would they act?

Taylor: I don’t really know. All Black people aren’t the same, so I don’t really know how they’re going to act. You can act many ways and be a Black person. Like I said. Some people are sophisticated or calm. The way you act isn’t based on your race, so I really don't know how to explain it. It’s just different type of people in the world, not just within Black people. I don’t know.

Interviewer: What I’m trying to get at is I’m trying to pull more stereotypes out because people act as individuals. The way we act isn’t necessarily based on our race, but the way we’re perceived as how we should act or how we act, I think a lot of that is race-based, or based on our class level. Like you said, based on our upbringing and based on our environment, that would be class. I think there are a lot of stereotypes associated with that, especially with what people see on television. I’m just trying to get at how you think other people might perceive Black people, Black women especially.

Taylor: They might perceive them as maybe—this sounds really weird to say, but like a gold digger. The women just—they’re with a man for money or something, or they’re with someone for money. You know what I'm saying? Stuff like that. They can’t get it on their own or something.

Needs in School
Taylor says that she does not feel as though what she is learning about in school represents her as an African American girl. However, her suggestions for what students need are not race or gender specific.

Interviewer: Do you feel as though, as a Black girl, what you’re about learning [in your education] represents you? For example, the books you read in your literature classes, or what you talk about in history.

Taylor: No. I think globalization. In there, we just talk about trading. Trading and importing, exporting, stuff like that. It doesn’t do really about the race. We talk about immigrants, but not really race. Then, I take government, and we just talk about government. We don’t really talk about race in my classes or anything.

Interviewer: What do you talk about in government?

Taylor: The different branches, Constitution, Bill of Rights. [Politics], a little bit.

Maybe a little bit. We watched, what was it called, state of the address or something? We just had to take notes in it.

Although she does not feel well represented in her coursework, Taylor initially gives suggestions for what students need, specifically aimed at African American girls, or girls in general. She says her recommendations are for students in general and boys. As she speaks, she finds that her suggestions could work for girls as well.

Interviewer: It’s interesting that you say that because last year’s State of the Union address—well, during last year’s State of the Union address, President Obama announced an initiative called My Brother’s Keeper, where he was
essentially talking about initiatives to support Black boys and Latino boys, just boys of color, in school, in the community. He was suggesting mentorship. He was suggesting making sure our boys are prepared in school. If you had the opportunity to give President Obama feedback about a My Sister’s Keeper initiative, what would you say that Black girls need in schools?

Taylor: Well, I don’t know what it’d be for girls of color. It’d be for all students.

Interviewer: Okay. What are your recommendations?

Taylor: I think people start off bad. I think the worst part is probably when you’re starting off high school. I feel like some people come with the mindset this is going be easy, or they’re just here for fun, and they end up doing bad because they don’t really focus. You can give advice to people, but you can’t really tell them what to do. It’s just hard to stay focused [when] you’re just ready to go. I could see a mentorship—but it wouldn’t be with school.

That goes back to boys, though. Keeping them off the streets and stuff. I guess females do stuff like that, too, so I guess keeping females off the street. Just focusing on going far. They usually keep females down in saying they don’t really recognize them if they go far. If they become a doctor or they become this or that. Or it’s rare if females are in politics or stuff like that.

Interviewer: You’re saying them being in politics is rare?
Taylor: Mm-hmm. We don’t really know about it that much. Well, I don’t. I think just a push. A mentor could help them set goals and stuff like that, follow through with them.

Overall, Taylor takes pride in being an African American girl. Here, Taylor tries to make sense of racism and sexism in society.

Taylor: Because Black people are just beautiful. I don’t know. I feel like they’re making a come-up. They’re glowing up. People, they’re starting to come out the stereotypes. I feel like we’re creating new ones. Some might not be good, but I feel like we’re coming out of them.

Interviewer: Which ones do you think we’re coming out of?

Taylor: They talk about women being at the bottom of the totem pole. I feel like we’re [doing] better at that. Blacks being in politics, period. We have a Black President, the first African American President right now. I feel like we’re just coming out of those stereotypes, some of them.

Interviewer: How do you think women are making strides in coming out from the bottom? Do you think they’re doing things that other women haven’t done?

Taylor: They’re just like—they’re working harder. Women are making and doing things others haven’t done before. They’re just not being recognized or something. We live in a different society than we did years ago. I feel like it’s a more lenient one. Maybe, [an] open society, open to new ideas and stuff.
Interviewer: You say we have a Black President. How do you feel, for example, there was a newspaper in Belgium that printed a picture in 2004 of Barack Obama and Michelle Obama side by side, looking like apes. We have a Black President, but do you think it’s changed race relations in this country?

Taylor: I think a little bit. I feel like if you going be racist, you are going to be racist. I feel maybe some people who not were racist, per se, but maybe—if they never had a Black President, they wouldn’t know how one [would] be. When you get one, it opens your mind up to the things. They might perceive him differently then. They have a stereotype like Black people are just violent, or maybe in gangs. I don’t know. Some people are more open-minded than others. If someone wants to stay racist, they’re going just stay racist.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you think racism is just an individual thing? It’s just a people thing?

Taylor: What else could it be?

Interviewer: Right. Do you think that people are racist or do you think that society is racist?

Taylor: I think people make up society, so I feel like people.

An ideal school. If she had the opportunity to create a school, Taylor would arrange for a calm environment that did not have uniforms. She believes that she and other students could work better in a more relaxed environment. She is clear on not
allowing standardized testing. She would also make sure that the student body was racially diverse.

Taylor: If I could make a school? I feel everybody would just be cool and calm. You come to school early in the morning and people are loud. I don’t like stuff like that because it’s really early. I just want everybody to be calm and cool and just go with the flow.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you have any opinion about standardized testing?

Taylor: I don’t think it’s a really good idea. Some people aren’t really good test takers. Some people might be good at the material. They might not be good at test taking. You know it’s timed? They might not be able to manage time the best. I don’t think it’s a good way of measuring someone’s intelligence.

Interviewer: How would you say you are with taking tests? Would there be testing in your school? What kind of testing?

Taylor: I’m fine with it. It’s not a problem for me, but I feel some students might not. You have tests in class. Not standardized testing. I feel like you should do that, to make sure you know the material. Then, some teachers, they see that you’re not doing [and] they’ll go back on the subject. Not all teachers do that, but some do. We would do that. It would be racially and culturally diverse because I like a lot of different people. I’ve been around African Americans all my life. I want to be around White people maybe, new people. I don’t know. I feel like it would just—I don’t even know.
If I could have a school in this society, I feel like everybody should just be relaxed and calm.

Interviewer: You think that schools in general aren’t like that?

Taylor: Well, I was about to say we wouldn’t have uniform. That’s not a big thing. I feel like why we have uniform now is because people think they got better stuff than everybody else. No, just come to school in some yoga pants and a t-shirt. That’s what I would do. That would just be awesome. I just do not feel like putting these khakis on and polos on everyday. What would I even dress in if I had a no-uniform school? I would wear sweats all the time. I feel like that’s how my school would be, just relaxed, but you’re learning. I feel like, if you're relaxed, you’re going to learn better.

If she could create a class that catered to African Americans, Taylor would focus on history and current events.

Interviewer: Okay. This is going back to school. Thinking about things that you like to do in school, thinking about the fact that you’re saying you don’t feel as though Black people are really represented in your classes, if you had the opportunity to create a class that you would just teach to Black girls or Black people, what would you have in the curriculum? What would you have people learning about?

Taylor: I could’ve sworn we used to have a class like this, or they talked about it, or something. I don’t know why African American studies sounds familiar to me. It would just talk about the history. I feel like it would be
like a regular class, but just focused on African Americans, like history about them, or what’s going on in the world right now about them, like current events.

Interviewer: Okay. Is there anything you’d want to learn about in particular, as far as history goes, or as far as current events go?

Taylor: Probably current events, like what’s going on with women, or African Americans right now. You hear about history a lot, actually. You always hear about slaves and stuff. We talk about the police brutality and stuff. You might learn more the background.

This chapter presented the narratives of Arya Thompson, Brittany Owens, Courtney Miller, Gabrielle Carter, Maya Adams, Olivia Reese, and Taylor Barnes.

Although their stories were unique, common threads and themes are present that connect each of the participants’ experiences. The following chapter will address these themes that have emerged and present an analysis that have been developed through a grounded theory approach.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the following overarching question: How do African American girls navigate their educational, personal and social worlds to become successful in school? The study explored this question through multiple aspects, such as the role of: home and family experiences as well as schooling experiences, and the media in the constructions of attitudes/perceptions that African American female students hold about their lives, education, and schooling. Moreover, the researcher is interested in understanding what are the educational needs of African American girls and how are these needs represented or manifested in home, work and school?

As noted in chapter one, adolescence is in a stage of development where human beings are actively exploring their identities. This identity formation is impacted by their family relationships, peer relationships, educational environments, and overall messages from the media (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Sadker & Zittleman, 2010; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). History and culture also play a significant role (Ginwright, 2010). This is particularly salient in the lives of African American adolescents, as their identity development is impacted by the historical legacy of subjugation, marginalization and institutional racism in the United States. African American female adolescents also have the added lens of gender and sexism to contend with. Throughout their identity
development, African American female adolescents are grappling with notions of race, gender, class, and overall perceptions of what it means not to just be Black in America, but what it means to be a Black girl. According to the participants’ narratives, these are two unique conceptualizations.

In this chapter, the researcher will discuss how the participants perceive their educational, social and personal worlds and present an interpretation of these findings. A number of themes have emerged from the data. With such a small sample size, it is acknowledged that these emergent themes are not meant to be generalizable across populations of African American high school juniors and seniors in urban districts. Rather, this is intended to provide an initial inquiry, which provides a starting point for further research. The themes that have emerged are theories that contribute to the understanding of the success of African American females in schools. The themes are based in the theoretical grounding of Black feminist theory and epistemology (Hill Collins, 1991) that places the lived experiences of African American girls and women at the center of knowledge.

The interviews revealed that the participants’ personal lives cannot be disassociated from their educational and social lives. These three elements are highly interconnected. The researcher’s interpretation of the data reflects that the girls are impacted by cultural influences that are steeped in race, gender and class norms. These influences are firmly grounded in family beliefs and attitudes, their educational environments, peer relationships and their exposure to the media. The interpretation of this interconnectedness has led to the creation of two conceptual models: the first is to
conceptualize the participants’ families, peers, school and community relationships as “networks of support” (see Figure 1 on p. 298) and the second to make sense of their “spheres of influence” (see Figure 2 on p. 328). Both models are fluid to highlight the fact that the importance of the relationships and influences can shift based upon the context.

This chapter is organized with the discussion of family first, as this is the first and foundational mode of socialization and impartation of cultural values. It also undergirds other emergent themes such as trauma and resilience, resistance, and education as stability and success and what it means to be an African American girl. After these themes, I discuss the roles of peer relationships as sources of support and the media as a significant point of influence.

Family: The Impartation of Values and The Intersection of Love, Support and Hurt

Olivia, Brittany, Courtney, Maya, Taylor, Arya and Gabrielle all say and demonstrate that their families play a major role in their lives. The girls’ family structures are varied. Olivia and Brittany’s homes are most similar; they live in homes with their biological mothers and fathers and younger siblings. Courtney and Taylor’s parents have separated and divorced respectively and their parents share custody. Taylor’s parents live close to one another and as per their custody agreement, she and her brother spend one week with her mother and one week with her father. Although her parents share custody, Courtney has chosen to live primarily with her mother and stepfather because of her relationship with her father, which she describes as verbally and emotionally abusive. She is the youngest sibling and lives alone with her mother and
stepfather. Maya lives with her mother and four siblings. Her father died when she was a baby and her mother takes care of her family on her own. Gabrielle has lived with her paternal grandparents since the birth of her daughter. She says that this is the best living situation for her because of her strained relationship with both her mother and stepmother. Her parents lived together but separated when she was about ten years old. Around this same time, her father was incarcerated and she lived with her mother. Once her father was released, Gabrielle moved to live with her father. This arrangement was in place until Gabrielle became pregnant with her daughter. Arya lives with her legal guardian and her younger brother. Her biological mother is not able to care for her or her siblings and lost custody of them when Arya was a young child due to neglect because of drug and alcohol use and prostitution. Arya’s mother does not know the identity of Arya’s father.

While all of the girls have close relationships with their siblings, Arya and Maya express distinct concern over the behavior, well-being, and future of their brothers, and spent a considerable amount of time during the interviews discussing them, implying to the researcher, that this is a significant aspect of their family lives. Arya and Maya’s concerns are particularly telling and reveals what the researcher interprets as a cultural value in the African American community: the girls believe that while they will ‘make it’, the boys require more concern because of various social factors.

Arya, for example, has a younger brother who demonstrates behaviors that are concerning to her and her guardian. He sneaks food from the kitchen and damages their home by making holes in the wall and tearing screens out of windows. He also risks his
and the family’s personal safety by playing with electrical outlets and fire. Arya says that she does not know where he gets the behavior from and does not believe that it comes from their household because she and their older siblings have always been focused on their schoolwork. She does note that her older siblings were, in her words, “bad” in school because they fought and had anger management issues, or as she described it, ‘low tempers.’ Arya attributed this behavior to their mistreatment as children while they were in different foster homes. She maintains that while her younger brother was too young to witness any of that and yet, it appears that these experiences may still have had a negative impact on him.

Maya’s concerns are focused on her twin brother, who in her words, does not listen and needs a father figure to fill the void that was left when their father was murdered. While she describes herself as a scholar, she says that her brother is average and unmotivated. He needs someone who is firmer than her mother, who can be “too nice.” While she wants both her and her brother to have a father figure, she says it is “easier for a woman to raise a woman. It’s not so easy for a woman to raise a man.” In her explanation of why this is, Maya points out her understanding of sexism and patriarchy:

Because boys tend to think they have—their views are different. They tend to think they know everything like they got everything is always right and sometimes they abuse their power. They want to control women and stuff and it’s like you can’t be like that. My mom’s trying to teach my
brother respect everybody the same. We’re all human. You don’t control anyone because you don’t want anyone to control you.

This topic of discussion also arose throughout her interviews. Whereas she advocates for equality and humanity, she feels as though gender is used as a way for men to control.

While Maya and her twin get along, she sees that they are not headed in the same direction and this scares her.

