

**Small School Conversion and African-American Student  
Academic Identity and Aspiration**

**Kim Renee Bobby**

**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of**

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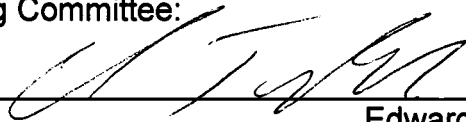
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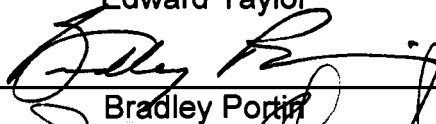


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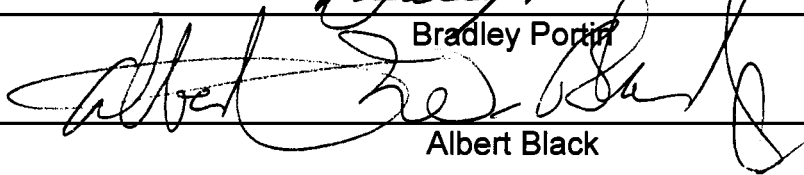
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**Abstract**

**Small School Conversion and African-American Student  
Academic Identity and Aspiration**

Kim Renee Bobby

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
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Research on school size shows that a large comprehensive high school where many poor students and students of color are engaged in a rigorous curriculum that is relevant to their lives is not a common occurrence in our schools. Many of these students who graduate are not ready to do college-level work if they make it that far, and many are simply dropping out. The theory behind the small school conversion rests on the assumption that students who are nurtured in a small learning community will flourish academically due to a greater sense of belonging in the academic domain. This study focused on 13 high school students who are enrolled in five separate academies in a formerly large comprehensive high school. Their interpretations of daily lived experiences relative to their academic identity were captured. What they revealed offers the potential for addressing real obstacles to success and feelings of belonging for African-American students in small schools.

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## DEDICATION

I would like to give thanks to God for the countless blessings I have received, the greatest of those being my mother, Audrey Bobby. She is a model of unwavering faith in God. Her teaching has guided me through many uncertain adventures, and given me the confidence to persevere. This body of work is dedicated to her, a mother, a teacher and a friend.

## Chapter I

### Introduction

#### *National Picture*

The gap in academic achievement between students of color and their White peers is persisting nationally and locally and in some cases becoming wider. The data representing the pattern for African-American student achievement are the subject of many studies aimed at determining what factors contribute to the gap in academic achievement: "Since 1988, the gap has been flat, or in some subjects, is wider" (National Center for Educational Statistics, [NCES], August 2000). These subjects include math, reading, and science.

In order to change this trend, it is necessary to explore some of the theories that attempt to explain what factors contribute to African-American student achievement and create the gap in academic performance. The Education Trust, Inc., reports findings from a 1999 study of reading and math scores nationally, showing the national reading scores of fourth-grade African-American students lagged behind the reading scores of fourth-grade White students, with a majority of African-American students scoring below basic grade level. "The bottom is labeled Below Basic, which is reserved for students unable to display even 'partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work' at their grade" (A. Thernstrom &

S. Thernstrom, 2003, p.14). The data reveal that 61% of African-American students are currently scoring below the basic fourth-grade reading level; in contrast 26% of White students are scoring below the basic fourth-grade level.

The advanced reading percentages show an opposite scoring pattern for African-American students compared to White students. "Advanced, the highest achievement level, is reserved for a performance that is 'superior'" (A. Thernstrom & S. Thernstrom, 2003, p.14). For example, 39% of White fourth-grade students nationally are currently scoring at an advanced reading level, while only 12% of African-American students are scoring in the advanced reading level. Students who demonstrate mastery at the baseline level of their peers nationally are defined as at Basic Level. The gap in basic reading scores is persistent but not quite as stark, with 35% of White students scoring at basic, compared to 27% of African-Americans scoring at basic reading level (NCES, 2000).

Nationally, math scores paint a consistent picture, with 61% of eighth-grade African-American students performing below basic level math and 32% performing at basic eighth-grade level. Conversely, nationally 7% are performing at the advanced level in math. In comparison, White eighth-grade students are performing at rates of 21% below basic math; 43% perform at grade level basic math, and 36% are performing at an advanced level (NCES, 2000).

Table 1:

*National Picture: Reading Scores*

	Below Basic Grade	Basic Reading	Advanced Reading
African-American 4th Grade Students	61%	27%	12%
White 4th Grade Students	26%	35%	39%
<i>National Picture: Math Scores</i>			
	Below Basic Math	Basic Math Level	Advanced Math Level
African-American 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Students	61%	32%	7%
White 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Students	21%	43%	36%

National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, August 2000.  
[nces.ed.gov/Nationalreportcard.naedata](http://nces.ed.gov/Nationalreportcard.naedata).

This means that many African-American high school students are taught reading and math overall at levels that equal the same levels as White 13 year old students overall, roughly the eighth-grade level. Math scores for African-American students at these levels represent significant roadblocks to college admission and college completion. While roughly 60% of African-American and roughly 70% of White students nationally go on to college, African-American students graduate at significantly lower rates: 41% compared to White students graduating college at a rate of 61% (NCES, 2000). Overall, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data demonstrate that there is a four-year skill gap in academic performance between African-American students and White students.

### *Local Picture*

In Washington State, the achievement gap for African-American and other minority groups is consistent with the national trend. For example, the 2003 Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) results show reading scores for fourth-grade students differ greatly between African-American and White students in the reading categories of well below standard level, below standard, at standard and above standard.

In 2003, 10% of African-American fourth-grade students were reading well below the basic reading level, compared to 4% of White students. The pattern persisted in the below standard reading level, at standard reading level, and above standard reading level for African-American fourth-grade students. In 2003 36% of African-American students were reading below grade level, 40% were reading at grade level and, 13% performed above the reading standard. These percentages for Washington's African-American students reveal that 46% of them are reading below basic reading levels. In comparison, 21% of White students were below standard, 45% met the reading standard, and 28% performed above the reading standard. While African-Americans make up 5% of the public K-12 population and White students make up 74% of this population. The fact that less than half of either

population is at or above grade level standard is not good news for everyone; it is particularly troubling with respect to African-American students.

Table 2

*Washington Assessment of Student (WASL) Reading Scores, 2003*

	Well Below Standard Reading Level	Below Standard Reading Level	At Standard Reading Level	Above Standard Reading Level
African-American 4th Grade Students	10%	36%	40%	13%
White 4th Grade Students	4%	21%	45%	28%

*Washington Assessment of Student (WASL) Grade 7 Math Scores, 2003*

	Below Basic Level	Basic Level	Proficient	Advanced
African-American 7th Grade Students	68%	15%	9%	5%
White 7th Grade Students	36%	20%	20%	22%

Education Trust. [www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)

For math and reading scores, the numbers of Washington's African-American students well below the standard are almost double the numbers of White students in these same categories. This alarming, yet persistent outcome in academic performance is the impetus for efforts to break large comprehensive high schools into small learning communities, or small academies that enroll the same group of students each year as they matriculate through high school.

The goals of these school transformation efforts are ambitious: they and not only aim to increase academic achievement by African-American and low-income students, they also intend to impact student aspirations, academic

identity, and to increase college readiness and college persistence for these same students. No longer is the large comprehensive high school seen as a suitable model. In *High Schools on a Human Scale: How Small Schools Can Transform American Education*, Toch (2003) endorses this viewpoint arguing that:

because they try to teach so many different subjects to students who they believe to have sharply differing educational priorities, comprehensive high schools are highly fragmented institutions. Rarely do students, parents, teachers, and administrators share a sense of what their schools' priorities should be. There is an absence of "focus" in the schools' curricula and culture. (p. 7)

Proponents of small schools point to the value of being "seen"; what is meant by that is a greater awareness of individuals and who they are, both for students and teachers. The benefit of this knowledge on the individual level could be instructive for processes of teaching and learning. "The anonymity that pervades many public high schools saps students' motivation to learn and teachers' motivation to teach" (p. 7). Meier (1995) in *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for American From a Small School in Harlem* argues:

The day has come when every child is entitled to be in a school small enough that he or she can be known by name to every faculty member in the school and well known by at least a few of them, a school so

small that family can easily come in and see the responsible adults and the responsible adults can easily and quickly see each other. (p. 117)

Advocates of small schools claim that poor and minority students stand to benefit the most from being in a small learning community.

For a majority of students, particularly African-American and Hispanic students and those from disadvantaged families, a large comprehensive high school is an educational dead end, where low expectations and tracking with enrollments in courses like “introduction to consumer math” instead of geometry, algebra and trigonometry (Toch, 2003, p. 10). Lipman (1990) argues that:

It is also possible that nurturing environments with sustained interaction between teachers and students will facilitate empathy and trust across cultural, racial, and class differences. In this regard, it is plausible that teachers, through sustained interactions with students, will develop a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, the strengths of students culturally different from themselves. (p. 35)

Small school advocates are quick to disclose that this kind of an approach to teaching and learning requires a great deal of energy and patience on the part of students and teachers. However, the rewards for students, teachers, and the community outweigh the frustrations.

Meier (1995) validates this viewpoint, and her work at New York's Julia Richmond complex provides her with rich credentials in the small schools movement: "this kind of teaching and schooling is never dehumanizing, because it rests upon intense human interaction and involvement" (p. 149). Meier also points out that "size and scale are critical". Even prisons and army units aren't as huge, impersonal, and anonymous as many schools are for children" (p. 151). How do African-American students themselves interpret these small school environments designed to change their aspirations, academic performance and college readiness?

### *Transition to College*

"In a nation where equal opportunity for all is a bedrock democratic value, getting a college degree still depends far too much on one's economic circumstances or ethnic heritage" (Pathways Network, 2004, p. 5). With only 53% of African-American students in the state of Washington graduating from high school, it is no surprise to find that their representation in colleges, or rather their absence from colleges, is greatly impacted by both ethnic heritage and economic factors. For those who go on to college, less than half graduate within four years. Academic performance, math and reading scoring patterns, and the four-year learning gap mentioned earlier forecasts these students' gap in preparation for college-level work. "Approximately two-thirds of Black and

Hispanic students do not enter the workplace immediately, but go on to college, and a great many are clearly entering higher education unprepared for true college-level work—work that assumes basic mastery of high school material” (A. Thernstrom & S. Thernstrom, 2003, p.16).

For example, in 2002, in Washington State, there were 614 bachelor’s degrees awarded to first time, full-time and part-time African-American freshmen out of the 1,358 who had started college four years earlier. This translates to a four-year graduation rate of 45% for African-American students who attend college in the State of Washington. In this same time period, White students obtained 17,095 bachelor’s degrees from a freshman class of 28,020, representing 61% of the total. Statistics from the University of Washington for 1996-1997 first time, full-time freshmen show graduation rates for African-American students at 54% and 71% for White students, the largest college going population in the state” (EdWatch Online, 2004).

The factors linked to low high-school graduation rates, low college admission rates, and longer time to college graduation or no graduation are varied and complex for African-American students. They include differential performance in college entrance examinations such as the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), a gap in scoring which is an outgrowth of the difference in elementary and middle-school math and reading levels presented earlier. Prior to the new SAT first administered in 2005, 1600 was the highest

possible score; African-American students in the state of Washington had a composite score of 908 on the SAT and only represented 3.4% of test takers; comparatively, White students had a composite score of 1067 and represented 80.2% of the test takers” (Education Trust, 2004).

Course rigor and course-taking patterns in high school are indicators of how many students are being prepared for success in postsecondary schooling; both can also shape the level of upward mobility in the workplace. When disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and income, course enrollments are also indicators of the amount of access which low-income and minority students have to challenging subject matter, and of the essential knowledge and skills they develop for life after high school. For example, a “gatekeeper” to ultimate college entrance is when, and if, a student takes algebra. This marker for educational trajectory is aptly called the “gatekeeper for citizenship” (Moses, 2001, p. 13). The gap in participation for eighth-grade low-income and minority students offers another reason why college transition is difficult for these students. Nationally, of all eighth-graders in 2000, 25% were taking algebra; 16% of all African-American eighth-graders were taking algebra; 17% of Latino eighth-graders; and 28% of White eighth-graders were taking algebra (NCES, 2001).

The most commonly cited reasons for the low transition to college for many students of color and poor students include low enrollment in such

college gatekeeper courses, along with low graduation rates, and low numbers taking college entrance exams. Although these factors contribute to the problem, we cannot overlook the level of experience and expertise of their teachers. Research shows that low-income and minority students are overwhelmingly being taught by teachers who lack either a major or minor in the subject area that they are teaching. "Classrooms in high-poverty schools and high-minority schools are far more likely than those in low-poverty or low-minority schools to be taught by teachers teaching out of their field of expertise" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 32). For example, in the State of Washington, 35% of high-poverty secondary schools and 32% of high-minority schools have teachers that fit this profile, compared to 18% of low-poverty secondary schools and 25% of low-minority schools (Education Trust, 2004).

Lee (2002) writes:

The poorest children in economic terms, those from black and Hispanic families, from families where parents are less educated, and children attending schools in large cities and rural areas attend the lowest quality schools. Whether "quality" is defined in terms of school sector, class size, school outreach to parents, teacher qualifications, teacher attitudes, or school environmental conditions, disadvantaged and minority children begin their educational careers in schools of consistently lower quality. (p. 84)

These conditions shape the trends in educational attainment and transition to college that are keeping the students who are at greatest risk of failure and the highest in terms of need in the poorest schools. Lee (2002) argues: "These findings translate into a sobering conclusion: the children who need the best schooling actually start their education in the worst public schools" (p. 84). Trends in academic achievement for poor students and many students of color reflect many variables, as well as historical underpinnings that provide insight into how and why these trends persist. Research time and time again outlines the landscape and explains how and why these outcomes are likely to continue replicating themselves if corrective action is not taken. Poverty, tracking, racism, cultural marginalization, low expectations, and unequal resources are among the stubborn realities of the unequal treatment of students in our schools. This leads to the persistence of the gap in academic achievement for many low-income and minority students. These variables also shape the lived experience of the individual student within the school setting; they represent nutrients that each student consumes and uses to make sense of what he or she might aspire to become, and they offer suggestions for the formation of an academic identity for the individual.