Maya: … I want my brother to do as good as me, if not better. It’s harder as a young man in today’s world. With all that gang violence, drugs, all that stuff. It’s easier for me to do better for myself but for them they got—I mean females have peer pressure too, but they really have pressure like pressure to not be smart or not go to school or just be in the streets all the time and just not do anything. I’m really more scared for him than for me because I know I’m gonna make it but I don’t know about him, especially growing up today.

Interviewer: You know you’re gonna make it.

Maya: Mm-hmm.

Maya’s comments highlight her perception of the uniquely gendered struggles that African American youth face. While she feels encouraged to work hard in school and succeed, she feels that boys have more issues that can derail them. She does acknowledge that girls have to contend with bullying based on looks while boys are raised to be macho so immediately fighting after a disagreement is expected.
**Love and nurturing: Sacrifice, provision and support.** Although their family dynamics are varied, the participants have revealed a commonality as it pertains to their families: *support*. This support is provided through love and nurturing, provision, and the belief in the girls’ overall success. This applies to their immediate and extended family members. As Taylor says,

“[My family] is important because they're in my life a lot. I’ve known them forever. They help me. They push me to do good. They motivate me. They love me. [They support] anything I do. They come to my sporting events. …—they ask me about school and stuff. My one aunt, she finds us scholarships and stuff to do.”

This is a common sentiment among the girls. They look to their families as sources of love and support and they indicate that they encourage them to believe their opportunities are limitless.

Although the term “love” is seldom used in the interviews in regard to their families, it is apparent from how the girls describe their relationships with their families that they feel loved and nurtured. This is expressed through how they and their families spend time together, how they treat one another, and how they take care of them. For example, although they have busy schedules that include extracurricular activities, jobs, and spending time with friends, the girls regularly spend time with their families after school on the weekends. These activities vary from having dinner at home or going out to eat at a restaurant, shopping, and going to the movies. All of the girls speak highly of their time with their families.
Maya describes her mother as selfless and giving and appreciates her for all that she does. At one point, she shares that she tries to give back to her mother so that she knows how they appreciate her.

“Yeah. I think it’s like in the middle because I want my mom to have stuff for herself, but I also want to have stuff for us. She’ll go and buy us stuff and then she’ll be like ‘I’ve had the same clothes since 2006.’ Mom, go buy you something. She’ll be like, no, I’m okay. I always buy her something. Anytime I go somewhere I’ll always get her something, so she’ll know that we’re—we appreciate her.”

Maya’s appreciation highlights a common theme that was shared among the girls: how their parents have sacrificed for them and how much they appreciate this. Olivia says that appreciates her parents’ sacrifice in coming to the United States to provide strong educational opportunities for her. Although she initially questioned why they brought her to America, she now acknowledges that they sacrificed their way of life to better hers and she is grateful.

Maya, Courtney and Arya share a similar sentiment. Maya’s mother had her and her twin brother when she was in college. Maya says that it was important to her mother to raise them herself and not ask family members to do it. As such, she dropped out of college to raise them. Courtney’s mother also had her at a young age and she both admires the hardships her mother has endured and how hard her mother has worked to care for her and her brothers. Arya is grateful to her guardian for taking her and her siblings in. To do this, her guardian had to leave nursing school. Arya says that she is
happy now because she has a “roof over [her] head, food, and stuff [she] didn’t have before.” Beyond the clothes and shoes that belong to her, she also has something that is not material: a voice. She says, “I can have an opinion, like what I want. I don’t have to get what they want me to get.”

_Mothers as role models._ Most of the participants noted that they were particularly close to their mothers and named characteristics that they admired and wished to emulate. For example, Taylor calls her mother her “bestie” because of their close relationship. She admires her for her work ethic and commitment to education. Taylor’s mother works full time and is also in graduate school while helping to put Taylor’s brother and soon, Taylor, through college as well. Taylor says that her mother has tried to instill independence in her but that she refuses to accept the lesson completely because she wants to hold onto her childhood that much longer.

Courtney, Maya, Brittany and Arya say that they are quite close to their mothers and they feel comfortable enough to talk to them about anything. Courtney and Maya admire their mother’s strength through what they have endured with being an abusive relationship and single mother, respectively. While Courtney describes her mother as strict and over protective, she does not hesitate in saying that they are extremely close and that she is emotionally supportive. Maya describes her mother as independent because she takes care of her five children on her own. Maya also sees her mother as giving and selfless and often sees her put her siblings’ needs before her own. Independence is a quality that Maya admires because of her mother’s influence.
Arya is grateful for her guardian for taking care of her and providing for her needs. Arya is fiercely protective of her guardian and gets upset when her biological mother verbally attacks this provider. Although her biological mother is not supposed to have any contact with her, Arya says that she pops into their lives every so often and accuses her guardian of turning Arya and her siblings against her. Arya speaks of these incidences with anger and resentment because she says that her mother had her chance.

Although the girls mentioned particular qualities in their mothers that they admired, Brittany is the only participant who specifically referred to her mother as a role model. She described her as a role model in direct opposition to the images of African American women on reality television. Whereas the women who fight on television look “stupid,” Brittany describes her mother as a role model who sets a positive example.

**Fathers as sources of love and hurt.** While the girls are particularly close to their mothers, a common theme among them, with the exception of Olivia, was that they do not report having relationships with their fathers that are as strong as the ones they have with their mothers. Taylor, for example, who calls her mother her bestie, does not give her father this distinction. She describes him as “cool” but says that she spends more time with her mother. In fact, the only participant who says that she is closer to her father than mother is Gabrielle. Gabrielle sees him as her role model and admires his strength and drive as he has since become an entrepreneur since being released from prison. She reacted with extreme hurt and anger when her parents separated and when he was incarcerated which led to her mother signing her up for anger management classes. Additionally, because she wanted her parents to be together, she resents his new wife.
Despite this, she says that they have a better relationship than the one she has with her mother.

Brittany is particularly vocal about her relationship with her father. She reports being raised in a household with both of her parents. She has a stronger relationship with her mother and often speaks of her father as if he is a child because in her perception, he does not act like a responsible parent. While he works and provides for the family, he does play an active role in taking care of the household duties. She recounts the time that she told her father that she wanted to attend prom with her friends and not take a date. Her father immediately asked if she was a lesbian. Brittany attributes the lack of communication to the fact that he has not had a daughter before and does not know how to act around her. Courtney’s father is emotionally and verbally abusive toward her. He verbally attacks her mother and stated to Courtney that he would have no problem with not supporting her. She says that this has impacted her ability to trust boys and people in general.

**Instilling the value of success.** Although they perceive themselves as being responsible and motivated, all of the girls acknowledge that their parents and guardians have instilled the values to be successful and driven, and are grateful for their emotional and monetary support. The girls’ parents have consistently given them messages that they want them to succeed beyond their own success. Based upon the girls’ responses, what emerged from the data was a multistep approach utilized by the parents to ensure that their daughters would be academically successful. First, the parents were highly involved in school selection choices. Three of the girls, Brittany, Taylor and Gabrielle
attended a middle school that was a feeder school for Northwestern Tech. Maya, Olivia, and Courtney were required to enter a lottery to attend. Regardless of how they arrived at Northwestern Tech, the girls’ parents made choices about their education that ensured their preparedness and competitiveness. Second, the parents of six of the seven girls had them participate in programs that are focused on preparation for college, personal development and the future. Third, their parents have expressed a high level of involvement in the college review and application process even if the parents themselves did not attend college. The girls have attended college tours and articulated that they not only knew that they would be going to college, but that they had choices. Overall, these parents have ensured that their daughters were a part of networks that contributed to their overall academic, personal and social success.

Additionally, and perhaps quite significantly, their parents have consistently provided the message that education was the pathway to success, in both academic and financial terms. For example, doing well in school means getting into a good college, getting an advanced degree and choosing a profitable career. Through instilling these values and providing opportunities for the girls to become academically competitive, their parents have helped develop high achieving and motivated daughters who are extremely focused on their present success in high school and in the future through college, graduate school, and building stable lives.

Brittany, Taylor and Gabrielle acknowledge being appreciative of their parents’ hard work and providing for them. Both of them note having parents who work demanding jobs and long hours to support them and their siblings. Brittany’s mother is a
hair stylist and is often on her feet for twelve to thirteen hours every day. Her mother’s hard work extends beyond financial support. She is providing a model for success while also encouraging Brittany to get an education and to advance higher than she has.

Brittany: Yeah, my family encourage me a lot because they haven’t done as well as I have done. It’s like they know how it is, and how it feels not to do well. They encourage me to do things better than they did so I won’t end up like them.

Interviewer: Now how are they?

Brittany: My mom, for example, she didn’t go to college. She works long nights. She works about 12 to 13 hours every day. She always tells me, “Brittany, go to college.”

Taylor’s mother provides support in a similar way. She works long hours and attended a two-year college. She is currently working on her Bachelor’s degree and tries to encourage Taylor to go further than she did in terms of education and profession.

“My mom, she went to a two-year college. She always wanted to do more, but she said her mother held her down. She didn’t want her to—she was fearful of things, I guess. Not in a way to hold her back, but more so outta ignorance, like she didn’t know. You know what I’m saying? She always wanted us to do more.”

The data reveals that instilling success is very much connected with the support and encouragement that the girls’ families are providing. Their families are trying to encourage the girls to achieve a level of success beyond what they have obtained which
has helped the girls in believing that education is the pathway to overall success and financial stability.

**Instilling the values of personal responsibility and motivation.** All of the girls are high achieving students with very clear career aspirations, and demonstrate a belief that their success can be attributed to the values of responsibility and personal motivation that were instilled in them by their parents and families. The girls regarded themselves as responsible in some aspect of their lives, whether it be at home, school, or in both environments. Personal motivation arose often as they discussed their performance in school and motivation for succeeding. The data suggests that their parents laid the foundation for their early achievement in elementary and middle schools by setting high expectations for their success and trying to impart responsibility. These themes in particular emerged when the participants were asked if they felt supported and motivated to do well by their parents and teachers. The common response was that now, as juniors and seniors, they had to be personally responsible and self-motivated for their own achievement and success but that when they were younger, their parents were highly involved whether the girls liked it or not.

For example, Olivia says that her parents say that she is supposed to get good grades, and in fact, they expect it from her. In her words, they were a “bit involved” when she was in middle school but now that she is in high school, they have eased up.

Olivia: I hate parents who are over involved, like helicopter parents.——like in middle school, my parents were a little bit involved. I never did great. My parents just expect that I do great and get ‘A’s. That's what they
expect and that's what I do. They don't put the pressure on me, and that's what I like. I put that pressure on myself to do great. At the end of the day, it's not their life. They're already living their life. It's mine. It's my job to do so.

Courtney’s mother has told her something similar:

Courtney: No. I have a life. I'm self-driven. It's like I feel like it has to be done for me, cuz I know my mom's not gonna take care of a 22-year-old that's not doing anything.

Interviewer: Did she tell you that?

Courtney: Yes.

Olivia’s last statements as well as Courtney’s reflect a shared theme among the participants: the girls feel responsible for their own lives, education and success.

The girls have been encouraged to be responsible in a number of ways. In addition to the expectation that they keep their grades up, the data reflects that they have been encouraged to be responsible at home through caring for younger siblings and performing household chores. Additionally, Brittany, Taylor, Gabrielle and Olivia have jobs for spending money. Brittany in particular says that she works as much as possible to save money for college. Brittany, Taylor and Courtney have also been entrusted with cars that they use to drive back and forth to school, activities, and work. The cars may ease the responsibility that is on the parents, as the girls are often working long hours and late into the evening.
In regard to the home, Brittany is expected to help out by taking care of her younger brother when her parents are at work. She says that she does not mind, as this is her younger brother and family is important. Arya has also been tasked with watching her younger brother when he plays outside. In addition to caretaking responsibilities for her daughter, Gabrielle helps out around the house by cleaning and cooking. Olivia also spends time with her brother and sister who are significantly younger than her.

Overall, the data reflects that all of the girls have relatively strong relationships with their families. Their families serve as networks of love and support and have instilled values such as personal responsibility, and the importance of faith. Their networks of support are interconnected, as demonstrated by Figure 1 below. Their families provide their primary and constant source of support. Their peers, school environments and community organizations also offer support but these can shift based upon the context. We also see that families can serve as a source of hurt, which leads directly to the discussion of trauma.

Figure 1. Networks of Support. This figure illustrates the participants’ families, peers, and schools/communities as networks of support.
Resilience in the Face of Trauma

Gabrielle, Maya, Courtney, Taylor, Arya, and Olivia experienced traumatic events in their childhoods as defined by Frazier et al. (2011). The source of these traumatic events is rooted in family situations, thus serving as another example of family influence in their lives. Gabrielle, Courtney and Maya were adversely affected by family situations to the extent that they acted out their anger in elementary and middle school. Notably, Brittany says that she was raised in a stable two-parent home. This is consistent with Frazier et al.’s (2011) argument that only a small percentage of African American girls who were studied reported experiencing no childhood traumatic events.

Gabrielle, Maya, and Courtney said that their experiences impacted their behavior in school. The girls indicated that they had supportive teachers and administrators who knew them and tried to provide a level of support to assist them in managing the behavior. In the case of Olivia her traumatic experiences occurred in school as a result of her being a new student who moved to the United States from her home in Africa. The bullying was observed firsthand during her classroom observation. Her female peers asked her how many languages she could speak because she was African and proceeded to dismiss her as being less intelligent than another African student because of her answer. Moreover, Olivia did not receive the support or protection from her teachers or the school staff in managing the relentless taunting. Olivia was very clear that the bullying has affected her deeply, and while she has maintained her status as a high achieving student, she developed insecurity and self-doubt about her appearance and decisions.
Although they were very open about their traumatic experiences, the participants were equally forthcoming about the fact that they were learning how to cope and were hopeful about their emotional growth and optimistic about their futures. Although some more straightforward than others, each girl indicated that she was not willing to let her past define her. This points directly to the concept of resilience, which was demonstrated in different ways by each participant who experienced a traumatic event. Such resilience is directly connected to their strong self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-affirmation. Even if they displayed an inability to trust some of their decisions, overall, these girls are very confident in who they are, their academic capabilities, and their success in the future.