### *Academic Identity*

This study's reference to the student's academic identity represents a fluid sense of the self within the school setting. Nakkula's description of the fluidity of identity captures this as well:

It is not the culmination of anything. It is, rather, the lived experience of an ongoing process—the process of integrating successes, failures, routines, habits, rituals, novelties, thrills, threats, violations, gratifications and frustrations into a coherent and evolving interpretation of who we are. (Sadowski, 2003, p. 7)

The identity one lives and presents is conditional, based on many factors including, time, place, interpersonal engagements, and perceptions of one's self in relation to all of these variables. The fluidity of this process is described by Erickson (1968) in *Identity Youth and Crisis*: “and yet just when a person, to all appearances, seems to ‘find himself,’ he can also be said to be ‘losing himself’ in new tasks and affiliations: he transcends identity-consciousness” (p. 301).

In Erikson's widely cited lifespan model each stage ushers in a unique ‘crisis’ or critical task to be negotiated, and each stage brings both risk and opportunity for future growth. Sadowski points to the work of Erikson and his classic model of identity:

[T]he identity 'crisis' of adolescence is part of a series of developmental transitions that begin in infancy and occur throughout a person's life. In adolescence, questions of identity take on special significance as adolescents try to make sense of themselves, their futures, and their world in the face of pressure from peers, teachers, parents, and others. (Sadowski, 2003, p. 3)

In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Tatum (1997) reflects on this question being asked by adolescents. She further offers:

[T]he answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, and store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? (p. 18)

It is especially important during this stage, Nakkula writes, for adolescents to have opportunities to invest their energies positively in a variety of pursuits, both academic and otherwise. Without such opportunities, youth are at risk of identity "foreclosure" whereby they can become "stuck" in preconceived notions of who they are (Erikson, 1968; Sadowski 2003).

Sadowski (2003) argues, “this [stage] is where educators, counselors, and others who work with and care about youth can play crucial roles: mentoring, counseling, coaching – also just providing space, listening, and allowing adolescents to be themselves” (p. 3). He adds, “for example, as adolescents view themselves through societal prejudices about what it means to be African-American or poor or gay or an immigrant, they may have difficulty realizing their full potential as human beings” (Sadowski, 2003, p. 4). Tatum (1997) writes: “The parts of our identity that *do* capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us. The aspect of identity that is the target of others’ attention, and subsequently of our own, often is that which sets us apart as exceptional or “other” in their eyes” (p. 21).

While the issues of identity and self-esteem at times intersect at school, they are not one and the same. “There are students who seemed to have high self-esteem despite poor academic performance, as well as high achievers who I believed had low self-perceptions” (Sadowski, 2003, p. 4). “Given the amount of time young people spend in school, the educational context plays a critical role in identity formation” (p. 9). The variables that contribute to that identity formation are both explicit and subliminal, and can determine what the student feels they are capable of achieving. Tatum (1997) notes that: “Our self-perceptions are shaped by the messages that we receive from those around us, and when young Black men and women enter adolescence, the

racial content of those messages is intensified "(p. 54). For example, when African-American students are encouraged to invest in sports, and map their school life around being an athlete, that message can diminish their confidence in their academic ability.

Tatum (1997) writes: "In adolescence, as race becomes personally salient for Black youth, finding the answer to questions such as, "What does it mean to be a young Black person? How should I act? What should I do? is particularly important" (p. 60). This argument is supported by Helms (1990) in *Black and White Racial Identity*, where she notes that "adolescence, the phase in life when one is most concerned with a variety of identity issues, also seems to be the time at which one's racial identity issues are most salient" (p. 184). According to Sadowski (2003), "the activities and relationships most influential to identity development are those in which youth are most invested and through which they experience the deepest gratification and most meaningful reinforcement" (p. 9). Being a gifted athlete is something to be proud of. However, for far too many African-American students, both boys and increasingly girls, this focus on athletics can eclipse opportunities to discover other talents, essentially blocking identity-exploration, or creating a moratorium in development. "Developmental moratorium is where youth suspend the opportunity to reflect on and experiment with who they are. The opposite of moratorium in Erikson's (1968) framework is "foreclosure." The

foreclosed identity results from an adolescent making a commitment to a particular life course without adequately exploring alternatives” (Sadowski, p. 11).

Intertwined with these multiple identities, African-American students may be experiencing any of the five stages of Black identity development presented by Cross (1991). In his analysis of the process of Black identity development and change Cross uses the term “nigrescence.” It is “the ‘process of becoming Black,’ and models on the psychology of nigrescence depicts the stages of the Negro-to Black identity transformation experienced by many Black adults in the Black power period” ( Cross, p. 157). He describes the stages of Black identity development as follows:

*Stage 1: Pre-encounter:* Depicts the identity to be changed. A person in this stage is described as one who has a non-Afrocentric identity. This person may hold a range of attitudes about race in general, and particularly the Black race. (p. 190)

Cross refers to these attitudes as “Low-Salience”, “Social-stigma” and “Anti-Black”. In his description, “persons who hold low-salience views do not deny being Black, but this ‘physical’ fact is thought to play an insignificant role in their everyday lives” (p. 190). This person may also see race as a problem, hence social-stigma. This person may also hold negative views about Blacks.

“Blackness and Black people define their internal model of what they dislike” (p. 191).

Stage 2: Encounter: “Isolates the point at which the person feels compelled to change” (p. 190).

Cross further states:

In many instances, it is not a single event that constitutes a person’s encounter but a series of small, eye-opening episodes, each of which chips away at the person’s ongoing world view. These small encounters have a cumulative effect; at a certain point, the straw comes that “breaks the camel’s back,” and the person feels the push toward nigrescence. (p. 200)

Stage 3: Immersion-Emersion: “Describes the vortex of identity change” (p. 190). According to Cross, “during this period of transition, the person begins to demolish the old perspective and simultaneously tries to construct what will become his or her new frame of reference”. At this stage there is awareness and a desire to change and form a new identity about Blackness. “In effect, the new convert lacks knowledge about the complexity and texture of the new identity and is forced to erect simplistic, glorified, highly romantic speculative images of what he or she assumes the new self to be like” (p. 202).

Stage 4 and 5: "Internalization and Internalization-Commitment:

"Describes the habituation and internalization of the new identity" (p. 190).

In Cross's description, "the internalization stage marks the point of dissonance resolution and a reconstitution of one's steady-state personal and cognitive style." Significantly, "the shift is away from how your friends see you ('Am I Black enough?') and toward confidence in your personal standards of Blackness" (p. 210).

These stages share a common characteristic of a heightened developmental moment as described earlier in Erikson's youth identity development model. This suggests that African-American students may be experiencing multiple developmental stages simultaneously, and this may leave them particularly vulnerable to messages about their identity. The daily lives of our youth are fraught with issues requiring them to make decisions about who they are at school, at home, in their neighborhoods, and as reflected in the media. In each of these spheres they are receiving messages about who they are; when one overlays messages associated with being a successful African-American student, the intensity of identity development becomes greater, and the experience even more convoluted.

### Statement of the Problem

Research on school size shows that a large comprehensive high school where many poor students and students of color are engaged in a rigorous curriculum that is relevant to their lives is not a common occurrence in our educational system. The research findings also show that students are not experiencing rich, engaging, purposeful relationships relating to academic achievement with teachers and peers. It suggests that this negatively impacts their academic performance, academic identity, and future aspirations. This leads to the following important questions: Do the students believe this? Do African-American students share these perceptions about their school environment? Does being a member of a small learning community, when the goal is precisely a high energy, affirmative experience, necessarily help these student's academic performance, academic identity development, and future aspirations?

In the State of Washington, like many other states, large comprehensive high schools are moving to the center of inquiry as educators in both K-12 systems and higher education try to eliminate the gap in minority and low-income student achievement. If this is achieved, the gap in college admission and college completion for these same students also stands a greater chance of being eliminated. Educators continue to list the many factors contributing to the gap in achievement for many low-income students

and students of color. These factors include lack of adequate parental involvement, level of parental or guardian education, poverty, scarce community resources, peer pressure, lack of understanding of how social capital works, school structure, students coping with learning to navigate multiple cultural borders, low aspirations, fragile academic identity, and low expectations by the adults across the landscape of these students' lives. Price (2002) refers to these variables as comprising the "Preparation Gap." He further argues that the seeds of the Preparation Gap are planted early in many poor and minority students' school experiences, and that it will impact these students over their lifetimes:

[T]he Preparation Gap is the gap between what poor and minority children know vs. what they need to know in order to meet state academic standards, move from one grade to the next, and eventually graduate from high school. There is also a gap between what they can do and what they must be able to do in order to land good jobs and get into college and trade schools. (p. 14)

One model being espoused to address the achievement gap is the creation of small schools to replace large comprehensive high schools.

There are proponents of creating smaller learning communities shaped to create real connections between students, educators and the curriculum.

Mohr is quoted in *A Simple Justice: The Challenge of Small Schools* offers:

“Small schools have the potential to be places where social justice is practiced, not just talked about” (Ayers, Klonsky & Lyon, 2000, p. 14). The notion that such settings allow for opportunities to tackle the unique complexities of human interaction is seen as added value by small school advocates.

Research points to the need for small school communities, built with a focus on increasing the academic achievement of struggling students are showing promise, according to these authors. In one study, “when the community of the school was small and the capacity of the participants to engage in civil discourse was increased, their ability to tackle tough issues more successfully also increased. Resolving these issues produced gains for students” (Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997, p. 18). According to Wasley and colleagues, small schools must incorporate four key guiding principals: Repertoire and Routine, Caring and Expectations, Innovation and Rigor, Small Scale and Civil Discourse. The Civil Discourse should encourage candid conversations about race, poverty, tracking, and cultural and ethnic diversity as a marker for true dialogue: “Control over institutional discourse is often a prerequisite for participation in networks that yield institutional support necessary for success in school and society” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 12). Many poor and minority adolescents have no such control, and, therefore, develop a variety of coping mechanisms in the attempt to navigate the

institutional terrain, at times an unfriendly one full of mine fields and roadblocks. Many of the variables related to the gap in achievement referenced earlier are faced by students negotiating the institutional terrain. These variables are a consequence of racial and socioeconomic barriers as well as stereotypes. The poor and minority student populations targeted in small school transformation efforts encounter these negatives in every aspect of daily life.

Taking action on the variables that contribute to the gap in academic achievement may be useful when attempting to transform schools where these students' academic identity is being shaped and personal aspirations are being developed daily in the school setting "by creating environments where customary structures are challenged, where caring relationships are allowed to flourish, and where conversations that are taboo in larger schools can take place, small schools open the door to new possibilities" (Ayers et al., 2000, p. 15). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has embarked on school reform by helping schools in the State of Washington build small learning communities centered around the attributes the Foundation considers necessary for high achieving schools. In doing so, the small learning communities will tackle the problems of low academic performance, the superficiality of student and teacher relationships, the disconnect students

experience with regard to a curriculum that is not made relevant to their lives, low graduation rates, and low college admission rates.

With the Foundation's assistance, administrators and teachers in these schools are attempting to create environments that are open and safe places for educators to tackle the issues related to the gap in academic performance by many poor and minority students. The Foundation lists attributes of a quality school as Common Focus, High Expectations, Personalized, Respect and Responsibility, Time To Collaborate, Performance Based and Technology As A Tool (see Appendix A for detailed descriptions). As suggested above, college readiness is a specific goal in these small school transformations. The academic performance and college and career aspirations of African-American students is a constant in the dialogue about the impact of small schools. Changes in pedagogy and structure may offer a glimmer of hope for the future of these schools. These prescriptions for success could be blunted, however, and educators may stand to lose the opportunity as learners to build on them, if African-American student reflections about how they make sense of these restructured environments are not captured. Providing a platform for African-American student perceptions to be not only heard, but acted upon should be included in assessing the true impact of these small learning communities designed to address the problems associated with attending a large comprehensive high school.

High-school transformation to smaller schools is occurring nationally, with a common goal of changing academic outcomes for poor and minority students. Researchers may benefit from learning how some of these students are interpreting the meaning of smaller school environments; how students believe these environments may be shaping their identity and aspirations; and understanding what obstacles and challenges these students face as they matriculate through these schools designed to enhance their readiness for college.

Development and cultivation of more meaningful and relevant curriculum and significant personal relationships with teachers and peers in relation to school is a stated marker for small learning community success. Do African-American students agree with this interpretation? If so, are they adjusting their personal aspirations and adopting a stronger academic identity? Can confirmatory evidence for this be seen in their academic performance? These are questions I hope to shed some light on in the proposed research.

### Proposed Research

The high school in this proposed study is located in a mid-sized urban school district in the Northwest region of the United States. The school enrolls populations that are the most ethnically diverse in the district and has transformed itself into five small schools called academies. I am calling the

original high school which currently enrolls approximately 1,600 students 9<sup>th</sup> through 12th grade Conversion High School. The following chart represents the ethnic breakdown of Conversion High School as of November 1, 2004, which represents the 2004-2005 school year.

Table 3

*Ethnic Breakdown of Student Population Conversion High School*

Total School	African-American		Asian		American Indian		Hispanic		White		Total %
	Enroll	%	Enroll	%	Enroll	%	Enroll	%	Enroll	%	
1595	390	24.5	310	19.4	58	3.6	241	15.1	596	37.4	62.6

Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington State Report Card, October 2003

During this time period, Conversion High School served free lunch to 774 students and lunch at a reduced cost to 180 students. This indicates that 6% of the students are receiving free or reduced lunch. This is the highest in the school district for high schools. This indicates that these students share the characteristics of low income and high minority status, the populations experiencing low academic achievement described earlier.

Academic achievement of African-American students is frequently mentioned by researchers, school district administrators, and in national academic profiles, when describing the achievement gap. These students' forward movement is an indicator of success in small school conversion efforts. Therefore, studying how African-American students are shaping what

their experiences at Conversion High School mean for them and their future is critical. Is living in a small school environment different? Is it better? If yes, in what ways? Is the environment supporting and developing what is meaningful to them as learners in the classroom? Creating space and time where African-American students talk about their lived experiences as they matriculate through their high school, now referred to as a group of academies, may reveal answers to these questions.

Particular focus will be placed on learning how African-American students create meaning about who they are as students relative to their day-to-day school interactions, and how these interactions impact each individual's fluid sense of his or her self as a learner. This is referred to as the students' "academic identity," which is consistent with their personal sense of belonging (Steele, 1997) to the domain as a learner.

The student academic identity is important because this prescribed school environment is deliberately targeted, by proponents of small schools, at changing how African-American students view themselves academically, thereby impacting their future aspirations. The overarching question centers on the connection between the conversion from a large comprehensive high school to small academies or small learning communities, on the one hand, and real change for African-American student academic identity and aspiration, on the other.

In the event that not all five academies have African-American students enrolled, only those academies that have African-American student enrollment will be included. As stated earlier these students are always mentioned when describing the achievement gap. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction's *Washington State Report Card*, October 2003, lists 1,595 students enrolled in the 9th through 12th grades at Conversion High School. Based on this figure, the school enrolls approximately 390 African-American students across all four grade levels. Each of the five academies enrolls no more than 400 students, with an annual student dropout rate of 8.8% for the entire 1,600-person high school. The dropout rate, coupled with the knowledge that poor and minority students are at higher risk for dropping out, suggests that the number of African-American students in the eleventh and twelfth grades will be smaller than their representation in the ninth and tenth grades. Thus, the 390 African-American students are not equally distributed (i.e., with 97 students in each grade level), 9<sup>th</sup> through 12th grade.

The small school transformation is also designed to address the higher dropout rate and low academic achievement rate for African-American students. It anticipates that both will reverse as a consequence of experiences being prescribed by creating learning communities designed around African-American academic achievement as a marker of success. If this is the case, engaging in deep reflective dialogue with African-American

students who have persisted to the eleventh and twelfth grades will help us understand how the vision of educators is realized by students and made meaningful.

The Gates Foundation Theory of Change offers a hypothesis about the construction of a small learning community and student academic performance, highlighting the principle that a student's academic identity is an inextricable component of academic performance. It is therefore anticipated by the Foundation that both evolutions, academic performance and strength of academic identity, will be enhanced as a consequence of the positive experiences which African-American students will gain by the creation of learning communities designed around their academic performance.

The Theory of Change model outlines the current reality for many large comprehensive high schools. Its application begins with examining the External Climate and the drivers and targets of change, starting with the assumption that large comprehensive high schools fail to serve all students well. The Foundation's Theory of Change webpage goes on to explain that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant programs are designed to address the challenges students, teachers and administrators face in large comprehensive high schools. This model is illustrated by a flow chart for Promoting Effective Schooling, Attributes of Effective Schooling, Promoting Desired Outcomes, and how to achieve Targeted Outcomes. African-

American student academic performance is one of the targets of change here. Understanding how these Conversion High School students perceive the conversion from a large comprehensive high school to small learning communities can contribute to validating the robustness of this Theory of Change model.

African-American students are specifically targeted in this and other conversion efforts, and their lived experience in these environments can inform us about how they interpret small school conversion and its impact on their school lives, in particular on their academic identity. The unit of analysis and therefore my target in the Theory of Change is African-American student academic identity and aspiration.

## Chapter II

### Review of Related Literature

The literature reviewed in this chapter offers a discussion of some of the areas that may impact how African-American students experience school based on race and culture. This includes a look at how social and cultural capital impacts educational experiences, how the values of the dominant culture impact the nondominant cultures, and how assumptions about race and culture impact what happens for African-American adolescents at school.

#### *Academic Identity and Aspirations Constructed Through Racial Identity Lens*

In the educational context, teachers are often cited as having notable impact on one's determination to succeed academically and one's self-esteem. Noguera (2003) cites: Brookover & Erickson, 1969; Weinstein, Madison, & Kuklinski; 1995) "Several studies have shown that students are influenced by the perceptions and expectations of the adults who teach them (p. 57). The influence is powerful in part due to the number of hours daily that students and teachers spend together. "For the vast majority of youth school is the single context within which the combination of skill and relationship development occurs on a regular basis, day in and day out" (Sadowski, 2003, p. 15). For African-American students this development does not occur without the ever-

present question “Who am I?” in relationships, in skill development, and in academic performance and in the overarching question of how racial identity shows up in all of these areas.

There is an absence of research on African-American student reflections about how racial identity shapes their aspiration and performance in newly formed small schools which are being transformed to specifically impact their academic achievement. While there is a great deal of excitement about what small schools can accomplish, the impact on African-American student achievement is not documented: As Noguera (2003) acknowledges, “we know relatively little about the subjective dimension of this phenomenon or how awareness of these patterns might affect how students see themselves” (p. 51). He adds,

despite overwhelming evidence of a strong correlation between race and academic performance, there is considerable confusion about how and why American minority students come to perceive a linkage between their racial identities and their academic ability, and how these in turn shape their aspirations and behaviors toward education and school. (2003, p. 42)

We are certain that shaping the collective conversation about education and school is a powerful tool; however, for members of a group that does not have power to shape that conversation, their journey is inevitably shaped by being

absent or by having a muted voice. This leaves one's academic identity in education vulnerable to be written into the script by others, which is what applies to many poor and non-White students in this country.

In *Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*, Perry et al. (2003) refer to a suggestion by Holland with regard to building a stronger foundation for African-American academic achievement ideology among our youth:

[I]dentities are the stories we tell ourselves and the world about who we are, and our attempts to live in accordance with these stories, 'the most important thing schools, families, and communities can do is to figure out how to develop among African-American children and youth identities of achievement. (p. 47)

Tatum (1997) also emphasizes the importance of positive academic identity: "If young people are exposed to images of African-American academic achievement in their early years, they will not have to define school achievement as something for Whites only. They will know that there is a long history of Black intellectual achievement" (p. 65).

The historic value placed on education held by African-Americans is no secret, there are stories to be captured within the African-American community. Ladson-Billings (1994) writes: "The chronicle of the civil rights movement in the United States illustrates the centrality of education in the fight

of African Americans for equal opportunity and full citizenship” (p. 5). That legacy is central in the current educational discourse:

In the campaign to widen standard education’s appeal and to diminish the widely documented achievement gap, educators, researchers, and policy makers must consider the interplay between multiple forms of knowledge and cultural repertoires. Quite possibly until educators grasp the value and functions of Black and other nondominant forms of cultural capital, they will continue to have difficulty in engaging many African-American students. (Carter, 2005, p. 72)

Being the target of negative messages about one’s ability along with corresponding messages about the lesser value of one’s cultural background sets up roadblocks to learning. Tatum (1997) writes: “To the extent that the targeted group internalizes the images that the dominant group reflects back to them, they may find it difficult to believe in their own ability” (p. 23).

Making connections with our peers is important to us all, “for some young people the commitments associated with racial membership can lead them to shut off possibilities of participating in activities and courses that are perceived as being outside the invisible but real racial boundaries. When this occurs, individual options can be severely limited” (Noguera, 2003, p.51). According to Ogbu (1984) in *Overcoming Racial Barriers to Equal Access*,

Blacks are unaware of how they have further worsened their options through oppositional coping mechanisms:

[B]ecause the coping responses have over time become an integral part of Black cultural beliefs and practices, Black students are not fully aware of how these factors affect their academic attitudes and behaviors, and they are often unaware of the nature of their own academic attitudes and behaviors. Nevertheless, such factors appear to have caused Blacks to develop low-effort syndrome, or lack of serious persevering academic effort as a norm. (p. 82)

While Ogbu's assessment may be true in some cases, this broad generalization only serves to endorse negative and anti-intellectual markers for African-Americans: Indeed A. Thernstrom & S. Thernstrom (2003) argue that: "data from representative samples of the national population suggests that this is an overblown, highly politicized idea whose empirical foundation is extremely weak" (p. 144). Tatum (1997) reminds us that:

An oppositional identity that disdains academic achievement has not always been a characteristic of Black adolescent peer groups. It seems to be a post-desegregation phenomenon. Historically, the oppositional identity found among African-Americans in the segregated South included a positive attitude toward education. (p. 64)

It is not clear that oppositional behavior is in response to academic identity development. Stanton-Salazar (1997) argues that:

In reality, what we find is a continuum whereby youth can be distinguished by the degree to which they embody a defiant individualist character. The greater the experience of marginality among youth and the more it is shared by similar and significant others, the greater the probability that youth will assume and express such a character. (pp. 30-31)

The shared experience of marginality can lead students to self-segregate, and this may be viewed by some educators as defiant individualist character.

Tatum (1997), however, views this phenomenon more positively: "Black students turn to each other for the much needed support they are not likely to find anywhere else" (p. 60) These students are coping with disturbing environmental cues and are looking for answers to questions about their shared perceptions. Observations of African-American students sitting together in the cafeteria is not unique to our public schools, where in many cases there are greater numbers of African-American students to turn to.

Crookson (1985) writes:

When we visited prep schools we often saw black students eating separately. The sense of estrangement experienced by blacks is all the more apparent when compared to Asian students, who appear to adjust

relatively well to boarding school life. Other minorities, such as Jewish students, also appear able to integrate into the total institution –only the blacks appear substantially isolated. (p. 150)

This suggests that the disturbing environmental cues that cause African-American students to isolate themselves should be questioned. Tatum (1997) further argues that:

It is their peer group, the kids in the cafeteria, who hold the answers to these questions. They know how to be Black. They have absorbed the stereotypical images of Black youth in the popular culture and are reflecting those images in their self-presentation. (p. 60)

She further notes that: “What is problematic is that the young people are operating with a very limited definition of what it means to be Black, based largely on cultural and class stereotypes” (p. 62). Oppositional behavior and defiant individualist coping strategies are not universally adopted by Black students, and the very assumption that these strategies are universally applied creates obstacles to academic success for some African-American students.

The consciousness that this notion of a defiant individualist character exists, along with anti-intellectual and other stereotypes about African-Americans, can create a response to counteract a threat. In this case the response reveals an awareness of the negative stereotype and one’s attempt to challenge it. Steele, Aronson, and Spencer call such features “stereotype

threat” – the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Perry, et al., 2003, p 111). Steele (1997) writes: “It is the social-psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one’s group applies” (p. 614).

Steele’s research has demonstrated this theory in studies with high-performing African-American students enrolled at Stanford University. The students’ academic performance changed based on the messages related to race and ability that they were given prior to taking a test. Their academic performance suffered due to anxiety about negative stereotypes about African-American intellectual ability and performance in the academic domain. Steele concludes that consequently: “for members of these groups who are identified with domains in which these stereotypes apply, the threat of these stereotypes can be sharply felt and, in several ways, hampers their achievement” (p. 614).

Cross (1991) addresses this important topic in his work on the five stages of Black Identity Development. In his discussion on the Pre-encounter stage in *Spotlight, or Race Image Anxiety*, he describes the approach taken by many of the students with regard to negative racial stereotyping:

Pre-encounter Blacks do not believe in these stereotypes, they are often overly sensitive to the fact that many White people do believe in them. This can lead to hypersensitivity toward racial issues in which

one is constantly on the lookout for any negative portrayal of Blacks” (p. 155).

As stated earlier, this is the first stage in what Cross describes as Black Identity Development, and the threat of representing the negative stereotype of Black intellectual ability may be particularly stressful in this stage.

Based on Cross’ description of the five stages of Black Identity Development, one can be vulnerable at any stage in a particular moment of developmental transition. Tatum (1997) adds that:

Transition to the encounter stage is typically precipitated by an event or series of events that force the young person to acknowledge the personal impact of racism. As the result of a new and heightened awareness of the significance of race, the individual begins to grapple with what it means to be a member of a group targeted by racism. (p. 55)

This suggests that when an individual is simultaneously trying to engage as a learner and dispel popular negative social myths about his or her intellectual ability, learning is strained and depreciated by the stress brought on by this fear.

Researchers have also found that it is not the students who take their learning for granted who experience this in the most traumatic way; it is, rather, those who are the most serious about their learning who are impacted

by this phenomenon. Steele (1999) refers to the worry about being judged based on an erroneous race-based myth about African-American students' intellectual inferiority. Steele continues, arguing that students with stronger academic skills are more susceptible to stereotype threat.

Dweck's (2000) research supports this view that students who are focused on performance goals are most vulnerable to this type of threat. "Recent research suggests that it is when they are focused on the negative – when they are focused on the possibility of failure and their need to avoid it" (p. 19) is when performance drops. This threat places students in a painful situation, and in some cases students choose to disengage, or psychologically divest, from the environment that creates that feeling. "Pain is lessened by ceasing to identify with the part of life in which the pain occurs" (Perry et al., 2003, p. 123). When stereotype threat affects school life, disidentification is a high price to pay for psychic comfort: "Negotiating identity as a member of a cultural group in opposition to which Whiteness has been defined is problematic" (Perry et al., 2003, p.106). Steele (1999) refers to the students most deeply impacted by this threat as the "vanguard" of these groups, those have achieved success, those with high self-esteem and high levels of motivation. They dare to enter the domain and challenge the stereotypes initially. However, over time they can be overcome by the threat.

Steele (1997) writes: "as schooling progresses and the obstacles of structure and stereotype threat take their cumulative toll, more of this vanguard will likely be pressured into the ranks of the unidentified" (p. 164). Although, some Blacks succeed, it is however, at a high identity cost. "According to these researchers, Black students who perform at high levels often are ostracized by their peers as traitors and 'sell outs,' and are compelled to adopt a 'raceless' persona to avoid the stigma associated with membership in their racial groups (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Goodlad, et al. 1994).

Ogbu (1984) points to a continuum of responses developed by African-American youth when trying to co-exist in an environment that they do not feel is inherently supportive of them, and in which, they must nonetheless depend on to move ahead: "A survey of ethnographic literature and related works suggests that academically successful Black youths can be categorized according to the types of secondary strategies they use. The categories of successful Black youths include the following: *assimilators*, *emissaries*, *alternators*, *regulars*, and *ambivalents*" (Goodlad et al. 1994, p. 66). Ogbu (1984) argues that *assimilators* make a conscious decision to rebuff Black culture and in some cases repudiate a Black cultural frame of reference in favor of the White cultural frame of reference. They believe they must do this to be successful, and they even give up their membership in Black peer

groups and the Black community (p. 66). These Black youth are seen to go out of their way to avoid interactions with other Blacks and reject the notion that they need to connect with other Blacks in any formal or informal way to be happy or succeed. In contrast, "*Emissaries* are youths who play down Black identity and cultural frame of reference in order to succeed in school and in mainstream institutions by mainstream criteria, but they do not reject Black culture and identity." Ogbu (1984) "Do your Black thing but know the White man's game." *Alternators* make an effort to assimilate, however; they are accommodating to what White culture expects from them. "These students do not reject Black cultural frame of reference or identity, but elect to play by the rules of "the system." They take the "When in Rome, do as the Romans." *Regulars* are students who know how to get along with everyone, that includes street culture, they know how to stay out of trouble, and they do this with the ability to camouflage. *Ambivalents* are caught in the middle and want to be liked and accepted by their peers and they want to do well in school, and this dissonance can cause them to be erratic in their success, depending on what need is being fed the most" (p. 67).