Gabrielle’s father was incarcerated when she was ten years old. Her parents broke up around this same time. She says that because of this, she grew angry and consistently got into arguments and fights in school. As mentioned earlier, her mother attempted to intervene by placing her in anger management. Although she learned coping strategies in therapy, Gabrielle’s relationship with her mother remained strained, and even now, she still does not get along with her mother or stepmother, as her father has since married. Gabrielle has always wanted her parents to remain a family unit.

Taylor and Courtney also experienced parental separation. Taylor’s parents divorced when she was in kindergarten. Interestingly enough, she prefers their relationship this way because of her memories of their continuous fighting. Her parents share custody, live close to one another, and often spend time together as a family unit. Courtney’s mother was in an abusive relationship with her father and she left him when

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Courtney was very young. Her parents now share custody. When Courtney was in the sixth grade, her father began to verbally and emotionally abuse her, in what Courtney believes was an effort to hurt her mother. This negatively impacted Courtney’s behavior in school and she became angry and prone to episodes where she says she often blacked out from the rage.

Maya’s father was murdered when she was a baby. She witnessed the murder of a close family friend whom she refers to as her brother when she was in middle school. She did not witness this from afar -- Maya was in the back of the car with him when he was shot in the head. Her anger at the violence and utter disregard for human life led her to act out in school. She regularly got into fights in middle school because of her temper.

Arya’s describes her mother as a drug addict and prostitute and does not know who her father is. She and her siblings were removed from her mother’s care when she was very young. The children were taken in together by family members in a number of foster homes. While in one of the foster homes, Arya remembers being abused by an older woman in the house. In one instance, this old woman would pour water on her in the morning to prevent her from sleeping. Arya now lives with her adult cousin who serves as her legal guardian. Although she is much happier, a continuing stressor for her is that her biological mother still finds a way to contact her and her guardian.

Although Olivia’s home life is comparatively stable to the other girls’, Olivia was bullied mercilessly by her classmates in elementary and middle school after her family arrived in the United States from her home country in Western Africa. Her classmates specifically targeted her accent, hair, and facial features to the point where Olivia tried to
find ways to shave her nose down to make it smaller. She also searched Google for a way to lose her accent. She said even though she is over it now because she acknowledges that she cannot change herself, she still cannot describe herself as beautiful and would get plastic surgery to make her nose smaller if she had the opportunity in the future.

While bullying, parent incarceration, divorce, separations and emotional and verbal abuse are not exclusive to African American girls, research shows that African American girls are exposed to traumatic stressors at significantly higher rates than adolescents of other racial groups. (Frazier, et al., 2011). These traumatic stressors include parents divorcing, emotional abuse, having a battered mother, physical abuse, and having a parent who was incarcerated.

Despite these events, all of the girls have excelled in school and are focused on succeeding. While Gabrielle, Olivia, Taylor, Arya and Courtney acknowledged that they had experienced traumatic events, they are optimistic about successfully moving forward and ultimately believe in their future success. They are determined to be successful in spite of their circumstances. Maya was very clear about explaining that her father’s death and seeing her god brother being shot in front of her had left her numb and that she did not know how to feel. This, however, does not impact her present academic achievement or the future that she envisions for herself: to be a neurosurgeon who is financially stable.

As noted in the review of the literature, resilience is a concept that has consistently been applied to the experiences of African American girls. In addition to their outstanding academic performance, the participants have shown their resilience in a
variety of ways. The researcher argues that their resilience helped them push through to: find happiness in spite of their circumstances, effective coping methods, and; speak their truths.

Arya has found happiness in spite of her circumstances. Her explanation of why she is happy is particularly moving and displays maturity when considering her story:

Interviewer: How do you feel about all of [what has happened?]

Arya: It's, it's weird. Like, how can people do that to other…like to other people? Now, it's just like I have to go through all that to get to where I'm at.

Interviewer: Explain.

Arya: Like it's not fair. I mean it's, it's life. But, it's just all this stuff that I've been through. It …got me to like a good place now.

Interviewer: OK. So you feel like you're in a good place now.

Arya: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Would,…you say you're happy?

Arya: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: OK. How do you… describe being happy?

Arya: Umm...to be able to have a roof over my head, and like food, and stuff that I didn't have before. ...And clothes that's mine, and shoes that's mine.

And… I can have an opinion, like what I want. I don't have to get what they want me to get.

Olivia has also pushed forward and considers herself to be happier now in high school than she was in middle school. She says that she is comfortable with herself
because she has accepted herself and cannot change it. She says that being happy and doing what makes her happy are important to her. I observed firsthand how normal and accepted the bullying seemed. Olivia acted as though it were common and reacted with both grace and righteous indignation. This demonstrates to the researcher that at least outwardly, she is ‘pushing through’.

Courtney was very open about the fact that when she was in elementary and middle school, she would get so angry that she would black out. Luckily, she had the support of teachers and administrators who employed methods to support her by calming her down and giving her space and calling her mother to calm her down. The verbal abuse from her father began when she was in the sixth grade and she initially held it inside. Eventually, she told her mother and brothers which was a huge release for her. Her family rallied around her in support and she now knows that she has multiple people (such as her mother and two brothers) to go to for emotional support. When she was twelve, Courtney made the choice to live with her mother full time. She still visits her father but finds way of avoiding him when she does not want to deal with him. Her father recently had another daughter who is now one. Courtney loves her sister very much and sees her as a source of support in dealing with her father because she will be able to guide her through how to deal with her father. Essentially, Courtney has found purpose in her role of being an older sister. Confronting her past and speaking her truth has not led Courtney to completely let go of the past, but she is making strides to work through it and is not letting anything hold her back.
Gabrielle also experienced angry episodes in elementary school and middle school around the time her parents separated and when her father went to prison. She got into fights and was suspended twice. Although she does not make the connection between the two events, Gabrielle says that she started hanging out with a “bad” group of people when she was in her freshman year of high school. Her father was home at this point and she was living with him. She would cut school regularly or not attend at all. Her grades fell sharply. The birth of her daughter caused her to regain focus. She says that she has gone through a great deal in her life and would not still be here if it were not for God. She relies heavily on her faith and I have interpreted as her faith being an effective way for her to manage and cope.

Despite her parents’ divorce, Taylor seems quite well adjusted. She acknowledges that she sees her parents’ relationship as normal now since they ended their marriage so long ago. She also says that since they spend so much time as a family unit, people often think her parents are together. In any event, she is happy with her family arrangement. The divorce has not impacted how she envisions her future. In fact, she is excited about getting married and having children in the very distant future. She thinks that planning a wedding will be “fun” because “you get to be with the person you really like for all the time.” This is “so cool” and she is looking forward to it.

Despite the traumatic events that they experienced, all of the girls have shown signs of succeeding. In essence, the data suggests that these girls are high achieving students with promising futures in spite of what occurred in their lives. They have not let these events derail them from meeting their goals and have shown their resilience through
choosing happiness, identifying effecting coping strategies, and being true to themselves by speaking their truths.

**Resistance: “(I Don’t Want to be) What People Actually Think We Are”**

The participants demonstrated a level of consciousness, either directly or indirectly, that African Americans experienced racism and that African American women experienced a particularly unique type of discrimination. Articulating racism was generally easier than identifying sexism, even though all of the participants acknowledged that African American women are treated differently and are plagued by stereotypes in American society that are overwhelmingly negative.

Whether it occurred in school or in their personal lives, each participant located an area in which they felt particularly strong about and demonstrated ways to actively work against it. This researcher argues the elements that the girls are resisting are based in racial, gender and/or class biases. Olivia and Maya, for example identify themselves as feminists and believe in equality. Because of this, they recognized gender oppression in their lives and wanted to actively resist it. Olivia resists her parent’s expectation that she learn to cook and perform housework to become a suitable wife. Maya says that men try to control and as such, she takes full control over her dating life. She also recognizes that women who have lighter skin and smaller bodies are considered beautiful as dictated by the mainstream media. She rejects that she has to look a certain way to beautiful. For this study, the researcher argues that Maya’s very act of asserting her beauty is an act of resistance.
The data reflects that for most of the participants, resistance occurred either at home or at school. In one instance, this resistance took place in both the home and at school. Olivia was the only participant that named the cultural norms and values that were expected of her by her family and said that she was actively resisting the ones that she determined were negative. Olivia, Maya, Arya, Taylor, Courtney, Brittany and Gabrielle’s resistance to and rejection of racialized and gendered stereotypes are directly connected to resilience and they were actively building strategies to cope and manage these stereotypes.

The participants employed several modes of resistance that have been interpreted as using their voices through speaking up, talking back and expressing themselves and their agency freely in an school environment that could at times be oppressive through interactions with teachers and constraints on behavior, dress and expectations. The participants also displayed an overall recognition of and resistance to stereotypes associated with African American womanhood.

**Resistance at home.** Olivia says that women in her family are very confident and they know what they want out of life. At the same time, however, they value wives being submissive to their husbands. Olivia strongly disagrees with this. Olivia explains that both her mother and father have the expectation that she prepare to be a wife. One way for her mother to prepare her is to teach her how to cook. Olivia has been told that she has to learn how to cook, not for survival, but because no one will want to marry her if she does not know how to how. Olivia recognized this irony in this and says that although cooking is not a problem for her, she actively resists this being forced on her by
making it seem as though she does not know how to cook. Her feigned ignorance leads to her mother giving up on the lesson and cooking herself. This also applies to the housework. While Olivia’s mother and father tell her on a regular basis that she is never going to find a husband, Olivia responds with, “Okay, whatever,” and maintains that preparing for marriage should not be the reason why she learns to take care of herself. She goes further and says that she is a big feminist and objects to these gender roles being placed upon her. She is resisting being groomed to be property by using her voice and actions to affirm her identity and what is important to her.

**Resistance at school.** The participants resisted the control that was placed upon them in school through the policing of their attire, behavior and low expectations. Edward Morris (2007) attributes racial, class and gender biases to the policing of the behaviors like these in urban schools. The participants’ modes of resistance include using their voices by speaking up, talking back, and choosing to express themselves freely.

Maya says that because of her mouth and temper, teachers have not expected her to be as intelligent as she is. Speaking her mind is a part of her personality and she does not shrink or change that for anyone, thus Maya asserts her humanity through her staying true to who she is, regardless of the perceptions.

Courtney and Brittany express their displeasure over the dress code and school rules in general. As such, they find their own unique ways to express their style and work around the dress code. Courtney says that she had to wear uniforms her entire life and has gotten tired of them as she gets closer to senior year. She acknowledges the
institutional rationale (for equality, to reduce bullying, and for safety) for why students are required to uniforms. Nevertheless, because she has grown tired of them, she makes it look like she is wearing a uniform by wearing the required colors. She is sometimes questioned by the principal, but everyone knows that she does not wear a uniform.

While Courtney’s resistance may be rooted in her grown tired of the uniforms, Brittany wants to express her personality. Brittany likes to “spice” her uniform up by adding accessories like pearls and diamond bracelets. Taylor, too, has remained true to herself in terms of appearance. She notes that in middle school, she resisted what the other girls were wearing, such as certain types of jewelry and looks that were overly feminine. Taylor feels as though uniforms are restricting and students could learn better if they were allowed to dress in a more relaxed way. When she is at school, she does not put much into her appearance because school is just like work for her—her looks are not a focus (E. Morris, 2005, 2007; M. Morris, 2012).

Although their reasons differ, the girls are taking ownership of their bodies and how they present themselves. These acts of expression and agency are both forms of resistance in a school and the greater culture that values uniformity. While uniformity is not necessarily based in race and gender norms, it can be argued that society does not value expression beyond the status quo and certainly does not value that coming from African American girls whose bodies are very much policed (Giddings, 1984; Hobson, 2005; Willis, 2010).

**Resisting social constructs and stereotypes.** All the participants acknowledge that there are stereotypes associated with African American girls and women. Their
levels of consciousness differ in terms of how they have been personally impacted by racism and sexism. This also applies to how they view the significance and impact of racism and sexism in society. Overall, however, with much discussion both amongst themselves in the group interviews and individually, they were able to articulate the representations and that they were overwhelmingly negative.

Courtney expresses a particularly sophisticated level of consciousness about how racism and sexism impact the lives of African American girls and women. She attributes this to seeing statistics on how African American girls in terms of teenage pregnancy and victims of abuse and stated that she has the responsibility to work against this. In fact, the quotation, “(I don’t want to be) what people actually think we are” comes from Courtney. She feels a personal responsibility to making sure that she represents herself as a girl who destroys the stereotypes of African American girls being teen moms with bad attitudes.

Gabrielle articulated that even though she is a teenage mother, she refuses to be a statistic and is still pressing forward. Her main priority is to start college and find a suitable job so that she can move into an apartment with her daughter and support her independently. She has stopped hanging out with the “bad people” that she hung out with when she was skipping school and got pregnant. She attributes learning that she was pregnant to moving in a more positive direction that included going back to school regularly and raising her grades.

A curious place: Resisting while reinforcing cultural representations of african american women. When considering Jordan-Zachary (2009)’s
conceptualizations of Black female cultural representation, the researcher found that some of the occurrences that the girls were resisting can be related to the following stereotypical constructions of Black womanhood: the Sapphire, Jezebel, Welfare Queen and Urban Teen Mother. More specifically, the researcher argues that Gabrielle actively worked against being the stereotypical teen mother and not being self-sufficient (Urban Teen Mother and Welfare Queen; Maya worked hard to achieve and tried to be conscious of her personality and smart mouth because it might impact how teachers perceived her intelligence (Sapphire). Maya, Brittany and Courtney worked against bodily control by expressing themselves. Courtney is not a teenage mother but she feels strongly about it after seeing her mother’s struggle. Olivia is resisting a specific cultural expectation and as such, the Mammie representation is an insufficient representation. While it could be argued that control over attire could be rooted in controlling sexuality, the data did not reflect an element of sexualization and as such the Jezebel representation is an inadequate description for this situation. If anything, this may well be an example of an evolving critical consciousness.

*Strength, independence, and in(ter)dependence.* Interestingly, while these representations were resisted, the girls supported the representation of the strong Black woman. Melissa Harris Perry (2013) suggests that representation does not come from who African American think they are but is rather a racial and political construct that is based in society and the African American community’s expectations of Black womanhood. The participants said that the strength of African American women as a whole was mainly a positive attribute. However, when the conversations dug more
deeply about how being strong and independent might impact them as individuals, the girls reflected on how this perception might be both positive and negative.