Ogbu presents these as secondary coping strategies that are used by Black students in order to "camouflage" their desire to achieve academically in the face of pressure from other Black students perform poorly or do the minimum in school. While students often put peer pressure on one another,

this broad generalization about Black students and their lack of engagement academically has not been validated on a large scale. The driving force for developing coping strategies may have more to do with reacting to negative descriptors or academic racial profiling of Black students. These coping mechanisms are observed by research to reject the White middle-class characteristics and standards of who is considered smart, how to behave, what music to listen to, how to speak, and what to wear. These coping strategies may include illuminating nondominant cultural values held by students, and may be adopted in an effort to reconcile moments related to adolescent and racial identity development.

Carter (2005) in *Keepin' It Real* describes the students in her study through the lens of what she calls Cultural Mainstreamers, Cultural Straddlers, or Noncompliant Believers:

Cultural mainstreamers emphasize both the similarities between racial and ethnic minority groups and Whites and the incorporation of the former into the opportunity structure. They expect group members to act according to traditional assimilationist values, which call for individuals from minority groups to accommodate and ultimately be absorbed into American schools, workplaces and communities. (Park, 1950; Gordon 1964; p. 28)

Carter argues that “Cultural mainstreamers accept the ideology that nondominant group members should be culturally, socially, economically, and politically assimilated” (p. 29). In contrast, the third category, “Noncompliant believers, while understanding what cultural behaviors lead to academic, social, an economic success, favor their own cultural presentations (for example, “Black” or “Puerto Rican”) and exert little effort to adapt to the cultural prescriptions of the school and White society. . . . “The term noncompliant does not signify anti-intellectualism or low achievement, which much oppositional culture theory seems to suggest” (p. 29). Rather,

Noncompliance, as I came to understand it from these youths, is a form of challenge of cultural practices that are tacitly understood to be the codes and symbols of intelligence success, knowledge and good cultural conduct “. . . Noncompliant believers often subscribe to the functional aspects of a good education, but they slip through the cracks because they comport themselves differently and do not view cultural assimilation as a prerequisite for achievement” (p. 30).

Carter argues that “Cultural straddlers are characterized by bicultural perspectives; they are strategic movers across the cultural spheres. They range in nature from students who ‘play the game’ and embrace the cultural codes of both school and home community, to students who vocally criticize the schools’ ideology while still achieving well academically” (p. 30). While

there are some similarities in the coping strategies described by Ogbu and Carter, the driving force for employing these coping strategies is vastly different. Ogbu asserts that Black youth employ the strategies he describes in order to camouflage their desire to achieve academically from their peers, who for the most part do not value academic achievement. Carter asserts that for the most part Black students hold a high value for academic achievement, and are not investing in hiding that from their peers. They are employing the type of strategies she describes in order to deal with the conflicting messages about their culture in relation to the values of the dominant culture. What is important for this study is *if* these strategies are being employed by the African-American students in a small school environment designed to serve them as individuals better.

Some of these coping mechanisms grow from a legacy of racism and oppression and a desire to shape their own identity. Ogbu (1984) calls this "cultural inversion".

In the present context this term has two meanings. Broadly speaking, it refers to the various culturally approved ways that Black Americans express their opposition to White Americans. It also refers to specific forms of behavior, specific events, symbols, and meanings that Blacks regard as inappropriate for themselves because they are characteristic of White Americans. (p. 68)

Tatum (1997) writes: "the success of these efforts to escape Whiteness via people of color depends in part on the racial identity development of the people of color involved." In the example of Black students seated together in the school cafeteria, Tatum explains: "If they are in the encounter or immersion/emersion stages, they are not likely to be interested in cultivating White friendships" (p. 107). This lack of interest is due to these particular stages of Black identity development as they draw individuals into deep examination of personal experiences related to race.

At the same time, Ogbu (1994) Blacks approve and emphasize other forms of behavior and other events, symbols, and meanings as more appropriate for themselves because these are not part of the White American way of life" (Goodlad et al., p. 63). As Tatum (1997) suggests: "We all must be able to embrace who we are in terms of our racial and cultural heritage, not in terms of assumed superiority or inferiority, but as an integral part of our daily experience in which we can take pride" (p. 107). This includes recognizing resources particular to one's culture: "While many poor, African-American students have little familiarity with the dominant society's body of cultural know-how, they, nonetheless, possess cultural capital. However, "instead of using it for long-term economic gain they use cultural capital to maintain group identity and distinctive cultural boundaries" (Carter, 2005, p. 49). The distinctive difference is that a value judgment is applied here which is based

on a devaluing of cultural characteristics and preferences based on socioeconomics and race: “Nondominant cultural capital consists of a set of tastes, appreciations, and understandings, such as preferences for particular linguistic, musical, and dress styles, and physical gestures used by low status groups members to gain ‘authentic’ cultural status positions in their respective communities” (p. 50). This form of capital is important and is used no differently than dominant cultural capital.

The issue here, however, is the cost associated with only investing in nondominant cultural capital. Take language for instance, Ray Rist reminds us that:

[T]he children whose language is considered defective are themselves viewed as defective. Spoken language has been shown to be one of the key means that teachers, like the corporate world, use to assess the intellect. There are doubts in the school adults’ minds about some children’s cognitive competence since they don’t “sound’ intelligent”.

(Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. 41)

These non-dominant ways of life, however are not anti-intellectual and devoid of a solid academic ideology. Gould (1999) argues that: “most deficiencies in performance among racial minorities stem not from their cultural attributes but from the ways in which these attributes are processed in dominant organizations” (Carter, 2005, p. 65). In many cases, these so-called

deficiencies are subjective assessments on the part of the dominant culture, and result in negative outcomes for marginalized individuals. According to A. Thernstrom and S. Thernstrom (2003): “The ‘cultural inheritance’ of African-Americans today is the product of a very long history of racial oppression—centuries of slavery, followed by disfranchisement, legally mandated segregation, and subordination in the Jim Crow South and intense racial prejudice in the North” (p. 121). Carter (2005) points to the study in which: “Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell (1998) found that Black students report more optimistic occupational expectations, view education as more important to their future, and maintain more pro-school attitudes than do their White counterparts” (p. 25). Yet there is a cost to non-dominant group membership: “Whether one succumbs to the devaluing pressures of the dominant culture or successfully resists them, the fact is that dealing with oppressive systems from the underside, regardless of the strategy, is physically and psychologically taxing” (p. 26).

The coping mechanisms employed by some African-American students described here may ring true in some environments. We should be reminded that they are situational and fluid, as is one’s identity. African-American youth may not fit these descriptions in the same manner in today’s academic settings, in particular in a setting that is designed to improve their academic outcomes.

In our attempts to transform schools, we are hopefully imparting a transformational impact on student educational experiences, and this includes identity and aspiration. Are these environments alleviating the need for African-American students to cope with messages about racial identity in ways described above? Youth of today are navigating a unique terrain, and entering their current daily school reality offers promise in answering this question. Inviting them to share their interpretation of their school environment and how they make sense of their school environment, and connect it to meaning, may offer possibilities for real academic engagement on the part of these students. Capturing this information in the daily moments they experience as they move through these environments is essential in supporting their educational success.

### *Dominant Cultural and Social Capital and Home Advantage*

A number of studies have found that ethnic minority families have uniformly high aspirations for their children (Haro, 1994; Delgado-Gaitan 1990; Steinberg, 1996). However, not all parents have the skills and resources to help their children realize these aspirations, as pointed out by Laureau and McNamara (1999) in "Moments of Social Inclusion and Exclusion: Race, Class, and Cultural Capital in Family-School Relationships." For one thing: "Low-income and minority parents often lack the cultural capital—knowledge

of how the system works—and social capital—access to important social networks—that play such an important role for middle-class White and Asian parents in supporting their children’s academic achievement” (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2001, p. 92). However, these parents maintain high expectations for their children’s academic performance.

Stanton-Salazar (1997) in *A Social Capital Framework for Understanding the Socialization of Racial Minority Children and Youths*, refers to Bourdieu’s theories for a more explicit description of these variables:

Bourdieu (1986) has argued that the laws governing the exchange of economic capital are applicable to human social relations in all their various forms. Thus, social capital 1) is cumulative, 2) possesses the capacity to produce profits or benefits in the social world, 3) is convertible into tangible resources or other forms of capital, and 4) possesses the capacity to reproduce itself in identical or in expanded form. (p. 10)

The use of this capital is contingent upon an individual knowing about, and having an understanding of how to activate these forms of capital to impact their access to structures of opportunity. Knowing how actions and reactions are coupled requires an understanding of what Stanton-Salazar calls “instrumental actions”. These are useful in navigating the institutional terrain.

Instrumental actions represent “the process by which individuals convert their social capital into institutional support for the express purpose of reaching certain goals” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 10). This means being aware of those individuals, or agents in the institution, who can help move one along the conveyor belt to their goals with a more effective trajectory than would be possible if left alone in that environment. Institutional agents have the ability to give or withhold knowledge. Stanton-Salazar further adds: “I would add that their power also comes from their ability to situate youth within resource rich social networks by actively manipulating the social and institutional forces that determine who shall ‘make it’ and who shall not” (Mehan et al., (1996). Six key forms of institutional support are described in Stanton-Salazar’s framework of knowledge associated with ascension within socialization into institutional discourses; they include bridging, or the process of acting as a human bridge to gatekeepers to social networks; advocacy and related forms of personalized intervention; role modeling; and the provision of emotional and moral support. The sixth one, institutional support, is the most complex because of the need for understanding on the part of all parties involved. The student has to be aware of the power and deference presented to those who are aware of the funds of knowledge support.

McDonough (1997) relates this awareness of the funds of knowledge to college choices:

[I]ndividual student behavior will be influenced by the flow and content of information and the school's explicit expectations that highlight or downplay specific options. These information flows and expectations are, in turn, based on assumptions about how familiar students are with basic information prerequisites, and specialized college choice vocabularies. (p. 10)

This social capital shows up in subtle and invisible ways, and in places inside and outside of the classroom; it also takes on many forms, such as “institutionally sanctioned discourses, academic task-specific knowledge, organizational/bureaucratic funds of knowledge, network development, technical funds of knowledge, knowledge of labor and educational markets and problem-solving knowledge” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 11). For instance, Stanton-Salazar describes a dominant discourse as one that is coded, that has insiders and outsiders, and whose origins are developed and sanctioned before children and youth reach the schoolhouse door: “Dominant discourse is sort of an ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (p. 12). He further points out that for low-status children and youth, opportunities for acquiring institutional discourses as well as consistent and routine access to other institutional knowledge forms are problematized by two key factors.

The first of these factors pertains to the difficulties these children and youth experience in their receptivity to such knowledge: “whether knowledge is interpretable and the second is whether [knowledge] is perceived to be meaningful and relevant to one’s experiences and anticipated life chances” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 12). There has to be a consciousness about the need to investigate and cultivate this institutional knowledge. McDonough (1997), quoting Bourdieu (1977a), defines “Cultural capital as that property that middle and upper class families transmit to their offspring which substitutes for or supplements the transmission of economic capital as a means of maintaining class status and privilege across generations” (p. 8). According to McDonough, even an awareness of this system does not afford one access, especially in communities that deny the existence of such systems: “Cultural capital is precisely that knowledge that elites value yet schools do not teach” (p. 9). And yet, when middle-class parents and students activate this capital, teachers and administrators recognize it.

For others, low-income and minority students, the lack of awareness of how this system works proves more exclusionary. Not knowing that they themselves do not know about the coding of the institutional discourse makes it problematic for them to interpret and therefore engage meaningfully. How are these students able to understand that the dominant discourse is being used? In some cases, there is an intuition, and in some instances, an

observance that helps students gain awareness of the power of dialogue. For many it is language, vocabulary and intonation. In any case, “such decoding requires either an explicit or implicit understanding that the rules governing social advancement, particularly the official assessment of ‘having scholastic ability’ have much to do with acquiring and exhibiting the dominant discourse in social interaction” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Over time, and following reflection on cumulative experiences, students frequently find ways to cope, such as seeking out vocabulary-building resources and reflections with others who are experiencing the same puzzling feelings of not being connected to the dialogue.

Perry (2003) presents another view on Bourdieu's theory. She has coupled the cultural capital theory with African-American society:

African-American children are afforded advantages if they possess not only cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu (dispositions, tastes, values, ‘*habits*’, institutionalized as the culture of power), but also a subset of those cultural features that represent ‘Whiteness’ in the American imagination, which has been defined to counterpoint how ‘Blackness’ is imagined. (p. 75)

Stanton-Salazar (1997) describes it as follows:

For members of the subordinate groups to fully access these funds of knowledge and to use them productively for instrumental purposes

requires no less than tapping into the cultural logic of the dominant group –however arbitrary it may be. Decoding the system begins with ‘making sense’ of this cultural logic; it entails knowing how to role-play using the institution’s “identity kit. (p. 13)

Access to this “identity kit” is contingent on being a cultural insider, and one being prepared for power.

Delpit (1995) describes the culture of power: “if you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier” (p. 24). However, being told does not guarantee equality in the use of the culture of power, as it is inextricably tied to the culture of the dominant social group. The culture of power is, moreover, used to define cultural inequality for the non-dominant cultural groups.

Achieving cultural equality in our schools is a critical first step in redefining the culture of power: “A move toward cultural equality would challenge our conventional notions of the “educated” person who has simply absorbed the codes of success and intelligence created by dominant social groups” (Carter, 2005, p. 170).

The fact that this tool kit or “identity kit” is not openly recognized or even acknowledged is problematic for youth who come to school with an academic achievement ideology, while not exhibiting characteristics that are consistent with the middle-class features of an insider. In most instances, these students

are not in schools where the features and discourses that dominate their cultural experiences are perceived as preparing them for academic advancement. It thus becomes incumbent upon the student to scan the environment for individuals that seem approachable and supportive. These students, while making all the common adjustments associated with being adolescents, must engage in a screening process of their own, looking for markers of acceptance and genuine interest in their success in the adults in their educational experience. Stanton-Salazar & Dornburh (1995) write:

Given that working-class minority children and youths are structurally more dependent on non-familial institutional agents for various forms of institutional support, the problematics of interweaving extended trust and solidarity become ever so salient, especially because in the absence of such solidarity, institutional support rarely occurs" (p. 17).

Recognizing the need to engage in scanning for particularly supportive individuals in order to build trust and safety is required if a student is to become successful. The notion that this could help decode the dominant discourse may not, however, be something these students have an awareness about. However, they are mindful if someone exhibits a behavior or a welcoming and supportive gesture to warrant greater inquiry. If the individual truly is a bridge builder to the gatekeeper domain, the student may start to begin decoding this domain and become aware of its power.

It often takes an entire semester to build the kind of trust and rapport that enables students to actively seek help. It would seem, therefore, that trust and attachment, when they do occur, essentially require some form of resistance to the social order, the necessity of pretending as if things were different, together with a self-induced mindset that represses the awareness that the relationship is fundamentally noncommittal and transitory. (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 19)

The fact that many students of color naturally and subconsciously engage in this scanning in an attempt to cross cultural borders should not be overlooked when we look at indicators of future success. This is a coping and adaptation skill that would be valued in any other setting associated with high achieving and valued members of any team or learning community. Stanton-Salazar continues:

Although it is possible for many of these young people to learn to navigate these borders, without proper intervention (or apprenticeship) the personal and psychic costs of crossing stressful borders can be great, cumulative, and, in terms of young people's human and social development, either inhibitive or degenerative. (p. 22)

This activity is inhibitive or degenerative because of the identity costs associated with the border crossing.

It implies a constellation of super-psychic abilities, such as a tolerance for contradiction and ambiguity; an ability to juggle complex and disparate social identities, and to code-switch linguistically in different cultural settings; and ability to act instrumentally in one setting, expressively in another, and both instrumentally and expressively in still another; and in total, an ability to operate in a culturally pluralistic mode while maintaining self-regard. (Stanton-Salazar, p. 27)

These students must make sense and connect to meaning that supports and values all that they are by virtue of their birth, honor that, and then move to incorporate that which in many instances looks at them as inferior and suspect for being in the room, for daring to cross the border.

Stanton-Salazar quotes Boykin (1986) to describe the complexity of this reality: “multiple border reality in this discussion of the socialization of African-American children, casting it in terms of “the interplay among three realms of experiential negotiation; the mainstream experience, the minority experience, and the Black cultural experience,” phrased succinctly as “the triple quandary” (p. 65). “Each realm of experience corresponds to a world dictating a distinctive socialization agenda” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 22).

Pollack (2004) writes:

Schools are key institutions where Americans ‘make each other racial’ (Olson, 1997) they are central places for forming racial ‘identities,’ but

they are key places where we rank, sort, order, and differently equip our children along “racial” lines even as we hope for schooling to be the great societal equalizer. (p. 4)

Equalization should not burden one group of students with the task of embracing and decoding the cultural norms of another group. Tatum (1997) asserts the following regarding the power of dominant group cultural capital: “The truth is that the dominants do not really know what the experience of the subordinates is. In contrast, the subordinates are very well informed about the dominants” (p. 24). This learning about cultural capital of non-dominant groups should be undertaken by all, “if these youth are to embrace multiple forms of cultural capital, then it will require educators to embrace multiple cultural capitals, too” (Carter, 2005, p. 164).

*Dominant Cultural Values, Social Reproduction and the Impact on Minority Students in Small Schools*

The vestiges of racism and social reproduction continue to dominate minority and low-income student realities in our schools. As stated earlier, the transformation to small learning communities is an attempt to correct some of the damage that has been a consequence of racism and social reproduction in our schools. This idea is not new, and we have evidence of that in Jay

McLeod's study presented in 1995 in, *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*.

The stubborn reality of social reproduction is evidenced, even in the face of the academic achievement ideology held by African-American students in McLeod's study. He studied two groups of young men living in a Chicago low-income housing project. One group of boys was low-income White boys, the Hallway Hangers, and the other was a group of low-income Black boys, the Brothers. These two groups hold opposite academic ideologies and incorporate those ideologies into daily life at school. There were a number of variables that contributed to the outcomes of these youth. The differential success outcomes between the Brothers and the Hallway Hangers were a consequence of the opportunity structure, culture, individual agency and racism. These variables converge differently for both groups, but all of these variables are present and account for how the lives of these groups of young men evolved.

Looking at the opportunity structure first: it was designed to create a hierarchy in this country based on social class standing. Those who have access to power and privilege build a legacy for their successors to maintain access to the varied levels of education, careers, and life choices they have enjoyed. In *Preparing for Power America's Elite Boarding Schools*, Hooper (1971) writes: "there is an important difference between 'educational amount'

and 'educational route'. Where one goes to school can be very important in determining his or her life-styles and life chances". Along these same lines, Collins (1979) has argued: "that the most fundamental purpose of education is to prepare students for social and cultural position within society" (Crookson & Persell, 1985, p. 16).

Schools play a critical role in this evolution, and the deterministic viewpoint can be validated to some degree when looking at the Brothers' and the Hallway Hangers' experiences with the school system. MacLeod refers to Bowles and Gintis, who represent the economic determinist perspective on the structure of schooling in the United States: "In short, the social relations of the school reflect those of the capitalist mode of production; through its institutional relationships, the system of education in the United States tailors the self-concepts, aspirations, and social class identifications of individuals to the requirements of the social division of labor" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). This argument then counters the notion that converting a large comprehensive high schools into small schools will result in any difference in upward social mobility for these students. Ogbu (1978) notes that:

[S]chools are agents of a caste society that assigns blacks and whites different positions in adult life requiring different levels of education and skills. So long as the schools remain agents of the caste system, there

is no guarantee that they will do better in educating black children under a reorganized, alternative education system. (p. 51)

Ogbu (1978) further argues:

So long as caste remains the principle of social organization, no efforts to use the schools to equalize the social and occupational status of different minority and majority castes can succeed because the social system demands that both desirable and undesirable social and occupational positions be filled on an ascriptive basis. (p. 358)

In the case of the Brothers and the Hallway Hangers, both groups were asked to choose, without the benefit of deciphering the code on what their choices meant for their futures. Both groups of young men operated within an opportunity structure that did not support all students in living out the achievement ideology, so the structure holds part of the blame for the lack of success experienced by the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers: MacLeod (1995) adds that: "Even within the same school, argue Bowles and Gintis, educational tracks, which cater to different classes of students, emphasize different values" (p. 11). Individual agency and racism are dominant factors in the outcomes for the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers.

Both groups demonstrated individual agency in their choices for their futures. The Brothers, with their notions about how hard work and playing by the rules, demonstrate their internal locus of control. Individual agency on their

parts cannot, in the early years, be blamed for their lack of success. MacLeod points out that, “it should be obvious from this study that all these levels of analysis, the cultural and the structural play their part in the reproduction of social inequality” (p. 97). Once deconstructed, we see that race is a variable that trumps all variables. The problems currently associated with the large comprehensive high school include these cultural and structural challenges. Whether the recently formed small learning communities or academies continue to be racialized environments for students is critical to the success of small school transformation.

Capturing information from students regarding how they make meaning of how policy changes, structural changes, rigor and relevance of the curriculum, and relationships impact them is valuable. These variables are at the center of the debate on academic performance. We need to not only close the gap in achievement for students; we need to close the gap in adult understanding how the moments of time in the classroom are being interpreted by students. “Closing the achievement gap is as dependent on closing the ‘preparation gaps,’ ‘caring gaps,’ and ‘culture gaps’ as it is on any other factors. If we are prepared to listen, minority students can teach educators a lot about these gaps and how to close them” (Sadowski & Fowler-Finn, 2003. p. 35).

A number of researchers along with practitioners in the field are capturing student voices about their educational experiences. These researchers point to the legacy of social reproduction and maintain that our schools can be instigators of social change. Fine (2003) writes of the schools:

They can be repressive and toxic, and they can challenge social (in)justices by opening the doors that race and class hierarchies have glued shut. Schools typically reproduce brutal social stratifications, but occasionally create the very wisdom and youth and by youth that enables and even encourages challenge to social arrangements. Most schools serve as contexts that narrowly constrict identities of youth, but an important exception is that some schools wedge open opportunities for new selves to emerge. (p. 3).

Fine further argues that the practice of “silencing” must be challenged. She asserts that there is a choreographed effort to maintain the stratification through sanctioned undiscussables, as she has observed a conspicuous absence of dialogue about race, class, and inequality in the schools. Fine (2003) writes:

[I]t must be assumed that the practice of silencing in public schools do the following:

1. Preserve the ideology of equal opportunity and access while obscuring the unequal distribution of resources and outcomes.

2. Create within a system of service asymmetric power relations the impression of democracy and collaboration among “peers” (e.g. between White, middle-income school administrators and low-income Black and Hispanic parents or guardians).
3. Quiet student voices of difference and dissent so that such voices, when they burst forth, are rendered deviant and dangerous.
4. Remove from public discourse the tensions between (a) *promises* of mobility and the material realities of students’ lives; (b) explicit claims to democracy and implicit reinforcement of power asymmetries; (c) school as an ostensibly public sphere and the pollution wrought on them by private interests; and (d) the dominant language of equal educational opportunity versus the undeniable evidence of failure as a majority experience of low-income adolescents. (p. 15).

It is important to consider the viewpoint that schools are agents of social reproduction; what Fine is asserting here is that casting light on this topic and inviting dialogue on this subject may serve to challenge the mapping of social reproduction and the impact of dominant cultural values.

*Opportunities to Learn Reduced by Assumptions About the Value of Education*

Perry (2003) suggests that:

Indeed, the African-American intellectual tradition suggests that schooling for work is probably not transcendent enough, powerful enough, sufficient to sustain, in African-Americans as a historically oppressed group, the desire to achieve in school in our present society, where the ideology of Black intellectual inferiority still reigns. (p. 78)

The awareness of how the opportunity structure is shaped in conjunction with schooling can diminish goals for many. Ogbu (1984), however, suggests “racial stratification also involves the adaptive or coping responses of the minorities. Each of these components of racial stratification has two faces: instrumental and expressive barriers against the minorities, on the one hand, and the instrumental and expressive responses of the minorities, on the other”.

Ogbu describes these barriers:

Instrumental barriers are those that yield tangible gains for the dominant group, such as gains resulting from job, wage, and housing discrimination. Expressive barriers are those conscious and unconscious treatment of racial minorities by members of the dominant group that satisfies the latter’s psychological needs. They include scapegoating as well as personal, intellectual, and cultural derogation of the minorities” (Goodlad et al., 1994, p. 62).

There is an exception to this however, with regard to Asian students as noted by Noguera (2003): "For example, it is widely believed that Asian American students tend to do well academically because their culture emphasizes the importance of hard work and the pursuit of academic excellence (Lee, 1996; Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Takaki, 1989; 2003, p. 43). Asian American students are also viewed as valuing the institutionalized White or upper and working-class social systems more than other groups. In some instances, they are the beneficiaries of the "model minority" label that implies a high level of adoption of White upper- and working-class values and social skills.

The social skills learned in school have lifelong benefits, but those skills alone cannot shape the bodies of knowledge held in high esteem by society. The socialization that one gains through participation in the institutionalized system of education does, however, move society forward by mass communication of cultural myths, values and expectations: "Beyond defining and extending national culture, mass education defines almost the entire population as possessing this culture, as imbued with its meanings, and as having the rights implied by it" (Meyer, 1997, p. 70). McLaren (1986) in *"Making Catholics: The Ritual Production of Conformity in a Catholic Junior High School"* offers Gehrke's (1979) description of how socialization through ceremonies and rituals in the schools support socialization theory. She describes "rituals as a type of 'hidden curriculum' which socializes students

into the dominant order". Gherke also stresses that "rituals have a propitiatory function of soothing conflict and promoting harmony among students" (p. 58). Oakes (1985) states: "In other words, in preparing students for their lives in the real world, schools must socialize students in very particular ways. This socialization must include how students feel about themselves, about schools and what they can expect in the future" (p. 119).

The problem is that this socialization is biased by middle-class White social values. This is inherently detrimental to students who do not fit that profile: "A great deal of research on teaching has shown that educators often equate differences (such as in culture, language, or race) with intellectual deficiencies and that such beliefs often have a profound influence on the expectations that are held toward students (Banks, 1981, Davidman & Davidman, 1994; Nieto, 1992, Noguera, 2003, p. 48). Noguera (2003) argues:

Cultural explanations are attractive because by placing the cause of disparities in achievement within the attitudes and behaviors of students and their families, they absolve schools and U.S. society generally from any responsibility for reversing academic trends. (p. 46)

This focus on nondominant cultural characteristics further implies an inherent deficiency in students of color and in reality stifles the learning of educators. "It is even more troubling that because culture is treated as an overriding explanation of academic ability, we often have ignored other factors

that influence school performance and that we actually might be able to do something about” (p. 45).

Tapping into the self-talk or how students shape meaning out of their experiences relative to culture would be useful in understanding how they relate this to academic identity and aspiration. Stanton-Salazar (1997) writes: “Phelan and her associates define ‘world’ as the cultural knowledge and behaviors found within the boundaries of students’ particular families, peer groups, and schools,” with each world containing “values and beliefs, expectations, actions and emotional responses familiar to insiders” (p. 21). Tapping into these worlds could produce opportunities to learn for educators.

Multi-factorial sociocultural determinants further confound students’ individual experiences, perceptions, and values. As Obgu (1994) notes, other barriers erected because of assumptions about culture and the value for education include “the use of biased textbooks and biased curriculum, testing, classification, and tracking, differential treatment of Black children in the classroom and in the disciplinary situations, prejudiced attitudes and expectations of White students and White school personnel, and lack of adequate understanding of programs to deal with problems arising from cultural and language differences” (Goodlad et al., p. 66).