Maya says that African American women are perceived to be strong caregivers and that because of this, they are expected to fend for themselves. She says that African American females fare well because they are able put personal issues aside. She acknowledges that knowing that African American females are going to fare well can have positive and negative elements.

Maya: I think it could be both, because it could make you strive to do better for yourself. Also it can send you into depression because you know you should have did it but then you chose to be lazy just because, so you didn’t really achieve your goal.

While the pressure to achieve could be positive by providing motivation to succeed, not reaching the goals one has set can cause guilt and depression. Maya’s word choice is interesting here because it implies that one does not reach their goal if they are lazy, which indicates the cultural value of personal responsibility.

Courtney provides another example. On a personal level, she is extremely driven and works hard to get good grades. However, she says that she does not know when to stop and take care of herself. It takes her family having to step in and suggest that she take a break before she recognizes that she is running herself into the ground. On a greater level, she feels pressure to correct how African American girls are perceived because she wants to “give the older generations hope,” which makes her work that much
harder. As she works harder, however, she puts more pressure on herself and has difficulty stopping.

Interestingly, what arose from this overall discussion with all of the participants was the concept of interdependence. While they revered being strong and wanting to be independent, they also acknowledged the importance of having support. Maya, for example, says that she wants to be independent “because you can do it by yourself as long as you try.” At the same time, however, she wants someone to “have her back” when she needs it. This person can be a partner or family member. Trying to be too independent can have a negative connotation because people can think that one does not need help. Maya stresses the importance of asking and receiving help when it is needed:

Maya: …people would think, well, she think she’s better because she thinks she don’t need anyone. She thinks better than them. She thinks she’s better than that. It’s like no, I’m just as good as you are. I just want to do it by myself, but it’s always okay to ask for help cuz you can’t—I don’t think it’s possible but it’s possible. You understand what I’m saying? To do something by yourself but you’re always gonna need somebody that’s gonna be there. Even if it’s not a partner, if it’s just a friend or your mom or your grandma, somebody that’s gonna be there for you to fall back on if you do need help.

Gabrielle also indicates something similar. While she values being independent and caring for her daughter, she also acknowledges that she values her family’s help.
**Reinforcing while resisting.** While all of the participants engaged in some form of resistance, it is important to note that they also engaged in attitudes and behaviors that reinforced racial and class privilege and norms of girlhood. This is seen in their descriptions of girls who acted like they were “proper” girls who “had it together.” This is presented in direct opposition to girls who behaved in a way that was “ghetto” or “ratchet.” In this sense, the researcher argues that the girls have internalized notions of respectability for their perceptions of what it means to be an African American girl.

During a discussion on stereotypes of African American girls, Taylor says that they are stereotypically seen as “loud,” “ghetto,” and “ratchet.” She tries to draw a distinction between ratchet and ghetto by saying that ghetto refers to personal behavior and ratchet refers to a lifestyle, respectively.

In Maya and Olivia’s group interview, they discuss one of their classmates who had a number of family issues. In her words, she went from someone who looked “presentable” and “put together” to dressing in a masculine way. There was a bit of a struggle when trying to understand what being presentable and put together looked like as Maya and Olivia described her attire. Their descriptions have undertones of class and how that is connected to being respectable.

Olivia: Like not even that. But she was nice. Like she was presentable. .. I don’t know how to describe the way she dressed.

Maya: Her clothes were clean. Like she had a decent amount of money, basically.
Olivia: Like she dressed okay, like somebody that maybe you know they’re having a hard time, they’re struggling, but—

Maya: They can afford to buy a couple of shirts, couple of pants.

Olivia: Yeah. A couple of shirts and wear uniform clothes to wear here and there. Like she had—I think she did a weave something. It wasn’t like a point or anything, but it was fine. Like it was presentable. …. She looked put together, like she was trying. But the next year, … you couldn’t recognize her. Like…you couldn’t.

Maya: She was a zombie. …She cut her hair all off. Yeah.

Olivia: Yeah, like by the end of the year, I heard that she had gone—like apparently she was having trouble at home. And you know like, a lot, like, I guess she was going to her foster home or something…. And a lot of things happened to her, apparently. And then I feel bad because I was judging her. I was like, really? Like she's so trashy. Like oh, my gosh. But then she represented herself in school as this—that’s the funniest thing. These girls at school, they represented themselves as this fun-loving, they don’t care clowns. Like school whatever. You know I’m all about that life. I’m in like gangs and stuff you know like that.

Maya: That's mean. They’re representing themselves as like masculine, like oh, I’m so hard. And umm...

Olivia: Yeah like they don’t really care. Like school is whatever. Like I’m with the boys and stuff like that.
Olivia’s use of the word “trashy” is telling here and her comments appear to have classist overtones. Additionally, this discussion presented an interesting opportunity to discuss a link to being presentable and feminine versus not being presentable and masculine. Maya said that girls can still dress “clean” while also acting masculine. Based upon this discussion, I cannot determine whether the participants’ conceptualization of respectability is based in class or gender norms. It seems to be steeped in both.

Courtney also shared sentiments as it pertains to dress. For her, African American girls should be able to dress however they wish. However, they have to be aware of what is or isn’t appropriate for any given situation.

Courtney: Dressing, the way you—if you're dressing a certain way, I think the way you act can portray you to be something that you're not….

Dressing a certain way, it should—like as far as if you wear yoga pants or something, I feel like you wanna be comfortable, but if you're acting out a certain way, like tooting your butt up in the air and stuff, you could be portrayed differently.

Interviewer: Do you think girls should be able to wear whatever they want?

Courtney: It depends, like if you're showing too much skin, or if it's just really inappropriate for school, like if you know your parents wouldn't let you wear that out, then it shouldn't be worn in school.

The reinforcement of cultural stereotypes does go beyond class and gender norms.

When Olivia’s family arrived in America, her parents told her to “Go hang out with the
White kids” and to leave the African American students alone because they were seen as dangerous and having poor behavior. Elements of this thinking arise in how Olivia speaks about “Black” girls and “Black” people in general. From the study, one realizes that Olivia has had highly negative experiences with her peers and her perceptions of African Americans may be rooted in both personal and societal perceptions.

The participants grapple with making sense of how they are perceived as African American girls and how they perceive others. These perceptions appear to be rooted in elements of race, gender and class and this is very much connected to how they view being an African American girl overall.

**On Being an African American Girl**

All of the participants took pride in their identities as African American and African girls. Olivia made the distinction between being Black and African and made it clear that she was African. In all instances, they took pride in their identities. One of the interview questions asked if they saw themselves as African American (or African) or female first, which is a challenging philosophical question regardless of their age. The initial results varied and there was a level of hesitation as each of them tried to process through the question. For example, Olivia said that she was female first because that is the first thing that people would notice. This is consistent with Olivia’s views on seeing issues that impact African American women as an issue of gender and not race. The follow up question asked if they saw themselves as both African American (or African) and female at the same time. Olivia said that she was both African and female and proud
to be such. She makes this point about why identity should not be an indication of her potential:

Olivia: Both of them should not be a point in making a decision or deciding about stuff, something about me, it should not be important. I mean I am a female and I am African, but what does that have to do with what I can do?

Taylor had similar sentiments. She hesitated at first but ultimately said that she was female first. She said that the question was confusing because she was a female who was African American and could not separate the two, and expressed pride in being an African American girl. Her remarks are particularly meaningful. Taylor’s comments show that she is hopeful about the future of African American women. Here she speaks about how African Americans women are rising in success and recognition and how society is changing to allow this:

Interviewer: Are you proud to be a Black girl?
Taylor: Mm-hmm…. Black people are just beautiful. I don’t know. I feel like they’re making a come-up. They’re glowing up. People, they’re starting to come out the stereotypes. I feel like we’re creating new ones. Some might not be good, but I feel like we’re coming outta them.

Interviewer: Which ones do you think we’re coming out of?
Taylor: They talk about women being at the bottom of the totem pole. I feel like we’re making better at that. Blacks being in politics, period. We have a
Black President, the first African American President right now. I feel like we’re just coming outta those stereotypes, some of them.

Interviewer: Okay. How do you think women are making strides out of coming out from the bottom?

Taylor: They’re just like—they’re working harder. Women are making—they’re doing things others haven’t done before. They’re just not being recognized or something. Yeah, they’re probably just—how about they might be doing more to get recognized. We live in a different society than we did years ago. I feel like it’s more—I feel like we’re in a more lenient one, maybe, or open society, open to new ideas and stuff.

Courtney also says that she is female first. Her reasoning is similar to Olivia’s in that she says people see her physically as female first. She also says that people question if she is fully African American because of her skin color. She is perceived as being biracial or another race all together. Courtney names physical attributes such as hair texture and body features when asked what is unique about being an African American girl.

Maya responded to the question by saying that she was African American first. She then says that neither is more important than the other and that she is equally African American and female. While she hesitated when asked if there was anything special about being an African American girl, she was clear that she would never change this aspect of her identity.
Maya: No, I would never trade [being a Black girl] ever. You couldn’t give me the most money in the world.

Interviewer: Why?

Maya: Just because of what our circumstance is like. Nobody ever thought there would be a famous Black person that invented this or invented that. Nobody ever thought that Black would be—I don’t want to say superior but a dominant race or amount to anything. We proved them wrong and we can keep proving people wrong.

While Maya’s response is more race than gender specific, she clearly exudes pride in her identity.

Brittany says that African American girls are unique because they “have to work harder than probably anybody else in the world.”

Brittany: Because of the fact that we’re female and the fact that we’re Black, it’s already harder for Black people because we’re not treated as equally. We’re not treated fair. Then, it’s harder for women because back then, women were portrayed as housewives, not as strong as men, not as capable to do things. It was like we both, being African American and being a female, we both started off not treated equally. It makes it even harder.

Interviewer: Do you think that the way women were portrayed as you say, back then, is different from how we’re portrayed now?
Brittany: We might be portrayed the same, but we’re treated differently. People still might think in their head, she’s just a housewife. We’re making changes and making differences now. We really worked hard and proved that we’re not housewives or whatever. I don't know how it started off as that… We’re doing everything that even White men, Black men, White women are doing.

Interviewer: Like what?

Brittany: Well, like I’m not sure how it is in the government a lot, but I know that we’ve had how many presidents have we had? Fifty? Are we on our fifty—what are we on? We’ve had more White presidents. We’ve only had one Black one. The Senate and House of Representatives, I know there has to be a couple of women in it. Maybe there will be a Black woman in it. Maybe there is already. I know that there’s a Black woman in government. I know a couple of Black judges that are federal. Just stuff like that.

Interviewer: Do you think that we’d ever have a Black female president?

Brittany: Yes.

Interviewer: Think in the near future?

Brittany: No time while I’m alive. I don’t think so. It’s very possible cuz I didn’t think we would have a Black president while I was alive, and we did. To have a Black woman president is a big— it’s actually not— it’s big to the
Brittany is articulating her understanding of how that race and gender play a significant role in the lives of African American women. Her inability to imagine an African American female president in her lifetime is significant. She makes the point of how these women are making strides and equally as capable as White men and women and African American men but are still limited by society’s perceptions and constraints. Her sentiments mirrors Taylor’s conception of African American women are “glowing up” but are not recognized for their achievements.

Gabrielle makes a similar point. She says that stereotypical representations of African American women include, “‘Screamin’, cursin’ a lot, wearing a weave [and] fightin’”. She believes that society has this perception from focusing on people who are like this rather than focusing on positive views of African American women. She also indicates that this perception may be a historical remnant from slavery. Gabrielle is not the only participant who makes this connection. All of the participants, in some form, make mention of the link between slavery and contemporary society.

Gabrielle: I feel like they would try us out to bein’ ghetto because that’s what they used to be know us as being Black as ghetto, which it’s really not. [Like] Screamin’, cursin’ a lot, wearing a weave, fightin’.

Interviewer: Where do you think they got that from?

Gabrielle: Honestly, I have no clue. Maybe from the angry people when we were enslaved.
Interviewer: Where do you think [society] sees that stuff now?

Gabrielle: In the ghetto. People’s who’s not—they look at Black people, like the Black people who’s livin in the projects, who’s not doin’ nothing with their life; they’re not looking at the successful Black women in our economy.

Interviewer: Do you think that when they look at the people in the projects, and then the successful Black women in—society, when I say they, do you think society can make a difference between the two?

Gabrielle: They can, but they don’t.

Interviewer: Tell me more about that.

Gabrielle: Because they see that—society sees that Black women are strong and we’re trying. We can be successful. Then, they look at us and say, well, you got here off of loans and doin’ all different types of stuff to where we had it handed to us.

Interviewer: You’re saying that society recognizes Black women as being strong, but basically, they’re saying we didn’t earn what we have?

Gabrielle: Yeah, right.

The researcher asserts that the participants are speaking to societal invisibility. Gabrielle makes this point clearly and rather significantly when she says that society could see positive images of African American women but they ‘choose’ not to. The participants attribute this invisibility to societal oppression that is based on race and
gender, and class. The class element is expressed through their articulation of African American women being stereotypically represented as “ghetto.”

**Glowed up: Confidence and validation.** “Glowed up” is a term that Taylor used during the course of her interviews. By her own definition, glowed up means when a person comes into her/his own.

Taylor: I feel like I’ve really glowed up… Glow up is like your come up. You know what I’m saying? They say come up…I think I started getting cute maybe in the end of last year. I had braces until the middle of last year. My braces were cute, but I don’t know. I got my hair dyed. Well, I been dying my hair, but I feel like this color looks really good on me, blonde. I got blonde. I was like oh—I thought I was really cute. Got my braces off. My teeth were all straight. I feel like—I don’t dress like nothing at school. When I come to school, it’s just like I’m just here just to learn. I don’t really care what I look like. I don’t really do my hair or nothing. When I go out, I’ll look cute. I just feel like I glowed up. You lose your little chunky face a little bit. That’s all. I glowed up. I don’t know.

Although Taylor’s example refers to her appearance, she also uses it when describing how African American women are succeeding in society. The data shows that all of the participants are confident in their academic abilities and are proud of themselves for their achievements. Their confidence, however, varies when it comes to how they view their bodies and appearance.
Gabrielle, Courtney, Maya and Taylor say that they are both happy with and confident about their appearance and reject being judged for it. Brittany admits that while she is comfortable with her body now, she was slightly uncomfortable when she entered high school because she noticed that she peers had “woman bodies” that consisted of, “hips, butts and boobs”. She did not feel good about herself because “God obviously didn’t want [her] to be built that way.” She still thinks about it but says that she is ultimately “cool” with how she is.

Olivia indicates that she has had her own “glowing up” experience and says that she is happy with herself now. However, her comments make it clear that her self-esteem has been heavily affected by the bullying. For example, she says that if she had the opportunity, she would consider plastic surgery to alter the features that she was bullied about: her nose and lips. She says that this is an improvement over how she felt when she was younger, where she used to hate herself for looking like she did. In response to how she feels she looks now, Olivia says that she never describes herself as pretty and finds ways to dismiss the compliment when people comment on her beauty. In fact, she finds it difficult to accept compliments in general and feels “weirded out” by them. Research shows that African American girls tend to have higher self-esteem than other groups. Olivia has an added lens of her ethnicity and I believe that being unaccepted as an immigrant has deeply impacted how she sees herself. It seems that she finds her validation in her schoolwork and her identity as being intelligent.

**Support and Motivation: The Importance of Peer Relationships**
All of the participants were particularly adamant about choosing a community of peers that shared similar academic goals and personal interests. Brittany and Taylor are in the same friend group and refer to each other as their closest best friends. Outside of this, both suggest that they see their friendships as positive networks of support. Taylor says that she and Brittany are competitive with their academics and that serves as motivation to do well. This competitiveness is not based in jealousy because they are all friends and wish to see each other succeed.

Taylor: Me and my one closest best friend, I feel like we’re competitive, which is a good thing. Maybe at academics. We’re trying to both get the good high grade. I feel like that’s a good thing. Then, the other two, they’re like—yeah, they’re not really competitive like that. I feel like they support me in other ways, maybe if—like during football season. They come to the games. When I’m out there dancing, they’re cheering for you. Then, the other—I haven’t really talked about the other one that much. When me and my closest best friend were homecoming court together, all the other three, they made signs for us. They just support us and cheer for us. I think they’re really supportive. I don’t know how to put this. I feel like I’m getting off topic.

Interviewer: Okay, so they’re supportive. Do you ever feel like there’s jealousy?

Taylor: No, not jealous. Maybe they might feel like we’re in competition, which I feel like is a good thing, depending on what the competition is.
Taylor and Brittany’s friendship highlights commonalities among all of the girls’ friendships. They have chosen to associate with like-minded peers who, in Olivia’s words, “are about their books.” They spend time with their friends by going to the movies or shopping and supporting one another at games and other extracurricular activities. They also spend time together after school where they may get help together, be social, and go out to eat. They share similar interests and goals. Gabrielle, for example, discusses a close friend who has also had a baby who will be starting at Northwestern City’s large university in the fall. They are both in similar circumstances and are continuing to push for success. Gabrielle was used as an example because she acknowledges that her peer relationships have impacted her negatively, as they skipped school together and were not motivated to work. Once she decided to leave that group of friends and focus again on school, her academic life improved.

Many of the participants’ friendships started in elementary school and have continued through the present. While Courtney and Maya made new friends at Northwestern Tech because they were coming from different middle schools, they kept the friends that they made earlier. Brittany and Taylor have essentially remained in the same friend group. For Olivia, her close friendships began in elementary and middle school and her best friends attend other schools. She has friends at Northwestern Tech but her closest friends are elsewhere. Although their families serve as the primary sources of support, the participants’ peer groups also provide a community of motivation and support. The data shows that depending on the context, their peers may provide an additional source of support as they move forward.
The Role of Media in Everyday Life: Imagery and Impact

The findings suggest that music, television, and social media play a significant role in the participants’ lives. The data reflects more of a connection to their personal lives than education. There is, however, a relationship between social media and community building with their peers. Additionally, there is a link between social media and bullying, which is an extension of what is happening in school. As demonstrated by Figure 2 below, although family serves as the primary and constant source of influence, the media serves as next most significant source of influence as it involves peers, school and constant interaction.

![Figure 2. Spheres of Influence. This figure illustrates the participants’ interconnected spheres of influence through their families, peers, social media and media, and school and the community organizations.](image)

Most of the girls report watching television regularly and all have a number of musical artists whose music they enjoy. Social media has a particularly strong presence
in their lives and they all have multiple social media accounts even if they do not use them all regularly.

The participants rarely look through magazines. When they do, they read magazines like Seventeen, People, and XXL. They also mentioned reading African American focused magazines that their parents read such as Essence, Ebony, and Jet. These are all lifestyle magazines and the participants acknowledge that they do not see many girls who look like them. Maya did say that if she could offer a recommendation for magazine editors, she would request diversity. Her thoughts demonstrate her consciousness about the role of money and societal norms and tastes in what the media chooses to represent.

Maya: You can have a whole picture with an African-American, a Hispanic or Caucasian, a Muslim or somebody from Islam, just have a whole picture. Because we’re all united anyway. Just have the whole picture with every different race. Put them in your magazine and people will—even a picture with different sizes. People will feel okay and be like, “Oh I like this magazine, I’m gonna keep reading it. Or I’m gonna keep buying it, I’m gonna subscribe to this magazine because I see people like me.”

Interviewer: Why do you think they don’t?

Maya: I think money. Because if you have a magazine without a skinny girl or with just all Black girls. Not all Black girls but all Hispanic girls I’m sure somebody wouldn’t buy it.
Interviewer: Interesting. If the magazine has all Black girls or Hispanic girls somebody wouldn’t buy it, but what about magazines that have all White girls?

Maya: People buy that. I don’t know why but people seem to buy it. I think it’s cuz it’s just social norm I guess, people are so used to it, so they don’t think about it. They just say. “Oh yeah, I’ll get this magazine.”

Maya is speaking to the fact that magazines target the desires and normative structures of the dominant society. In this instance white women are their prime consumer base because they reflect the ‘normed’ ideal beauty. Moreover besides the ‘niche’ markets, which by the way, dominant white corporations have also gobbled up, there is not as much demand or business for magazines that represent women of color or women who do not have an ideal body size.

The participants’ television usage varied. Taylor says that she does not have much time to watch television because of her involvement in extracurricular activities and her job. Gabrielle watches very little television outside of watching the Disney channel with her daughter. Courtney and Brittany watch a bit more than Taylor and Gabrielle. Maya watches quite often and Olivia describes herself as a “self-diagnosed TV addict.” The majority of them watch ‘reality’ television shows, such as Real Housewives of Atlanta, the Love and Hip Hop franchises, and dramas in which African American women are the lead characters, Scandal, Empire and Being Mary Jane. Olivia’s tastes in television are white female variations of the same theme. She says that she watches a bit of everything like Real Housewives of Beverly Hills and Pretty Little Liars. Some of their viewing choices were surprising as it is questionable as to the age
group that these shows are being marketed to. For example, they all feature adult women and *Scandal* and *Being Mary Jane* have topics that are sexually charged. The reality series are also heavy on cursing and violence. The participants who do watch these shows do not see it as reality but more so entertainment.

The participants’ musical tastes are also varied. They range from listening to music from the 1990s, to more contemporary artists like Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj and Chris Brown. These three artists in particular were favorites to all of the participants but Maya and Olivia. They were not impressed by Beyoncé’s image or perceived beauty.

The data that came out of our discussions about the media reflects a disconnect in the participants’ perceptions of racism, colorism, sexism and misogyny. The consciousness that they displayed in other areas was less apparent here. For example, all of the girls adamantly rejected the thought of women being called bitches in the music that they listened to but were willing to overlook this if they liked the beat of the song or the artist. For example, Courtney, who loves singer Chris Brown, changed the lyrics of and continues to enjoy the song.

Courtney: I always change it to boys, so when he said "These hoes ain't loyal," I just said, "Boys not loyal." I just change it. I don't like the fact that a man referred to females as any word that isn't their name, or is something that's appropriate, but because I can't really do anything about it, I just—it doesn't bother me as long as it's not said to me.

She indicates that although she does not like the use of the term ‘hoes,’ she does not feel as though she can do anything about it and she is not as bothered because it is not being
said directly to her. Courtney’s case is an interesting one because she has an intense love for Chris Brown and says that his music has gotten her through tough places in her life. These tough places include witnessing her mother’s abuse at the hands of her father and being verbally and emotionally abused herself by her father. When asked about Chris Brown’s and Rihanna’s domestic violence incident, she essentially says that she does not know what happened because she was not there. She has been able to disassociate the singer’s actions from his music.

The girls agreed that the images of African American women that they were presented with through television, magazines and social media were unrealistic in both their appearance and behavior. Based on their accounts, they agreed that they were consistently presented with images of African American women who wore too much makeup, showed too much skin, and behaved in a way that was inappropriate and in the word of Taylor, “stupid.” This includes the constant fighting and degrading of women shown on reality shows such as Real Housewives of Atlanta and Love and Hip Hop Atlanta. While most of the participants watch the shows, they indicate that they are able to tell the difference between how “real women” act and how the women are acting on the show.

Their accounts began to differ when asked what famous women they considered beautiful. What was consistent, however, was that the women who were named all had a lighter complexion. For example, Olivia named women who were White and struggled to name actress Kerry Washington when asked if she could name a beautiful African American woman. Entertainers Beyoncé Knowles, Nicki Minaj and Rihanna were
named as beautiful as well as white actress Angelina Jolie. Michelle Obama and Oprah were named as strong role models but the girls hesitated to consider either woman as beautiful. Maya named Oprah as beautiful but linked this with her actions and how her contributions have helped women and the world in general. Arya also shared similar sentiments about Michelle Obama and her “Let’s Move” campaign. While she showed admiration for how the First Lady has focused on empowering youth, she hesitated to call her beautiful or even pretty.

This aspect of the data is telling because it reveals their perception of who is beautiful and goes beyond the images that they are exposed to. This researcher prefers to use the term ‘immersed’ as opposed to ‘exposed’ because these participants are being flooded with images and messages of what is considered beautiful. All of the women that they are labeling as physically beautiful have light skin. They are also shaped in a similar curvaceous manner. I found Brittany’s love for Beyoncé interesting, as she has pointed out her own insecurity with her body shape and her disdain for girls who show too much of their bodies.

The girls’ opinions of Beyoncé in particular present an interesting space for the discussion of image and sexuality. Although she is named as beautiful, the girls have varying opinions about her image. Gabrielle refers to her as “natural,” in regard to her wearing little makeup and hair extensions. She says that her mother taught her the importance of natural beauty and she sees this in Beyoncé. Brittany and Taylor love Beyoncé as an entertainer, and think she is beautiful. Taylor says that her music helps
her get ready to go out and makes her feel prettier. She also sees her as a positive role mode, because of her business sense and the fact that she is married and has a child.

Taylor: And she can sing. I got her CD, so I just listened. Whenever I get ready, I listen to Beyoncé cuz it makes me feel like Beyoncé. I play Beyoncé when I get ready to go places. It makes me feel prettier when I’m getting ready. Yeah, this is Beyoncé.

Interviewer: Do you think she’s a positive role model?

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Why?

Taylor: Because she’s a successful Black woman. That’s a good look for us, I feel like. She’s successful. She’s married. A lot of people might think Black people, they just have kids, they not married. A lot of people really do get married and have kids. … Some people don’t get married and have kids. It’s just another stereotype. She’s a successful Black woman. She makes a lot of money. She’s just doing well in life, I feel like. Well, we don’t really know. That’s another good thing. She’s not really in the media like that, and I like that.

Courtney likes Beyoncé, but critiques her sexual image now that she has a child. She says that her mother would never discuss the things that Beyoncé does in her songs openly around her. This comment in itself is interesting because it presents a view of how the participants’ parents communicate with them about sex. Interestingly, this topic did not arise in any of the interviews.
Social media. Social media is a particularly significant force in the girls’ lives. Although the girls demonstrated varying degrees of engagement with social media, they have all been exposed to it and interact with their peers through it. The participants are primarily engaging with the social media sites and applications Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and Facebook on their phones. They use Instagram and Snapchat to share pictures and videos, Twitter allows users to share short thoughts, and Facebook allows them to engage with family members and some friends. The general consensus was that they generally did not use Facebook because their friends were not on it, or because it was a source of drama and bullying with their classmates. Arya and Gabrielle’s interviews revealed there is an element of contention associated with social media because they have both been bullied via Facebook. In Arya’s case, this resulted in a fight and two suspensions. Gabrielle said that she got off of the site in order to avoid it all together.

This heavy and constant exposure and engagement has contributed to shaping their sense of community through their networks of peers and current events. Additionally, it serves as a source of pseudo-literacy engagement since all of the girls held a strong dislike for reading. It has also influenced their sense of body image.

Olivia is particularly critical of social media and is the one participant that says that she does not have Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram accounts. She has a Facebook account that her friend set up for her but she does not use it. She also says that she could live without her phone. She had a particularly strong reaction when asked about her social media accounts and said that she is saving herself from “emotional damage from
that.” The researcher argues that Olivia has raised an interesting point. The emotional damage that she is referring to comes from the fact that her classmates’ continual engagement with each other through social media both inside and outside of school is a source of ongoing contention. She also suggests that her peers use social media to build illusions about themselves and are not building authentic friendships. Olivia resists having to put on a façade for popularity while also fears being judged. Her views are particularly meaningful:

Olivia: Yeah, I'm not part of any [social media], but I kinda don't wanna put myself in there and then have to worry about not having enough followers and I'm a loser because of that. That just don't even—and plus I'm lazy. It's hard trying to keep up with those stuff and keep followers. …You wanna be—you wanna look like you have the best stuff. You wanna look like your life is exciting. That's also the reason why I don't do social media is because my life is not exciting. Like, "Oh, there's gonna be the same posts, sitting on the TV—gotta watch this show, got to watch this other show, got to watch this." I don't have anything exciting going on in my life to be like social media. It's kind of hard to—that kind of takes over. It's kind of like a job because you have to keep up with it a little bit. I don't wanna give myself a job that I don't have to have. I also find it boring. It's just pictures of you. … A lot of people—some girls think, "I got this much followers." I don't know, it kinda gets you like—a lot of people in this school they're so materialistic in so many ways. I kinda
look at them—like I'm not judging 'cause I like a good pair of shoes. It's kind of like they're selfish. They're way too selfish than they need to be. It's all about how cute you look on the pictures and nobody really cares about, "Oh, you're smart. Oh, you don't have this much followers so I'm not gonna talk to you." You only got like, I don't know—people are selfish because of social media. You just kinda become so superficial.