### *Summary*

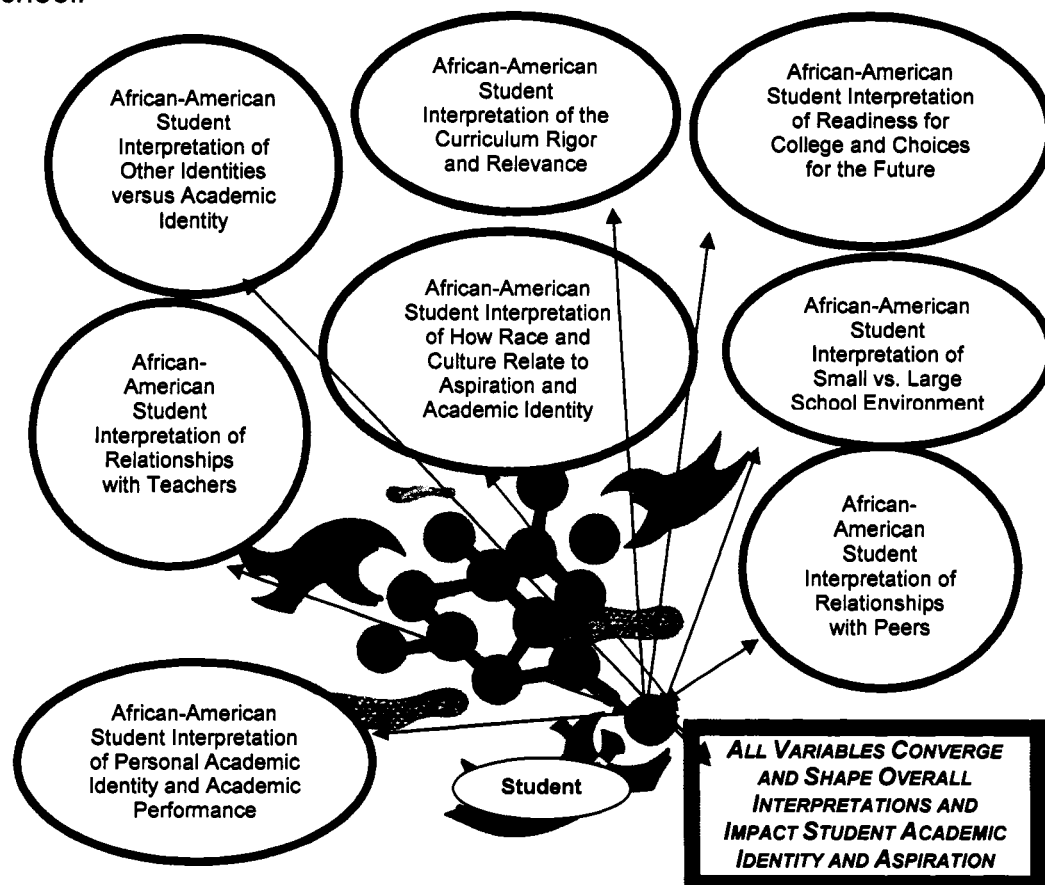
The outcomes of student achievement and behavior should be viewed through a lens of adult interactions: “regarding the attitudes and expectations of school officials, we know that teachers, administrators, and school staff, through their words, actions, and body language, have an enormous impact on the behavior and achievement of students” (Hrabowski, Maton, & Grief, 1998, p. 11). Strong belief systems on the part of educators can be powerful forces in creating educational outcomes. The myth that certain groups devalue education is most commonly attributed to African-Americans, and many educators carry this myth into their daily interactions with students and families. “If young people are exposed to images of African-American academic achievement in their early years, they will not have to define school achievement as something for Whites only. They will know that there is a long history of Black intellectual achievement” (Tatum, 1997, p. 65).

The conceptual framework (see Figure 1) represents the school environment rich with variables for interpretation by this group African-American students. These variables coincide with many of the gaps mentioned here and include interactions with people, the curriculum, messages about dominant and nondominant culture, and co-curricular experiences. In Carter’s (2005) words: “To ignore roles and values of

nondominant cultures engenders a distortion of the goals and aspirations of many African-American and Latino students” (p. 9). Students are consumers of these variables and, in making sense of them, they inextricably act on their personal aspirations and academic identity.

This framework represents the connections between variables that are uniquely experienced by each student and which shape their individual interpretation of their daily moments at school. The development of one’s academic identity is cultivated to varying degrees at school, and the impact that teachers, peers, curriculum, messages about race, culture and ability have in shaping that identity is powerful. Each one of these variables acts in concert with the others, and also singularly. Depending on how the student interprets the messages related to these variables, these variables may dominate how a student sees himself or herself as a learner. They can also impact student engagement and attachment to school.

This conceptual framework depicts some of the interrelated factors that exist in the school context and are equally important. All elements are connected in various ways and at various times, in a non-linear fashion. Each is a unique feature of the lived experiences African-American students in each small school.



*Figure 1 Factors Contributing To African-American Student Academic Identity Aspiration in a Small School Conversion Conceptual Framework*

## Chapter III

### Methodology

A field-based qualitative study was conducted to learn how African-American students were making sense of their lived daily school experiences in each small academy at Conversion High School. The interviews began by introducing the participants to the term “academic identity” in order to draw them into a narrow focus and reflection on who they were in their daily lives in their classroom and as learner at school. The interviews prompted students to offer their perceptions about their academic self and how that self was being engaged daily in their school life inside the classroom, among their peers, with their teachers, and by the curriculum. The names of the students, their academies, and their high school were changed to maintain confidentiality.

#### *Description of Participants*

The 13 student participants who agreed to be in this study come from each of the five academies that enroll no more than 400 students: Thrive, Galaxy, Legacy, Bridge, and Explorer at Conversion High School.

The goal was to include two students from each academy; however, because of scheduling conflicts for a couple of the students, more students from three of the academies were recruited, which resulted in three student participants from three of the academies.

Table 4:

*Description of Participants  
Students By Name, Grade and Academy*

Girls	Academy	Grade		Boys	Academy	Grade
Myra	Thrive	12th		John	Thrive	12th
Crystal	Thrive	11th		Skylar	Galaxy	12th
Amy	Galaxy	12th		Ronald	Legacy	11th
Stephanie	Legacy	11th		Tony	Explorer	11th
Kellie	Explorer	12th		Brian	Bridge	11th
Anita	Explorer	11th		Michael	Bridge	12th
Linda	Bridge	12th				

Each of the participants volunteered to participate upon hearing a presentation about the study. Because these students self-selected into the study there is no assumption that they are a random representative sample of African-American 11th and 12th grade students at Conversion High School. Further, a requirement that the study participants be African-American students who were enrolled at Conversion High School since the 9th grade represents a unique characteristic of the sample.

The interview questions focused on what impact their small learning community, also known as a small school academy, was having on their

academic identity and personal aspirations. They were coached to become critical observers as they matriculated through this purposefully transformed small learning environment, an environment aimed at their particular academic success as African-American students (Interview questions, see Appendix D). The study required that individual students talk about their feelings related to school and interpretations of what was uppermost in their minds, daily as a learner.

All of the interviews took place in a portable classroom at Conversion High School. This room was located directly across the street from the school, and one of the academies, Galaxy, held classes in an adjacent room. The room was not being used and resembled a student lounge with a sofa, tables, chairs, and a couple of computers. The students were reminded that these interviews were confidential and the room could be accessed from the street, so students were able to come and go with ease.

Each student was given the set of interview questions and told that the purpose of the questions was to help capture their perceptions about their daily lived experiences within Conversion High School. Each student was given a journal and asked to take a few minutes before each meeting to review the interview questions and think about how they were feeling about their daily school life before they wrote in their journal. The journal entries were read

each week, after which the journal was returned to the student. Each interview was tape-recorded and each one lasted no more than 35 minutes.

Interviews were transcribed at the start of the 2006 spring semester, and they were completed during the following summer. A qualitative research software called NVIVO7 was used to assist in coding the participant responses. A document was constructed for each of the 13 students and the transcribed interviews were saved within that document. Upon completion, each document was exported to the NVIVO7 software and coded through a cut-and-paste process. This process included creating folders called nodes that were named for each variable being isolated for analysis. These included talk about, Academic Identity, Aspirations, Small versus Large Environment, Relationships with Teachers, Relationships with Peers, Curriculum Rigor and Relevance, Academy Model, Obstacles to Success, Other Identities, Readiness for College/Future, Student Labels, Student Schedules, Environment at Conversion High School, and Race and Culture and Academic Performance. All student responses corresponding with a node were captured under that node for analysis. This presented the opportunity to uncover themes in the participants' interviews collectively as well as individually.

The students were individually interviewed once a week over the course of the spring semester, and each student talked aloud and reflected with me about how he or she describe his or her academic identity and how

that academic self converges with the school environment during the school day. Particularly, I wanted to learn if this description of academic self or academic identity became more prominent in their minds, what messages that academic identity was receiving, and whether that was different since the restructuring of the school into small academies.

### *Research Questions*

Over the course of the spring 2006 semester, I engaged the students in interviews about the following:

- How is the daily school environment supporting or challenging his or her aspirations related to their academic self?
- What are some of the impediments to student aspirations for college?
- What are some of the supports for student aspirations for the future in relation to their daily school encounters?
- What social and cultural factors influence his or her aspirations and identity at school?
- What messages does he or she encounter about his or her academic identity?
- Does he or she plan on going to college? Why or why not?

Through journal entries and interviews, these students revealed their perceptions on all of these issues. Capturing the lived experience of this cohort of students was key to understanding the impact this learning environment was having on them. The case study interview method was used, since the qualitative experience I hoped to capture was the product of a series of interview questions that prompted richer and deeper personal reflections. As Patton (2002) writes: "We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe." Through the interview process and journaling process, I learned how students have organized meanings about their current academic practices, and their connection to whatever they plan on pursuing in the future. Patton further notes: "We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world" (p. 278). A qualitative case study approach allows me to grasp the realities that were taking place according to these students.

The set of interview questions was aimed at eliciting the students' perspectives about their schoolwork, about their daily interactions with educators and their peers, and about the shaping of their school daily experiences. This was the theme of each interview conducted. The same questions were asked of each respondent during the semi-structured interview. The interview discussions did "remain free to build a conversation within a particular subject area" (Patton, 2002, p. 283). Students were

observed at the school site to understand the ethos and climate that lives there.

Learning how these students made sense of their daily school experiences as they attempted to achieve their personal goals was the focal point. Our interviews touched on how they interpreted being in a smaller school, and whether being there was meaningful to them. Student shared their personal aspirations and their feelings about how the school classroom and the learning environment at the school impacts those aspirations. They were guided to these topics to uncover deeper observations. Patton adds that: “the interview guide model [is] employed with the goal of keeping interactions focused but allowing individual perspectives and experiences to emerge” (p. 283). Because the focus is on how African-American students are attaching meaning and making sense of their school experiences, their academic identity and aspirations, and of the organization of guidance in the academies in their school, race is being held constant.

### *Selection of Participants*

This study is focused on capturing in-depth African-American student interpretations about their unique daily moments in a newly formed urban small school. The case study approach employed here is used to offer suggestions about what these interpretations may offer with regard to this

subject matter. The experiences of the participants are unique, and I do not attempt to generalize to African-American student experiences in all small schools. The school in this study is, socio-economically, one of the most diverse, a fact which offers me an opportunity to study African-American students from a variety of economic backgrounds. There are five academies, each with no more than 400 students enrolled. This sample included at least two students from each academy, who are in the eleventh or twelfth grade and had been enrolled at Conversion High School since the ninth grade. This gave me a minimum of ten participants; however, in some cases three students from one academy volunteered, and this brought my participant total to 13 students. There was an attempt to make all African-American students in the eleventh and twelfth grades aware of the opportunity to participate in the study. This was done through announcements at assemblies, classroom visits to each academy, and being present during first and second lunch periods daily.

The population that showed interest in being in the study was screened for variables that included being on grade level according to credits, being enrolled in this school since ninth grade, so that they were enrolled pre- and post-restructuring. Parents signed consent forms and students signed assent forms to be in the study. Each student made a commitment to meet with me weekly or four different times during the semester. Each student was given a

journal and agreed to reflect on the interview questions and our interviews, and to share that information with me. Boys and girls were invited to participate in this case study. This was important, as their variable perceptions add richness to the interpretations of the lived experiences of African-American students in this newly transformed small school. Capturing this richness in experiences will be achieved through the case study method.

The case study method creates an entrée into deep personal exploration and personal reflection. This study will illuminate how some students are interpreting the messages being sent by their transition to a small school environment; it will capture their interpretation of this prescription of a small academy model for their higher personal academic performance and higher aspirations, including college attendance.

The interviews will create a space for the students' voice to offer feedback on whether this is the right prescription for them. Case study research, as stated by Merriam (1998), is particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive. It is particularistic because it focuses on one person or social unit. In this case, a cohort of African-American students is the focus of the study, with specific attention given to their academic identity and aspirations in a high school recently transformed into small academies. A case study is also descriptive because the result is an intense, highly textured representation of the lived experiences of these students. A case study is heuristic because it

can lead to discovering how these students are understanding and creating meaning related to messages about their academic identity in their school environment. The case study is also inductive because it may offer explanations that can be incorporated when more generalized situations are being studied.

<p>Table 5:</p> <p><i>Research Strategies and Implementation</i></p> <p><i>African-American Student Academic Identity and Aspiration</i></p> <p><i>Connection to Small School Conversion</i></p>		
<p><b>Research questions</b></p> <p>How is this environment supporting or challenging their aspirations?</p> <p>What are some of the impediments to student aspirations for college?</p> <p>What are some of the supports for student aspirations for the future?</p> <p>What social, cultural and school factors influence his or her aspirations?</p> <p>What messages does he or she encounter about his or her academic identity?</p> <p>Does he or she plan to go to college? Why or why not?</p>	<p><b>Selection of Participants</b></p> <p><b>Approval To Conduct Research</b></p> <p>Researcher presents all documentation required by the University of Washington and the School District for consideration.</p> <p><b>Student Recruitment</b></p> <p>The opportunity to participate in the study is presented at the school with the permission of teachers, during the lunch hour in 10-minute presentations to all first- and second-period English classes where 11th and 12th grade students are enrolled.</p> <p>Students and parents sign the forms to allow the method of investigation to take place at a mutually agreeable time over the course of the semester.</p>	<p><b>Methods Used To Engage Students in Dialogue About Their Experiences Pre- and Post-School Conversion</b></p> <p><b>Study Procedures</b></p> <p><b><u>Personal Interview:</u></b></p> <p>Once a week (4 weeks minimum), 35 minutes maximum.</p> <p>Tape-recorded.</p> <p><b><u>Journal Entry (Journal Provided)</u></b></p> <p>Scripted instructions for content focused on research topic.</p>

The case-study method used here will create the opportunity to capture great depth about the moments of critical observation of a sample of the student body over time. It will not include the entire student body. The data gathered here will question the theory of practice concerning the unique personal benefits of being in a small learning community for African-American students. Therefore, the study will be limited in generalizability and may offer suggestions that can be incorporated when more generalized situations are being studied.

#### Analytical Strategy and Procedures

The case-study format included both one-on-one interviews and journal reviews over the course of the semester. Questions about the students' future goals, to see if they are using the language of college aspirants, were also included.

The lived experience of this cohort of students was the unit of analysis. The analysis was ethno-methodological in nature, and maintained a "focus on the interactionally unfolding features of social settings, treating talk and interaction as topics for analysis rather than as mere communications about more sociologically important underlying phenomena" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 143). The findings were analyzed by looking for themes related to what the students were feeling about life at school, to challenges they are

grappling with regarding how to navigate the system, to representing their self-concept, their academic identity, their academic achievement, and college aspiration. By creating a space for students to talk out loud about their experiences, capturing their authentic reflections on their school setting was achieved.

The steps taken to analyze the interview transcripts included mapping participant responses to specific interview questions and discussions about their interpretation of life at school. Each of the 13 transcripts was analyzed independently to capture each individual student's overall interpretation of his or her daily lived experiences in school that related to the interview questions, journaling, and discussions. This included discussions about small versus large schools; personal academic performance; personal aspirations; messages about race and culture; environment at Conversion High School regarding academic identity; peer relations and teacher relations; rigor and relevance of the curriculum; and plans for the future. Participant responses related to each of these discreet topic areas were grouped together to analyze the cohort's collective interpretations. This was done to uncover matching and divergent interpretations related to each specific topic being studied. This presented an opportunity to learn about the similarities and differences in the daily lived experiences individual students and offered information about the differences in academies according to student experiences.

### Means of Ensuring Validity and Reliability in Study Design

The interviews were conducted at the school site where these students are matriculating. A set of interview questions was developed, and each participant was prompted to engage in dialogue based on the same initial prompt. The study was conducted in the high school setting, as this is where the school transformation is taking place. A great deal of emphasis was placed on what the students were doing right then in high school. The students were selected after an informal conversation about their impressions of their current school experience. If students were interested in participation, they and their parents had to complete a student assent form and the parent consent form.

Questions were posed with an emphasis on African-American student achievement and academic identity in their small school academy. With that as a backdrop, furthering the conversation in the high school setting seemed appropriate, as it is explicitly tied to the desired outcomes for these students' academic achievement and academic identity. The student body is representative of students that are currently underrepresented in higher education, and therefore represent a target group that is seen in the most needed school reform measures, small school conversion efforts, and seen to be in greatest need of early college awareness programs.

## Chapter IV

### Findings

African-American student perceptions and interpretations about the small schools at Conversion High School are presented here. The participants attend an urban high school in a mid-sized urban school district. The school enrolls 390 African-American students 9th through 12th grade, and has an 8.8% dropout rate. Being in the 11th or 12th grade and having attended Conversion High School since the 9th grade was also a requirement for participating in the study.

The dropout rate, coupled with the knowledge that poor and minority students are at higher risk for dropping out, suggests that the number of African-American students in the 11th and 12th grades will be smaller than their representation in the 9th and 10th grades. Thus, the 390 African-American students are not equally distributed with 97 students in each grade level, 9th through 12th grade. The student responses presented here offer the unique interpretations of 13 African-American boys and girls who volunteered to participate in this study, and thus there is no attempt to generalize to the larger population at the school, or all small schools.

The discussion begins with student perceptions about the connection between small schools and academic achievement. The discussion continues with student interpretations about the benefits of the academy model; about

the differences in academies; about their relationships with teachers and peers, about the rigor and relevance of the curriculum; and about the persistence of racial stereotypes in small schools.

There are seven girls and six boys in the participant group (See Appendix D). Seven students were in the 12th grade and six were in the 11th grade at the time of the study. Three of the boys, Skyley, 12th grade, Galaxy Academy; Tony, 11th grade, Explorer Academy; and Brian, 11th grade, Bridge Academy are varsity basketball players. Two students, Myra, 12th grade, Thrive Academy, and John 12th grade, Thrive Academy are formally elected leaders, namely Associated Student Body President and Associated Student Body Vice President, respectively. The remaining students are not serving in any formal leadership capacity; however, one student, Michael, 12th grade, Bridge Academy, sees himself as an informal leader and as a self-proclaimed most popular person in the school; he also reports that the formal leadership consults with him regularly.

One student, Brian, 11th grade, Bridge Academy, is the only student in this study who has a father and mother that graduated from college. Four students, Crystal, 11th grade, Thrive Academy; Anita, 11th grade, Explorer Academy; Tony, 11th grade, Explorer Academy; and John, 12th grade, Thrive Academy, have a mother who graduated from college. The remaining students' parents do not have a college degree. Nine, or 60%, of the

participants are in two-parent homes. Eight students reported that they work after school. The majority work in fast food restaurants, two reported they work at school, and one works for a bank.

Three of the 12th grade students, Myra, John and Skyler had taken the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), and two 12th grade students, Michael and Linda, stated they plan to attend four-year colleges in the fall and have not taken the SAT or American College Test (ACT); the other two 12th grade students, Kellie and Amy, did not mention the SAT or ACT. All participants have visited at least one college campus (see the chart in Appendix D for greater details on the profiles of the participants).

### *Student Perceptions About the Connection Between Small School*

#### *Conversion and Academic Achievement*

The students in this study saw themselves as academically successful. Each stated their grade point average, ranging from 2.0–4.0. Each senior will be graduating, and each junior will be promoted to the 12th grade in the fall of 2006. When we began talking about why the larger high school formed small academies, only a couple of the students thought they knew why this change had occurred. However, they did not connect this change to their academic achievement. One stated that the conversion was done to get the Gates Foundation money another stated that it was so the students could be

managed better in small groups with better discipline. However, later on during the weekly interviews, this awareness changed as students began journaling and reflecting on discreet encounters related to the interview questions and discussions.

The discussion of student perceptions about the connection between the small school conversion and academic achievement will begin with the responses of the boys in this study. All of the young men stated that the college admittance rates and the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) data currently being cited does not point to them, but it points to students who came before them. These boys demonstrated a wide range in work ethic when it came to school. For example, at one extreme, Michael, a 12th grade boy mentioned that he sleeps in class and had even slept during the science portion of the WASL:

When we had to come all extra early for WASL, a matter of fact, I missed one day because I was sleeping. So I got into class and it was a science day and I went to sleep. I told the girl next to me to wake me up right before it was done and I did it real quick.

Michael was asked how he did on the WASL, and he shared the following: “I just – I like had like, if I would have got like, I think I missed like 5 points by passing science. If I would have passed science, I would have passed all four [areas].” Michael is in the Bridge Academy, which has the basketball class,

and he is proud of that. He is not an athlete, but his sister and brother who graduated from Conversion High School were varsity athletes. He stated that he knows his popularity comes from their legacy at the school, and he moves through the school in the spotlight because of this. He also feels that being an informal leader in the school, he is in the spotlight, and he has a duty to do well.

I have come to the conclusion that like since I was in the popular – like, I am popular and everything like, that like, is more everybody focuses on me more than like other kids to like succeed. And so it is not really like – it is kind of mandatory that you succeed when you are in the spotlight. If you don't it is kind of like, failure if you like, settled for second best. That is kind of like failure basically. Like, in this world in my environment, you can't just be like in the spotlight and just not shine. Once you are in the spotlight, you always have to shine. You always have to make sure you are always on point. You have to make sure everything is like goes, like ,everything connects like a puzzle.

Michael's sleeping in class and during the WASL implies that his academic identity may take a back seat to being popular. He stated that he is a good test taker and can handle the school work. It also implies that being in the spotlight in a positive manner does not necessarily intersect with academic performance for him. Although, in the 12th grade, Michael has not taken the

SAT or the ACT, and is applying to four-year institutions. His schedule includes Late Arrival (which equates to no class during first period), English, International Trade, Marketing, Student Store, and Basketball. So, in reality he only has three core classes in his last semester as a senior. He states that he has a 2.5 grade point average, and will graduate on time. He also makes it clear that he has a high value for education and understands how it can help him achieve his long-term goals.

All of the boys except Skyler, who is deeply invested in his academic performance, stated that they knew they were not doing their best, and they knew they could do better in school if they put forth more effort. This implies that these boys hold what Dweck (2000) calls an “incremental theory” about their intelligence, i.e., “intelligence is portrayed as something that can be increased through one’s efforts” (Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; p. 3). They did not make a connection to themselves or their efforts toward academic achievement to the conversion to small academies; they did not make any reference to achievement gap data.

For instance Brian, an 11th grade student in the Bridge Academy, earned a D grade in Chemistry in the fall semester. He openly shared that he did not seek help with Chemistry, because “the rest of the class is struggling, so the teacher should come out to help more.” Brian does not see his own initiative or lack of initiative here as a part of the problem, but he eventually

stated that he knows he should try harder and he feels that he could do the work if he did. Brian stated he has a 3.2 grade point average and is also a varsity basketball player. Upon further questioning he seemed to be invested in his academic performance. This was revealed when he was asked how he feels about getting a D grade in Chemistry and whether the opinion of his friends matters to him when it comes to grades. He stated, "it [getting a D grade] is a bad thing with me." The response promoted the idea that Brian's investment in his academic performance, while not as solid as Skyler's, is present. Later on in the interviews, after there was established language around academic identity, Brian was asked how he would describe himself; he stated, "an athlete and a scholar."

Ronald, an 11th grade student in Legacy Academy, on the other hand, has connected his own initiative to success: "artistic-wise, I am not very good but when it comes to computers I am mediocre. However, academic-wise everybody taught me that I am smart. I know I can do whatever I put my mind to in my work because like my sophomore year I didn't really get that many good grades. Half of them were failing and during my first semester of this year, I have gotten three As and three Bs."

Ronald went on to state how he saw the students' role in achieving academically when the gap in academic achievement among different groups of students had been alluded to: "The only way for that gap to close is if the

students try and close it themselves on their own free will. My mother always told me that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink." This was an attempt to uncover a connection to the small school conversion and student achievement in my interview with Ronald. Upon further reflection on the interview question, he offered this: "You said was there a difference between small schools and how Conversion used to be before all of this? I would say that there really isn't much of a difference except that you are getting more one-on-one with the teachers. Becoming easy for you to understand what the teachers are doing, or whatever." Having more one-on-one may represent significant change for some students and might impact the academic engagement for some African-American students. But for Ronald this statement is consistent with what he stated about his approach to school these days. While he thinks the academy model is a good one, he sees the student as instrumental, in whatever setting, for connecting with their teachers and doing their part in school.

John, a 12th grader in Thrive Academy, talked about his aspirations and indicated how he is aware of the messages about the low effort regarding academics that some perceive African-American students to be engaged in: "I try to not let that get to me. Because every person is different that is what makes us all unique. So my thing is I have a driving force that no matter what

I am going to get what I want. I guess that is how I have been raised that if I want something I am going to have to go get it.”

Tony, an 11th grader in Explorer Academy, seemed deeply invested in his identity as a varsity basketball player. His response hints that his motivation to do his school work is to stay eligible to play basketball, and so his mother will not be upset with him. His investment is measured by what Steinberg calls the “trouble-threshold”. This is, “the level of grade that they [students] thought would get them in trouble with their parents” (A. Thernstrom & S. Thernstrom, 2003. p. 145). When we talked about greater academic achievement and the small school conversion he did not initially see them as connected. However, Tony is motivated by external factors, playing sports and making his mother happy and has not connected to learning for the sake of learning and self development. While sports are important opportunities to develop discipline and focus, Tony has not made the connection to his academic success as personal development with value outside of sports. Tony was asked if the school recognizes him as a good athlete. He was quick to respond “yes.” When asked about his future goals and how they relate to school, he stated: “I just want to play basketball in college.” Although Tony is deeply wrapped up in his basketball future, he was able to offer this reflection on the academy model when asked if he thought it was good idea. “I guess it is we could always be around the same people and getting the same learning

environment so like you already know like the teachers and also like that. So you are used to the people around you so if you need help you can just go and ask them” he said. This suggests that the access to assistance from teachers is possibly facilitated better in the academy model.

Each of these six boys approached school differently, with, at one extreme, one seeing it as a means to play basketball, and others doing well, but they all knew they could do better for themselves. There was one boy who stood out as being engaged in his school day experience in the classroom and as being invested in learning for the sake of learning. Skyler, a 12<sup>th</sup>, grade boy, Galaxy Academy, and a varsity basketball player, in particular exhibited a strong work ethic; and he also saw school as personal self-development and understands that he needs good grades to get ahead in life. He was asked to describe himself as a student, and he answered the question in the following manner:

I am a good student compared to most of the students I see. I think they have their priorities mixed up. Some of them just really don't get it, I feel they really just don't – I feel they go to school and they just sit in class they do the work but they are not really taking anything in.

There was an attempt to go deeper with that line of questioning with Skyler and to capture his perception about African-American students. What this uncovered was that Skyler sees many Black students as more invested in

wearing “the \$200 Jordan’s” (Michael Jordan athletic shoes) and keeping up on the latest sports icons, and he believes this is encouraged by peers. Initially the interviews revealed that the boys see the structural changes, that is, breaking the students up into small academies, as something they have to cope with daily. However, they did not see themselves or their fellow students’ academic experience as a driver for the high school conversion. They did not interpret the change in school structure as being tied to assisting them with a richer academic experience.

The seven girls in this study presented a similar picture when sharing their perceptions about the high school conversion to small academies. The following excerpts from our interviews demonstrate their varied perceptions. Two of the girls, Myra and Crystal, in the Thrive Academy, the one that has the reputation of being where the “smart kids” are, exhibited a strong academic investment. At the time, Myra was in the 12th grade and Crystal was in the 11th grade. They talked in great detail about their pride over being in Thrive Academy, and about their focus on school, about their plans for the future, about how they choose their friends carefully, looking for fellow students with a similar work ethic. Myra offered this reflection on the things she and her friends are focused on with regard to school:

I have a friend named Nicole who, me and her, are always talking about school and college, because we work a lot and we are just slamming, we are

on a budget right now. Like we are always doing our budget in class and stuff like that. I helped her with some of her college applications and writing some of her essays.