The data revealed that the participants are constantly engaged with the world around them because of their consistent social media usage. Such usage seems to have its positive attributes such as building networks and connections, keeping the participants informed of current events, and providing a way to engage with literacy. However, because of the consistent engagement, there is no clear boundary drawn between home and school life and peer relationships. Bullying and fighting that occur in school continue well beyond the school day and building. Social media is also promoting unrealistic images of women’s bodies and people’s wealth and possessions. Even though participants in general tend to be critical of these images, there may be a deeper impact that is yet unknown.

Overall the data has shown that the participants are being inundated with images from multiple sources: television, music, social media and to a lesser extent, magazines. They demonstrate varying levels of consciousness about the representation of African American women in these mediums, and they offer critiques while also engaging in the harmful representations.

**Education as a Means of Success and Stability**
Each of the participants demonstrated the belief that education is the best pathway for personal advancement. They are all adamant about attending college and obtaining careers that were meaningful and would provide stability for themselves, their families and their communities. The study revealed that their parents instilled the belief in the value of education and this reflects the interconnectedness of the girls’ family values and other areas of their lives, which has been discussed extensively throughout the discussion and analysis. The researcher has however, chosen this section to close the chapter because while ‘family’ has set the foundation for their success, education is seen as the piece that affirms the participants’ identities as intelligent and high achieving girls who are determined to succeed. Along with family, education has been weaved into each of the themes because of the importance in the participants’ lives.

Clearly, education is the top priority in their lives and they often referred to attending school as their jobs. This means that they are expected to attend and achieve good grades. When they were asked how they were doing in school, the girls automatically gave their cumulative grade point averages. The activities that they participate in both inside and outside of school are meant to be enjoyable for them personally, but also build competiveness and preparation for college. Education is so much the priority that all of the girls preferred do not date because it would be a distraction from their overall goal: achieving high grades to attend a good college and then graduate school for a top career in the medical field.

**The pressure to succeed.** With achievement comes responsibility. The data reveals that in most instances, the girls took their grades personally as a reflection of their
hard work and personal aptitude. Because the participants believe so highly in personal responsibility as it relates to their education, it seems that they have internalized that their doing well is linked to how hard they worked. A bad grade or low grade point average brings feelings of guilt. Conversely, doing well means that they worked hard and have positioned themselves as models that anyone can succeed as long as they put forth the effort and work hard.

Taylor, for example stressed her personal responsibility in the fact that her grade point average has fallen to a 3.0 over the course of senior year. Her cumulative grade point average is still 3.7. She used descriptors like “bad” and “trash” to describe her second quarter grades and is proud to have worked her way out of it to make honor roll.

Taylor: I had D’s and F’s. That’s all I had was D’s and F’s. I would tell people this all the time. When we come back from school, we only have one week left in the quarter. I was up till two every night doing makeup work. …If you really wanna be honor roll, you can. I made honor roll that quarter. I feel like, if you really wanna push yourself, you will. I think I’m intelligent. I comprehend stuff really well. Like I said, school’s been easy. That’s why I think I’m intelligent.

Although school is easy for her, she emphasizes the importance of putting in the effort and work to be successful.

Gabrielle shares similar sentiments as she fought to her grades after spending the school year cutting classes and skipping school. She worked hard to raise her grade point average and it is now above a 3.0.
Gabrielle: I mean I don’t feel bad [when I don’t do well on a test]. I just feel like I tried my best. If I know I tried my best, and I still get a bad grade, then I’m not gonna feel bad cuz I know I tried my best.

Interviewer: What if you didn’t try your best?

Gabrielle: Then I still—I won’t feel bad. I just know well, I know I just played this off. I should’ve expected this one. I do feel bad if I do try my best, and I didn’t get the grade I thought I was gonna get. I will feel bad, but then I wouldn’t because I feel that I tried my best. I just didn’t know.

Courtney says that she is most proud of herself because of her grades. This shows that she may be connecting her overall identity with the grades she receives. This is reinforced by the fact that she acknowledges if she is having a bad day, it may be because she is having a family issue or received a bad grade, which may mean that Courtney is situating the significance of family issues on an equal level with academics. Courtney describes herself as self-driven and says that she does not feel pressured to do well. She is expected to bring home high grades and would most likely be disciplined for bringing home a grade point average that was less than 3.7, as this is what she has maintained throughout high school. The highlights how hard Courtney is on herself and how she internalizes getting a grade that she does not feel like she deserves.

Courtney: If I brought home less than a 3.8, I think [my mother] would be upset, but she wouldn't be that upset, but because I haven't came home with a 3.8 since probably—well, anything below a 3.8 since freshman year, I think she would be really upset.

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Interviewer: How would you feel about it?

Courtney: I would be upset too, cuz I'm not used to that. Because it's not like—with my grades, I don't base it off how my mom's gonna feel. I feel a certain way, even with a B. I get all As now, except for in my AP class. I get a B, but it counts as an A. I'm even—I'm disappointed when I still see a B on my report card, or like in middle school I had my first C, I cried over it. Stuff like that really makes me upset.

Interviewer: Why?

Courtney: Because sometimes I feel like that's not the grade I deserve, or sometimes I just feel like I was probably slacking.

Interviewer: Do you feel like you're hard on yourself?

Courtney: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Do you think there are negatives or positives associated with that?

Courtney: Negative could be sometimes, when I need a break I don't take one. For me, it's just when I'm going "I gotta get it done. I gotta get it done." The positive is I'm never gonna really procrastinate. Everything that's assigned to me is gonna get accomplished.

Olivia feels similarly; while she says that she does not feel pressured, the interview reflects that she places a great deal of pressure on herself to succeed. She says that getting good grades is a no-brainer but she does feel as though she should be doing more in terms of studying and being the “smart girl that has her stuff together,” which is how she is perceived.
Brittany is very goal driven and has challenged herself to keep her grades up during senior year while working, playing sports, cheerleading and holding leadership positions in her extracurricular activities. She, too, says that she does not feel pressured but acknowledges that she would be disciplined for getting a bad grade:

Brittany: … It’s like they’ll tell me [if] you don’t get good grades, that’s your loss basically. They don’t force me to do it. If I get a bad grade, I probably would get in trouble though.

Interviewer: Why?

Brittany: Because when you go to college, they look at your transcript. College is a big deal, neither of my parents went there. They just want me to succeed.

Interviewer: How would you feel if you got a bad grade?

Brittany: I’d just be mad because I’m so used to getting good grades. I don’t settle for less than a C or a B.

Interviewer: Would you just be mad?

Brittany: No, it would have to get changed some kind of way. I probably would go to that teacher and talk to her. ‘What can I do extra? This has to change,’ something.

Interviewer: Why?

Brittany: Cuz I don't know. It’s just not a good feeling to get—I don't know. After you get good grades so long, it’s like wow, what happened? Why? I don’t deserve this. I worked too hard to deserve a bad grade.
The participants say they do not feel pressured from their family or teachers to succeed and this may very well be the case. However, it seems as though they do not recognize the tremendous amount of pressure they are putting on themselves. In fact, it seems as though they believe that this is the right attitude that they need to be successful. The attitude about success is rooted in the value of personal responsibility and the importance of education that was instilled in them as children.

Needs in School: Caring, Mentorship, and Acknowledgement of Humanity

Gabrielle, Arya, Maya, Olivia, Courtney, Brittany and Taylor were all quite clear about what they needed in school to help them and other African American girls be more successful. Their varying levels of race and gender consciousness are apparent in their responses. For example, Taylor and Gabrielle found it difficult to articulate the needs that African American girls might have in schools. Instead, they spoke more about the needs of students in general terms and did not think that the needs should be race or gender specific. Brittany and Arya’s responses initially reduced the role of race and gender but they were ultimately clear about what African American girls need in schools. In some instances, Olivia’s responses showed that issues that faced female students needed to be addressed in general terms and transcended race. Courtney and Maya were quite vocal about how they could be best served as African American girls. The researcher notes that at the level of analysis, the data did not reveal that school policies were a primary factor in all of the participants’ experiences. However, they did take issue with high stakes testing and discipline. Arya notes that she was suspended in the ninth grade because she was bullied but was seen as an equal player in the fight.
Gabrielle and Maya have been suspended in middle school over fighting. While they briefly mention the suspensions, the data does not indicate that these suspensions negatively impacted their achievement.

**Caring.** When asked about their most and least favorite teachers, the girls provided responses that were very similar: they worked best with teachers who engaged with them on a human level. These teachers talked about their lives and made it clear that they were interested and invested in the lives of their students. Courtney for example, chooses to stay after school in a teacher’s classroom with whom she and her friends feel most comfortable. They do homework and talk and enjoy each other’s company. Courtney also says that the teachers that she has connected with the most have reminded her of her mother and her female family members. She attributes this to their wanting her to be independent and self-reliant while also providing support and encouraging her to succeed. Given Courtney’s strong relationship with her mother, Courtney’s relating these teachers to her mother and family members is meaningful. They have provided a safe and comforting space for her that makes her feel like family.

**Mentorship, self-esteem and leadership building.** All of the participants acknowledged the importance of mentorship as it applies to guidance and career aspirations. This was interesting, given the fact that they are a part of extra curricular organizations that promote to pathways college preparation. The following exchange between Maya and Olivia is a prime example that shows that they are particularly adamant about needing leadership. Maya’s responses indicate that she is relating leadership to fulfill the role of a parent or guidance that girls may nor be getting at home
while Olivia relates this directly to her future goals and wanting examples of successful women of color.

Maya: Leadership because some people don’t have their mothers. Either their mother’s passed away or their mother is on drugs or doing this or doing that. So they like need somebody that they can just talk to about anything, that’s not gonna try and like preach to them but talk to them and lead them in the right direction. So I think they need mentors, too.

Olivia: Leadership. They need, also, stuff like career wise, like finding new ways of like career. ’Cause I don’t think a lot of girls realize that—they envision being the housewives and stuff like that.

Maya: Yeah. That’s not for me. That's not for me.

Olivia: That’s what they feel like the number one choice that females have. Like, they need I think there should be some part of the program that shows that—

Maya: They can be the breadwinner.

Olivia: ... many women are doing this in the field. There’s different fields that they can work with. If they do want to be a housewife, that you can also do that, but that’s just different options. And also like role models because I know I don’t have a female role model, especially in the field that I want to do, like neurosurgery and stuff, I don’t have any Black—

Maya: Personal people that I know.
Olivia: Yeah. They need to show more of that, like you know, women of color doing different things in society.

Maya makes a point about needing mentorship that is particularly poignant about needing models of successful women as a means a motivation:

Maya: And I think it's, I think too, is they, everybody needs somebody to like come and speak to motivate them. A lot of people don’t never want to speak to kids. Like why wouldn’t you—you made it. And if you claim you wanna see people do better, why can’t you just come and give like a 30-minute speech? It don’t have to be a whole two hours, just a 30-minute speech. Sometime you could write it on your way home in the car. It’s just like come and show people that they can really make it out. They just have to try like you tried. We don’t have a lot of people that come and speak. Like our school is really like high up there, but we don’t have speakers.

Brittany and Arya also ask for real life experience in terms of teaching behaviors that would be appropriate outside of school. In the following exchange, the pair discuss the importance of learning how to speak based on the environment or else they will face consequences. I argue that they are highlighting the concept of code switching, in which they know when to speak appropriately based upon the context.

Brittany: Like... just a little bit of inside scoop on the real world, because I think that high schoolers tend to focus so much on high school that they forget like, “Ohh, there’s a real world out there.” There’s a lot of girls here—
like since we know everybody here, we’re all in the same school. Like there's this one girl here, and she’s like very open, and she’ll speak her mind rather it’s rude or nice. And in the real world you can’t do that because you’ll get slapped. Like if you say some—the wrong thing to the wrong person they will bop you in the face.

Arya: Or like your boss. You can’t talk any way to him or her.

Brittany: Yeah. I understand we’re in high school, and people know that you’re very open-minded. Not everybody outside of this school knows that you’re open-minded.

Going further, the girls also spoke about how leadership and mentorship could help impact African American girls’ self-esteem. Although their individual responses indicated that they thought highly of and valued themselves, the girls suggest that not all African American girls think this way and would benefit from work to help them build a strong sense of self. Olivia, Maya, Brittany and Arya mentioned self-esteem building in their group interviews. Keeping in line with their focus on gender equality, Olivia and Maya connect the importance of self-esteem with making decisions about interacting with boys because a lot of African American girls, in Maya’s words, are “Looking for love in the wrong places!” She attributes this to looking for a father figure that African American girls may not have because their fathers may have died or are in prison. She maintains that African American girls may be looking for both a father figure and a lover. Their discussion about self-esteem is below:
Olivia: And then there’s also the thing with self-esteem and like the way girls see themselves...

Maya: They carry themselves...

Olivia: ... in society. Like you know a lot of girls feel like they have—I mean I’m not, I'm not shaming girls who have weaves or eyelashes. Like they should maybe have something about girls having you know not being who they are and embracing who they are as themselves and self-esteem and not having, wanting, needing a guy to tell them...

Maya: That they’re beautiful.

Olivia: That you’re beautiful.

Maya: Like you should know.

Olivia: Like you should know you’re beautiful.

Maya: Right. Look in a mirror and be like, "Dang, I look good today!"

This transcript highlights the fact that the participants are advocating for the type of support that does not just focus on academics, but develops their whole person.

**Acknowledgement of humanity.** When asked about their most and least favorite teachers, the girls provided responses that were very similar: they worked best with teachers who engaged with them on a human level. These teachers joked around with them and opened up to them with less regard for power relationships in classroom. These teachers also engaged with them outside of class both personally and academically. If the girls needed extra help, their favorite teachers were willing to try and explain the material in multiple ways and stayed with them after school for extra assistance. Conversely, their
least favorite teachers either drew a hard line between teacher and student or tried too hard to be like a peer. They also either taught subjects that did not interest them or taught in a way that did not engage them. Additionally, they did not offer help when it was needed and tended to ignore the girls in the hallways. The data did not reflect differences in the girls’ treatment by African American teachers or White teachers.

The research suggests that the participants’ perception of school rules is related to the acknowledgement of their humanity. Taylor, for example, had great concerns with the school’s strict rules in general, and felt as though student behavior is policed, and her perceptions were not aberrant. She as well as the other participants felt as though they were treated in an overly strict manner. Moreover they indicated that school officials did not regularly communicate with student. Furthermore, Taylor believes the entire student body gets punished for the actions of a few.

**Ideal school and curriculum.** Each participant was asked about how she would design her ideal school and as well as a class that would best represent them as African American girls. I argue that this exercise and their choices is an assertion of their voice and humanity as students who deserve to have their needs recognized. There were several similarities across the girls’ responses. This is particularly the case with the focus on services and a schedule that would serve their emotional and mental well-being. An element of this well-being is the request for more rest and sleep throughout their day. Maya specifically says that she needs this and that by the end of the day she is very tired and ready to go home.
A common theme across all of the participants was the overall disdain for testing and the data indicates that their ideal school would not have high stakes testing. The participants indicated that standardized tests are not a true measure of anyone’s intelligence and that tests in the classroom make them nervous. Olivia, for example, does not like tests because of her test anxiety [she sometimes draws a blank] even though she feels confident about the material. Participants like Courtney may tie their emotions to how they perform on a test and will be upset if they do not receive a high grade.

Overall, the participants supported having coursework that would discuss both history and current events as it relates to African American women and people in general. Their current social studies coursework, according to the participants, did not provide a discussion of race or gender. Literacy engagement also felt forced and none of the participants enjoyed reading outside of school because they felt as though they were required to do so much of it in school.

Courtney suggests that engaging and reading about the past struggles of African American women would be helpful in helping African American girls be successful.

Courtney: I read a book called—it was like a Blueprint series, so it was pretty much about the average high school girl, and it was about African Americans and how basically you're looked at from other races, how other people view you, and I would basically push that issue, because I think that really limits the opportunities that we get, because people think that we're like every stereotype there is. I think that we should just—I think we should
learn everything else that any other race learns, but also learn more about where we come from and our heritage.

Interviewer: Like what?

Courtney: I know I've seen movies, or my history teachers that I've had, they've talked about how racism was back in the day, and how women were treated, so I think that for all those women who weren't treated fairly, and didn't get to vote and everything, we should pretty much—we shouldn't be acting the way we are. We should be more appreciative.

Interviewer: Are you saying that if Black girls have the opportunity to learn these things, maybe things would be different as far as how they act?

Courtney: Yes.

Courtney makes a particularly interesting point here about how, in school, they focus on racism and sexism as if it were something in the past. There is a disconnect between the girls’ perceptions of how African American women and people as a whole are treated today. Taylor acknowledged this and requested learning more about current events that impacted her as an African American. She had a particular interest in the “Black Lives Matter” movement and the lack of representation of women who have been victims of police brutality, as discussed in the group interview session.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the themes that emerged from the data. These overarching themes include the significant role of family in the participants’ lives, resilience in the face of trauma, resistance to cultural stereotypes, peer relationships, the role of the media,
and the participants’ needs in schools. The next chapter presents an overall summary, conclusions and recommendations for future work.
Chapter 6: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Over the course of several weeks, seven high achieving high school juniors and seniors allowed this researcher to better understand the lives of African American girls. Individual interviews, group interviews and classroom observations provided a lens by which to explore their experiences in their personal, social and academic life. The purpose of the study is to make sense of how African American female students navigate these elements to explore what factors contribute to their success in school. Adolescents are socialized through experiences with their families, schools, peers and the media and the study has been organized to explore these areas. This chapter will present a discussion of the summary, overall conclusions and recommendations of the work for future research.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. The first limitation is that data drawn from small sample size cannot be generalized across all populations of African American girls. The research has been positioned as an initial inquiry for further research. As this study explored the life histories of the participants, while the narratives of these high school students are powerful and compelling, the second limitation is that data is based solely on their perceptions and memories. The intention of this work was to allow the subjects to
give voice to their own interpretations of their life. During the interviews this researcher asked for clarification or stopped and repeated statements back to the interviewee to ensure understanding of their thoughts and ideas, which served as an initial form of member checking. The group interviews provided a particularly useful entry point for this. For example, after Olivia identified as a feminist in her group interview, the researcher explored the point further in both of her individual interviews. The researcher also followed up Maya about comments made in her group interview about men and control. The group interviews also introduced the subjects of beauty and the representation of African American women that was explored further in the individual interviews.

Recruitment played a role in the third limitation. In the recruitment process, the researcher was looking for participants who identified as African American and did not initially conceive of what working with participant who rejected that label might bring. Olivia, who identified herself as African, has a rich and valuable experience as an immigrant who moved to the United States with her parents as a child. Her narrative adds a layer of complexity to identity construction and demonstrated that girls of the African Diaspora in America are not one monolithic group. Her story leaves much room for exploration and further work.

The interviews were organized to begin with a description about the interviewee’s family life. This was based on the assumption that they might want to begin with something familiar in an effort to build rapport. In hindsight, this could have been the fourth limitation with one particular interviewee, Arya, because of the traumatic events
associated with her family life. Although she said that she wanted to participate in the study, we communicated several times about her completing her interviews and she ultimately declined. Perhaps a more clear explanation of the types of questions to be asked should have been included with the recruitment materials so that the participants could have chosen to select out of the study.

The fifth limitation concerned the data collection process. Initially, when the data collection process was conceived, it was determined that the data could be collected in one round of individual interviews that could be completed during the course of fifty minute class periods during the participants’ school day. However, the nature of the interview questions and subject matter led to interviews that often ran longer and required two or three sessions. The underestimation of time needed was partially based on two assumptions: first, the literature on interviewing adolescents suggests that forty-five minutes to an hour is more than enough time to complete an interview because they may get tired, and; secondly in free periods would be the least disruptive to their school day. In point of fact, scheduling presented unanticipated difficulties because the interviewees often had work to complete during their free periods. The school’s principal was extremely accommodating and helped drive the process forward.

The sixth and final limitation, or at least a concern, is how identity may or may not impact the research. Being completely objective may not possible for any researcher, much less an African American woman because these topics are not just professional but personal. The researcher gave great effort to ensure that she was not projecting her own life onto the data and trying to make pieces and elements fit that were not there because
of personal thoughts/perspectives that they thought would be or should be within the data. This discussion of identity is further explored in the section in the later section on research and positionality.

**Summary and Conclusions**

Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) call for “educational research, theorizing, and practice by women and scholars of color who are adamant about improving the academic outcomes and schooling experiences of Black girls” (p. 22). The authors offer several pathways for exploration through what they term as realities faced by Black girls in education and argue that more scholarship needs to be devoted to educational policy, classroom practice and curriculum to serve the needs of African American girls.

In the postmodern era, Black girls’ psyches and bodies are being subjected to subjugation in the media, racist and sexist school policies that serve to exclude and silence Black girls, and social and legal policies that dehumanize rather than foster the quality of life of many low-income and working class young women (Esposito-Winters, 2010, p. 22).

A research agenda with this focus would benefit society as a whole and influence education reform efforts. As such, this investigation is in response to this call. Evans-Winters & Esposito’s (2010) call for theorizing is primarily concerned with young women who are from poor and working class backgrounds. Although the socio-economic backgrounds of the participants in this study vary, the majority of them describe themselves as coming from primarily middle class backgrounds as indicated by their parents’ home ownership, jobs and material wealth. Northwestern Tech High
School is located in a working class area in an urban district but is not a neighborhood school. Those attending this school, including students who live in the neighborhood, have applied to a lottery and live in neighborhoods throughout the city.

**Resistance.** The data shows that all of the participants have demonstrated varying levels of consciousness about race, gender and class issues. They are particularly able to articulate what they have perceived as racism and sexism in American society and identified ways that African American women are subject to oppression. They agree that African American women are positioned on the lowest rungs of the societal hierarchy and, as they recognize this, they resist these racist and sexist constructions. Even as they identify and resist the stereotypical representations of African American women, they also reinforce stereotypes that are steeped in cultural influences.

However, the data does not indicate that the participants feel particularly silenced or discriminated against because of race, gender or class by teachers, administrators or policies in their school settings. Essentially, while they recognize how oppression and invisibility impact African American women in general, they do not necessarily see themselves as being directly affected. The addressed disparities are often described as oppression between Whites and African Americans, although Maya and Olivia make mention of oppression from African American men. Olivia, however, is the one exception to this, as she recognizes oppression stemming from her own lived experience with her family’s cultural values and she actively engages in resistance to this oppression. She also questions the overall ignorance of her African American peers in terms of not being socially or globally aware of and therefore perpetuating discrimination.
The role of media in everyday life. The data shows that the media plays a particularly significant role in the participants’ lives. The girls are inundated with images and messages that promote racism, sexism, misogyny and consumerism and they show both resistance to and acceptance of these oppressive messages at the same time. There is a constant interaction with the media, especially in regard to social media. Social media plays a particularly strong role in how these girls interact with the world and their peers, and this interaction is both a point of connection and community building with their peers, as well as a point of contention through fighting and cyber bullying. The girls are constantly connected to both school and the outside world through social media.

The data reflects that the participants are indeed aware of how African American women are objectified in the media. This includes stereotypical representations of African American women on television, in music, and through images on social media sites such as Instagram. The participants are immersed in their engagement with the media and while they demonstrate a critical awareness, they are still constantly connected and consuming the images. This presents a disconnect between their awareness and acceptance of racism, sexism, misogyny and consumerism present in the media. This is particularly the case with the types of music they listen to.

The television shows that the participants are watching are aimed at a much older demographic. Additionally, the participants do not enjoy reading. They are adamant about the fact that they do not have the time to do so or do not see it as enjoyable because they are required to read in school. The researcher argues that for the participants who
watch a great deal of television, the time for reading and literacy engagement may be lost to their viewing habits.

**Family: Interconnected relationships, trauma and resilience.** The data reveals that there is an interconnected relationship between the participants’ personal, social and academic lives. Family has set the foundation for their belief in education by instilling values of personal responsibility, motivation, strength and interdependence. The girls have also stressed the importance of education as a pathway for success and stability. Their parents have modeled strong work ethics, as well as the importance of interdependence. Furthermore, they have provided their daughters with love, support and provision. And while their family dynamics vary, these themes hold constant across the participants. The participants’ parents have created networks of support to ensure their daughters’ success. This includes making active and thoughtful decisions about their school selections and having them participate in organizations to further their chances of academic success.

Although family is a source of love and support, it may also be a source of trauma and hurt. Six out of the seven participants reported varied traumatic events that were either caused by family members or precipitated by the actions of their family members. Despite these traumatic experiences, the participants have shown incredible resilience and have become and remained high achieving students. The participants also describe themselves as happy and proud of who they have become.

**Education as success and achievement.** Lastly, as their families have instilled in them, education serves as a pathway for success and achievement. With achievement,
however, comes pressure and although they vary in terms of how this pressure presents itself, it is clear that these young girls hold themselves to very high standards in order to achieve their overall academic success and obtain happiness and stability.

**Needs in school.** The participants have expressed needing mentorship in schools as they navigate their college paths and future careers. They have specifically asked for professionals in their fields to speak at their school so that they have a better understanding of what is required. The participants also work best with caring teachers who engage with them on a human level. They need structure but eschew traditional teacher-students relationships that are based in oppressive power relationships. Furthermore, the participants say that what they are learning does not reflect who they are as African American girls and request content that is focused on both historical and contemporary issues that pertain to African American womanhood.

**Recommendations for Teachers, Parents and Policy Makers**

The data reveals several needs for African American girls in schools, and while this is not meant to be generalizable across populations, it highlights the suggestions and needs that the participants say would make them and their peers even more successful. The discussion of these needs leads directly into recommendations.

**Resistance.** The researcher was particularly struck by the levels of awareness and critical consciousness that the participants held about race, gender and class issues. Knowledge is a major force behind resisting oppressive constructions. While resistance such as “talking back” and choosing to express themselves is typically punished both at school and at home, the researcher argues that the participants are asserting their rights as
humans. Rather than automatically punishing students, the researcher recommends that closer attention be paid to the human aspect of the participants rather than needing to constantly exert control over them.

**The role of media in everyday life.** The researcher recommends that the participants are provided with positive role models to balance the images that they are exposed to through television and social media. Many of the participants name their mothers as direct positive role models. While this is extremely valuable, the participants are also asking for mentors and role models in the schools.

The researcher also recommends that literacy becomes a priority outside of the school building. The participants have prioritized math and science as their favorite subjects, which is not unrealistic considering the fact that they attend a science and math focused high school. Social media has taken the place of critical literacy engagement and building literacy skills can only serve as a benefit as they enter college.

**Family: Interconnected relationships, trauma and resilience.** The traumatic nature of the participants’ narratives leads the researcher to strongly suggest emotional support in the form of counseling in or outside of the school building. One participant’s mother took this step for her daughter and she says that it helped her learn to better resolve her anger.

**Education as success and achievement.** The data reflects that the participants have placed a great deal of pressure on themselves to succeed. Although this can be seen as a positive, the researcher noted some points of concern as it applies to how hard the participants can be on themselves. The data shows that this pressure can manifest itself
in anxiety and guilt. The researcher recommends that parents and schools engage in promoting self-care activities to help provide balance in the participants’ lives.

**Needs in school.** Education is seen as a means of success and achievement. As such, the researcher argues that the participants need to view school as a place where they are supported emotionally, developed as leaders, and acknowledged as human. As a reflection of the participants needs in school, these recommendations are offered as a pedagogy of support for schools. The researcher’s conceptualization of a pedagogy of support has three elements: mentorship, emotional support, and the acknowledgement of humanity.

**Support as mentorship.** The participants are supported through networks that consist of their families, peers, school, and the extended community. They described being well supported were well supported through these networks, especially from their families. They recognized support in school as it pertains to ‘caring’ teachers and guidance counselors who assisted them, throughout their high school careers and more importantly with the college admissions process. In addition, the participants were quite vocal about requiring further support through mentorship and leadership development. They are specifically asking for African American women, (or women of color in general) to give back and serve as models of success. This might include having women who are in their chosen career paths to speak to them about their experiences.

**Support as catering to emotions.** The participants were quite willing and open to tell their stories and assert their humanities by advocating for themselves and their importance. The researcher was impressed by their bravery and willingness to share.
There is a requirement of a space for these girls to feel as though they are more than high achieving students. The girls asked for programming and efforts that would provide emotional and mental support, because these were areas in which they realized they and their female peers were struggling. The participants ask for this support from the faculty. In addition to the teaching staff, the support staff such as guidance counselors and school social workers, as well as positive role models from the community could also be a great assistance in self-esteem building and counseling to help affirm their value and beauty.

bell hooks (2015) suggests that African American’s women emotional health is impacted negatively by the institutional structures racism and sexism. Self-recovery for African American women is a concept that encourages healing and wellness in the face of these oppressive forces. Self-recovery is also a political act of resistance, as it presents a means for African American women to heal individual emotional wounds to move toward community empowerment. One of the main tenants is living in truth.

From a policy perspective, the researcher recommends considering the implementation of social and emotional standards that are extended beyond third grade and span through high school. Coping skills, for example, are one such aspect that can be covered by these standards.

*Support as acknowledgement of humanity.* The participants feel best supported in the classroom when they have teachers who engage with them on a human level and eschew oppressive power relationships. They respond best to teachers who tell them about their personal lives and relate to them outside of the content they are teaching. They pick up on teachers who choose favorites and are affected by teachers who ignore
them in the hallways – regardless of their race. Clearly, these young ladies are in need of adults, faculty, and staff who will validate and celebrate “The I-ness of [their] humanness and Negroness” as aptly described by Melvin Tolson (1965, p. 20). As a policy recommendation, the notion of humanity speaks directly to the need for cultural competency training for teachers. Olivia’s experience with bullying highlights this. She does not make any mention of teachers stepping in to address the behavior, which illuminates the need for teachers to be trained in being culturally competent.

Going further, support as an acknowledgement of humanity extends to discipline. Three of the participants reported being suspended or receiving disciplinary action for fighting. They, however, were seen as model students academically and because of this and close relationships with teachers, they were given less punitive punishments that did not derail their drive or accomplishments. Not all students are this fortunate and the researcher encourages schools and districts to rethink and redesign zero tolerance policies that data shows disproportionately affect and push out students and particularly girls of color.

Curriculum. As the participants discussed their conceptions of African American female oppression, they often referred to their historical understanding of the struggle for race and gender rights. They discussed slavery and women’s rights but did not clearly discuss the history of African American women. The researcher argues that the history of white women has become the normalized narrative when discussing women’s rights. This could be an issue of policy, curriculum and pedagogy and the researcher suggests closer attention be paid to this area of instruction. From a policy
perspective, this can be addressed through actively pursuing curriculum and pedagogical approaches that are culturally responsive.

**Implications for Future Research**

As this study has provided an initial and exploratory inquiry into the topic of African American females’ educational experiences, the researcher has identified at least four areas that could be explored in future research. The first is a comparative study between these participants and adolescent girls at high, moderate and low achieving high schools in comparable areas. Such work could illuminate issues with class, as this was as much of a significant topic for analysis as was race and gender. Additionally, when seeking approval for this study from the district, it was suggested to the researcher that Northwestern Tech was not a “typical” school in the district and that more work might be needed around the schools in the district that were deemed as a better representation of the district.

In more broad terms, African American girls are not a monolithic group with completely shared experiences. The participants in this study represent but a miniscule slice of African American girlhood. While the study found many similarities between the participants in terms of family and cultural values, resisting oppression and being resilient in the face of trauma, the reality is that these are seven different girls with seven different personalities and perceptions. The researcher worked with participants that shared a common school environment, grade point average and racial and ethnic identity. Future research in this area should take into account that even with this, the narratives will be very different but no less valuable.
A longitudinal study exploring the participants’ experiences would be a particularly illuminating project to track the dynamics of their perceptions once they have or have not met the high expectations that they have set for themselves. The study could explore their experiences in college, graduate school, and once they have graduated.

The role of white supremacy also needs to have a continuous place in the conversation of the impact of racism, sexism and classism on African American females, since the participants may not have felt its impact in their own lives but, nevertheless, saw how it played a role in broader society. However, my analysis of Olivia’s bullying and the participants’ overall of valuing light skin as beautiful reflects strong elements of this and offers further space for exploration.

**Positionality and Research: A Personal Note**

At times one wonders if one might be too close to the research, given my positioning as an African American women. As Patricia Hill Collins (1989) suggests, this is a line of thinking that arises from positivist methodological approaches that usually entail the researcher’s distance from the subject and the absence of emotions in the research process. This research has been conducted in a spirit that rejects these notions and embraces a Black feminist epistemology. Great care was given to ethical considerations and being true to the participants’ narratives. I had to be extremely mindful not impose my own thoughts and beliefs into the data. It is extremely difficult to remain objectivity but the resulting work reflects a solid effort.

At times, hearing the girls’ interviews were extremely hard to take and I found myself reliving traumatic experiences long considered over and done with. Elements of
the girls’ stories and their apparent pain while speaking their live histories triggered extreme feelings of empathy and stress, which required finding ways to decompress after each interview.

In preparation for data collection, I both reviewed literature and attended conferences that spoke directly to the needs of African American girls. This proved useful and very positive experiences for both my work and my own personal identity building. In this sense, I posit that having such a close connection to the work can be personally transformational for the researcher.

Conclusion

This study is an effort to tell the stories of a group that has been historically been marginalized in educational research. In an effort to work against the pathological crisis narrative for African Americans youth in education and particularly the seeming invisibility of Black girls in particular, the participants in this study are high achieving students who benefit from strong communities of support and networks that have been designed for their academic success. While this narrative posits that African American girls that doing well because they are achieving, the data reflects that while the participants are achieving, they are grappling with personal and social issues that have a relationship with their educational worlds. What is quite profound about their narratives is that even after experiencing significant traumatic events in their childhoods, the participants have shown resilience, affirm their achievements and believe in their overall success. They refuse to be distracted or derailed and understand that although they are
personally motivated, they acknowledge the importance of interdependence and support from the families, peers and educators.

Based upon the data, the participants do not feel as though they are represented in their classes as African American girls and suggest programming in helping to develop their emotional and mental strength. They work best with teachers who acknowledge their humanity treat them as normal students but also set boundaries. These teachers care but also provide them with opportunities to be independent. Their ideal environment would allow them to dress in a more relaxed way and have more flexibility in their daily schedules to sleep and rest. If they had their way, the girls would also eliminate high stakes testing, as they do not believe that these are true indicators of their intelligence. A curriculum that best represents them would include historical and contemporary accounts of the lives of African American women and provide emotional support. With such a significant focus on support, my recommendations call for a pedagogy of support that would affirm their humanity and need for success.
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The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: An Exploration of the Educational Experiences of African American Female Students in Grades K-12

Researcher: Dr. Beverly Gordon, Principal Investigator and Alyssa Elmore, Co-Investigator

Sponsor: None

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to understand how African American female students’ views of education, society and the world are impacted by their personal, family, peer and schooling experiences. African American females are the focus of this study because they are generally unstudied in academic research and it is important for their voices to be heard.

Procedures/Tasks:

You will be interviewed in both an individual and group setting to explore these issues. Please note that confidentiality cannot be ensured in a group interview setting. The interviews would be arranged for a time and place that’s convenient for you. They will
probably last 45 minutes to an hour, but the length will depend in part on how much you have to say. You may also be asked to participate in follow-up interviews once the initial interviews have been completed. These will also be held at a location that is convenient for you. You can stop the interview at any time – you just need to say you want to stop it. You can also say that you do not want to answer a particular question if you do not want to. You may be encouraged to bring up relevant topics and issues that the researcher may not be aware of. Feel free to ask the researcher questions, too. Here are examples of the kinds of things the researcher will ask about. The researcher is looking at four things: what role their experiences with home and family, schooling, social and peer networks, and the media play in how they view their lives, education and schooling. For example, is education important? Why? Have they had positive or negative experiences in school? These interviews will be recorded using an audio recording device such as a recorder and/or laptop computer. The researcher may also ask to observe you in a classroom setting. You may tell the researcher if you do not want to be observed.

**Duration:**

The interview period will last from one to two months. You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

**Risks and Benefits:**

Participating in this research will not bring you or the school any direct benefits. The researcher believes that this research can be quite important as we seek to make your voice heard. It is important that African American females tell their stories in a culture that seeks to stereotype and silence them.

The researcher believes the interviews should be no riskier than the work you normally do in school, or from talking about that work and the situations of school life with teachers, friends, and acquaintances. Also, remember that you don’t have to answer a question if you feel uncomfortable doing so, and that you can stop the interview at any point.

**Confidentiality:**

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by
state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

**Incentives:**

The researcher will provide light refreshments at the interviews.

**Participant Rights:**

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. If you choose to discontinue participation after beginning the study, all recordings and notes related to your participation will be deleted and redacted as soon as possible. Please note that removing your participation from group recordings is not possible. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

**Contacts and Questions:**

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, or you feel you have been harmed as a result of study participation, you may contact Alyssa Elmore at (914) 450-6584 or Dr. Beverly Gordon at (614) 688-4259.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

**Signing the consent form**
I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

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**Investigator/Research Staff**

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

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The Ohio State University Assent to Participate in Research

Study Title: An Exploration of the Educational Experiences of African American Female Students in Grades K-12

Researcher: Dr. Beverly Gordon, Principal Investigator and Alyssa Elmore, Co-Investigator

Sponsor: None

• You are being asked to be in a research study. Studies are done to find better ways to treat people or to understand things better.
• This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to participate.
• You should ask any questions you have before making up your mind. You can think about it and discuss it with your family or friends before you decide.
• It is okay to say “No” if you don’t want to be in the study. If you say “Yes” you can change your mind and quit being in the study at any time without getting in trouble.
• If you decide you want to be in the study, an adult (usually a parent) will also need to give permission for you to be in the study.

1. What is this study about?

This study is about how African American female students think about and view education, society and the world around them. The researcher is trying to understand how these views are impacted by what happens in school, their personal lives, and family relationships.

2. What will I need to do if I am in this study?

You will be asked to participate in a group interview and one individual interview. You may be asked to also participate in a second interview. These interviews will be recorded using an audio recording device such as a recorder and/or laptop computer. The researcher may also ask to observe you in your classroom. You may say if you do not want to be observed.
3. **How long will I be in the study?**

The researcher will be conducting interviews for one to two-month period.

4. **Can I stop being in the study?**

You may stop being in the study at any time. If you choose to leave the study, all recordings and notes related to your participation will be removed as soon as possible. Please know that removing your participation from group recordings is not possible.

5. **What bad things might happen to me if I am in the study?**

The researcher does not see any harm happening to you if you are in the study. Answering questions in front of the group may be just like answering questions with your teacher in class.

6. **What good things might happen to me if I am in the study?**

You will have the chance to talk about your life and tell your story. Your story is important and deserves to be heard. Many of the images we see of African American girls are negative and stereotypical. You have the opportunity to address this by showing people a different view. You may also have the chance to be a positive influence on students that are younger than you.

7. **Will I be given anything for being in this study?**

The researcher will provide light refreshments at the group interviews.

8. **Who can I talk to about the study?**

For questions about the study you may contact Alyssa Elmore at (914) 450-6584 or Dr. Beverly Gordon at (614) 688-4259.

To discuss other study-related questions with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.
Signing the assent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form. I have had a chance to ask questions before making up my mind. I want to be in this research study.

_________________________________________    __________________________  AM/PM
Signature or printed name of subject               Date and time

Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant before requesting the signature above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

_________________________________________    __________________________  AM/PM
Printed name of person obtaining assent          Signature of person obtaining assent

_________________________________________  AM/PM
Date and time

This form must be accompanied by an IRB approved parental permission form signed by a parent/guardian.
PLEASE SIGN ONLY IF THE PARTICIPANT IS 18 YEARS OLD OR ABOVE.

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: An Exploration of the Educational Experiences of African American Female Students in Grades K-12

Researcher: Dr. Beverly Gordon, Principal Investigator and Alyssa Elmore, Co-Investigator

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Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions

Home and Family
- Can you tell me about your family?
- Who do you live with?
- Do you have siblings?
- How do you spend your time when you’re at home?
- What activities you do with your family?
- What activities do you enjoy doing with your family?
- If your family could describe you, what do you think they would say?
- Do you feel as though there is pressure on you to do well in school?
- Do you feel as though you can talk to your family about anything?

Social and Peer Networks
- What extra-curricular activities do you participate in?
- Do you hang out after school?
- Who do you hang out with in and outside of school?
- What do you do?
- How would you describe you and your friends? (Popular? Well liked?)
- How would you describe your friends?
- Can you walk me through a typical time that you would hang out?
- Who would you say are the people you are closest to?
- Do you date?
- Do you think it’s easy to date in your school? What about outside of school?

School/Education
- Can you walk me through your school day starting when you wake up to when you leave school and are ready for bed?
- What is your school like?
- How do you feel about school?
- What classes do you enjoy the most? Why?
- Which classes are you most comfortable in? Why?
- Do you have favorite teachers? Why? How do they make you feel?
- What about your least favorite teachers? What happens in those classes? How would you describe them?
- What do you want to do in the future? Has school helped with that?
- How are your relationships with teachers/administrators/guidance counselors/other students?
- If they could describe you, what do you think they would say?
- Do you think you are encouraged to do well?
- Do you feel pressure to get good grades? Behave well?
- How do you feel about the rules?
- Have you ever been suspended?
- Do you feel safe?
- Do you feel like you can be yourself in school? (Around your classmates/teachers)
- How would you describe yourself as a student? (Do you work hard? Could you work harder?)
- Imagine that you were talking to your teachers/Principal Morton. What would you want them to know?

Media
- What television shows do you like to watch?
- Who is your favorite music artist? Song?
- What famous person would you say is most beautiful?
- What books do you like to read?
- What magazines do you like to read?
- What social media accounts do you have?
- How often do you check it/post?
- How do you feel about the images of African American girls that you see on the internet/television/magazines/books?
- Do you feel they represent you? Do you see girls who look like you?
- Do you watch the news?
- Are there things you hear on the news that are important to you? Why? Why not?
  - Ferguson – Black Lives Matter
- How do you feel about things like fights on World Star?

Perceptions of Self and From Others
- How would you describe yourself? (how you act, how you look)
- How do you think your friends would describe you?
- What about people who don’t like you?
- What do you like to do? (Hobbies)
- What is important to you?
- Do you think you are African American or female first? Is one more important to you than the other?
- How do you feel about yourself?
- Do you feel beautiful? Pretty?
- Do you ever feel uncomfortable? (Re: looks, sounds)