Crystal shared similar reflections, when asked about how she connects her future to being in the Thrive Academy. She described talking about her future every day with her friends and how she knows being in Thrive helps her:

[W]e talk about how much we like our teachers and our classes now, and what school we want to go to; what we want to major in things like that. For the most part we are all pretty excited about it and we do talk about it a lot, especially at lunch.

Comments like these were consistent throughout my interviews with these two students in Thrive Academy.

Linda, 12th grade, Bridge Academy, and Amy, 12th grade, Galaxy Academy, presented somewhat fragile academic identities; the connection between the academy structure and academic achievement was not apparent to them. Linda, in particular, presents a demeanor of helplessness; she feels her destiny is not in her own hands and just goes along without challenging herself, for example, getting into more difficult classes that she feels will be better for her. Linda talked about her awareness that the classes she was taking were not challenging to her and her peers. She was aware that there is an academy labeled for smarter kids. She named Thrive Academy and

questioned rhetorically why she could not get into that academy. It should be noted that equity in course rigor in each academy is a specific attribute of a good small school, according to the Gates Foundation Theory of Practice. Linda felt that she could take on more challenging school work, and she talked about how she waits until the last minute to do assignments and still gets a good grade. She was in the 12th grade at the time of this study and mentioned that she could not get into classes she thought would be better for her, because the teachers would not allow it. She did not attempt a course change because she stated that "it would be too much paperwork for the counselors, and when they say that is it, well that is it." She did not exhibit a sense of personal initiative, but she seemed to be very observant of her surroundings.

Amy, 12th grade Galaxy Academy, is not highly engaged with her school life. Her academic performance has gone downhill this year. She stated that she understands the purpose of the small school conversion, but feels that it does not benefit students; in particular, she feels the teachers do not consult with each other on the workload. She feels that they all give heavy assignments at the same time. Amy talks with great pride about her past academic performance, but also talked about how being on MySpace, a popular social Internet website, for 4 hours at night when she knows she has homework, is not helping her achieve academically. She cannot explain how her awareness of this issue does not seem to prompt her to do better. She

feels that everything will just work out in the end for her, college and everything else. Amy has not connected success in school with her own agency. The ramifications of grades and of spending four hours on MySpace are unclear to her; she does not seem to be aware that these may have a direct impact on her future accomplishments. Amy and Michael, who mentioned sleeping in class earlier and did not take any college entrance exams, both stated a strong value for education. However, their behaviors are not consistent with this stated value.

Stephanie is an 11th grade girl in Legacy Academy. Her academic performance is important to her; however, like Tony above, she is focused on being able to play varsity basketball. Stephanie is in the Running Start program, which allows high school students to take classes at the community college and receive both college and high school credit. The program also allows students to take a test to demonstrate mastery of particular course content. If they pass the test, they do not have to take the course. Stephanie is trying to test out of most of her academic courses in order to be free to play ball.

[W]hen basketball season starts back up that is when it starts to get more difficult because they want me to take the classes that start from 3:00 – 4:00 at Clover Park but basketball is like 3:00 – 4:00. So that is why I take the Compass Test and each time I have taken it – I only took

it twice – the first time I got a score and then the second time I took it I bumped up each score for each test that I took. So I improved each time I have taken it so far. But if I keep taking it and improve then I can knock off those classes. So then that would kind of--I could do basketball. That is what I did this year so I could play basketball.

Stephanie receives strong encouragement from some of her teachers to make basketball a priority and mentioned that she was asked to consider changing schools if she does not make the team next year. This student is unique in this study by the fact that she is enrolled in the Legacy Academy and in Running Start. However, she initially presented a general disconnect from her high school. Later it was revealed that she is in Running Start because her parents strongly recommend it, and her father really wants her to play basketball.

Kellie is a senior in the Explorer Academy and plans to join the Air Force after she graduates. She feels that the military is the best way to get money for college. She plans to be a counselor, and when I pressed her on the connection to the small school conversion, she did not readily make a connection from the conversion to her college aspirations. She stated that her school life is not connected to her future goals:

I am hoping to be a counselor. I did want to be an English teacher but, like because I love English; I love books and I love reading and writing, but I think I want to help people more as a counselor.

Kellie stated that her family--her mother in particular is who came to mind when I asked about support for her aspirations.

The interview went on to focus on African-American students in this environment. Kellie shared her perception of how the environment at Conversion High School is, in her words, "impacting" the academic performance for Black students: "For academics I don't think anybody really acknowledges that we do good academically. We don't have many African-American students getting awards for academics." The next interview question specifically speaks to Black students' success. However, Kellie was persistent in her interpretation of the school structure being smaller, and maybe even better. However, the change in structure is not solidly challenging the notions of who is successful academically. This environment, in Kellie's assessment, is not creating new currency around being smart and African-American.

Anita is an 11th grade student in the Explorer Academy. She took great care with each of our interview and she stated that she really enjoyed the sessions. When it came to the benefits of the academy model, she had a great deal to say:

It is both good and bad, actually. You know if you are doing the same work over and over again you are going to get used to it eventually and if you have the same teachers over and over again you are going to get used to them and you are going to know their ways and their habits.

These perceptions about how African-American students are viewed by teachers and the dominant culture are consistent among these students and are, for them, the reality. These reflections are examples of how these 13 unique students see their school day life. The interviews had to remain focused on their school day. For these 13 students, their attention had to be drawn to the possible connection between academic identity and aspiration and their school lives.

African-American student interpretation of the connection between academic identity and aspiration is a variable in the conceptual framework presented earlier (see Figure 1). That is mentioned here because student awareness of the reason for the conversion could, on its own, serve to boost academic performance and aspiration. While the responses are varied, they suggest that the majority of the students in this study do not readily see their academic achievement at the center of the small school conversion effort.

*Interpretations of the Benefits and Challenges of the Academy Model*

Over the course of the semester the students were forthcoming with their opinions about the benefits and the drawbacks of their newly structured school environment. One common complaint was the inability to get to know fellow students and teachers outside of their academy. Once again, the seniors were at Conversion before the academy model was implemented and were retrofitted in. The seniors' viewpoint is important here, as they are the first students of the original high school to become enrolled in the academy structure, either by their choice or by administrator choice. The juniors were the first class to enter the academy structure as 9<sup>th</sup> graders. Several of the students, both juniors and seniors, stated they became bored with some teachers' style over time. Half students in this study gave examples of becoming frustrated with the complications presented when wanting a class that was not taught in the academy you chose or are assigned to. Michael, a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student, at the Bridge Academy, shared his experience trying to get a class in a different academy that he felt would benefit him and help him with his future goals as a businessman. This is his example of why he does not think the academy model is helping students in some cases:

Through my eyes I don't think it was very helpful, very much academically. International Trade [offered at another academy] is like a substitute for World Issues [offered at Bridge Academy]. I wanted to get

into International Trades because I want to know about what was going on like around the world actually. I don't want to learn history, I wanted to learn present history, like I want it to be able to like 10 years from now I want to be like I remember when we were talking about that in my senior International Trades class. And they weren't trying to let me in that class because I was a Bridge student.

Many of the students stated that changes in academy assignment were easily made if the teachers wanted it to happen. This supported the perception that the change to the academy model was for the benefit of the teachers. Upon further discussion, it was revealed that this happened mostly when it came to elective classes. A description of this type came from Crystal:

For French, I think they switched me and put me in like Auto Shop. And then for math they put me in Digi-tools or something. And they tried to put me back in accounting and I was like, I took accounting. And even though I didn't want to take that class because it is an elective, and I didn't want it, they put me in there anyways.

Initially, all but one student, Myra, 12th grade Thrive Academy, lamented the loss of connections with their friends who were now in other academies. As we progressed in our weekly interviews on the academy model, a different perspective started to emerge from all of the participants. For example, Crystal, who was initially not happy because she "didn't see her

people,” reflected on her daily experiences with her small-school peers and the closeness she feels to many of them: “it has been three years now, and over those years we have grown like basically brother and sisters with everybody.” Crystal went on to state that she felt this is an outgrowth of the small school environment: “Because I am one-on-one with everybody and so that way it is better for me to understand things I am not understanding.”

Over time Crystal discovered that she had a deeper appreciation for the small academies which outweighed the disconnect with some of her friends. As the interviews progressed, and students began to journal and reflect on moments related to our interviews, they began to modify their initial response to the question about the challenges and benefits of being in academies.

Anita is an 11th grade student in the Explorer Academy. She offered:

It is both good and bad, actually. You know if you are doing the same work over and over again you are going to get used to it eventually and if you have the same teachers over and over again you are going to get used to them and you are going to know their ways and their habits.

Which teacher I can get over on and which ones I have to actually do my work with.

The interview questions narrowed in on her perception of the structure and the benefits for African-American students. Anita offered the following:

In some ways I do think it is better for us. Because if you are in a smaller learning community you get certain attributes out of that small learning community like the teachers. The small group is the--you know the better they are going to know you so the more you are going to achieve unless you don't want to achieve. But I do think that they do connect because if you want to learn and if you want to achieve more than certain goals in life then you will go far.

Anita did go on to tell me that she has observed a difference in her behavior with her peers and teachers, and attributed this to the small school structure: "Because I see them more often and you eventually form a bond or relationship with these people so you do start to behave differently once you are in the small school."

Student reflections did move from one end of the scale to the other, however, some still had trouble understanding the benefits as personal. Skyler, 12th grade, Galaxy Academy, stated that he personally did not think the small school model was benefiting him. However, he could see benefits for other students who have all of their classes in one academy. He is a unique case because he had classes in several different academies. This was based on the fact that he needed certain classes to graduate. He was asked to share his class schedule, and he responded:

First Period I have AP Statistics, then 2nd I have Senior English, 3rd Period I have, well I had Computer Applications, but now I have Art; fourth Period I have World Problems; 5th Period I have Physics; and 6th Period and I have French 6.

He has a solid academic schedule and is also a varsity basketball player.

Below is part of the interview with Skyler about the academy model:

Well it is a good idea for some, but it just doesn't do anything for me. It hasn't changed – I have always had like good grades. And usually when I have a teacher I usually get to know them myself. It doesn't really help me in any way really. It is still a good idea, I like to know my teachers a little better.

As the interview proceeded, Skyler began to offer perceptions that differed slightly from his initial response:

I just never thought about it, but you know now that I see them [teachers]. I see them a lot more after school now. They live lives like my friend was like "I couldn't believe that I saw a teacher at a restaurant with some friends. I didn't' know teachers had friends. Some of them are real helpful. But you know they, it has gotten a lot better. Like they actually take the time out, they sit down, they try explaining things. Cause a lot of students they really struggle here.

Skyler was asked to clarify whether this was his view since the conversion to

small schools. Skyler added the following:

I think it has been since the small schools. I notice I have the same teachers a lot, you get to know them a little bit better. . .

Maybe if I see them in the future you know outside of school. It is like some of the teachers they are good people just like us. Like a long time ago when I had a teacher I had never thought of them as being like human beings, you know they are just teachers. Had no lives, lived at school or whatever.

So, from the interviews over time with many of these students it was gleaned that being in a smaller learning community is seen as a good thing. The practice of journaling, anticipation of the weekly interview and, being purposeful about observing themselves and the encounters they had daily at school precipitate this greater awareness. The students are able to talk about their daily experiences in the classroom and how being in a smaller setting has helped them connect with fellow students and teachers in a different way. Accordingly, they see the model as better than the large comprehensive high school.

The interview sessions became more narrow in their focus, and the students began to offer critical observations with regard to their academy, the classroom and school day experiences in this converted high school.

They also made it a point to talk about how different the academies are.

*Perceived Differences in Academies At Conversion High School*

According to several of these students, the academies have labels depending on the students who enrolled are in them. For example, four students in this study stated or implied that the Thrive Academy is where the “smart kids” are enrolled. Three students stated that the Explorer Academy is where the students that want “more hands on” or the arts are enrolled, and Galaxy was initially for those interested in science. It is true that each academy was introduced with a theme. Thrive Academy’s label as where the smart kids are was not based solely on student perception. The students from the Thrive Academy, Myra, Crystal, and John, demonstrated a sense of pride in their academy for its academic profile far more than any of the other students. The initial interview with Myra illustrates this point, when she was asked to state what came to mind when the small school conversion was talked about:

My academy. You do get closer with your teachers. I personally think That Thrive is the best academy. Because I am biased because I am in the academy. We have AP classes, college prep classes, and all the honors classes in our academy. If you want one of those, you pretty much have to leave your academy and come to Thrive.

Myra was pressed for another example. She offered:

We are the most as I believe, that every kid in Thrive is on their way to going to college. Like we are the most college-bound academy at Conversion High School like most of – we have the most kids who pass the WASL; have the most kids who apply for financial aid early; have the most kids who got the Gates scholarship and have the most kids who have their college applications already.

Myra gave an example of why she thought the teachers in Thrive Academy had a bigger vision for the students when she compared co-curricular activities:

The teachers, whoever made up the teams, I would have to say we do have the best teachers just because we have the more dedicated teachers. Like, we are missing a teacher this year named Mr. Wilson and he used to be the leader of Thrive. And instead of like, organizing you know, let's go buy everybody in the academy a T-Shirt, he saved our money and organized a trip to Washington, DC. That sort of thing. So we don't get ice cream socials once every month.

The same sentiments were expressed by Crystal when she was asked about her perceptions about the different small schools:

For the most part, it is good, I mean – they say that Thrive is the best academy in Conversion High School as far as like WASL scores. We

have the best WASL scores out of all the academies. And like students in our academy they are good, they are respectful, all of that. And so we don't really have like problems in our academy."

While these are individual student perceptions, they serve to impact academic identity for the students in this academy.

Linda, 11th grader, who is in Bridge Academy pointed to the same perception about Thrive Academy when I asked if she had a typical schedule like every other student in Bridge Academy:

Yeah, pretty much. Because like, I think in my opinion it seems like some of the academies are like, set up for like, more of like, academic kids. Because like I know a couple of people they are in different ones than me, it is like, their classes are harder and more challenging and stuff like that.

When Linda was pressed in two different lines of questions to name where she felt the smarter kids were, she named the Thrive Academy and the Galaxy Academy:

Yeah, like, Thrive and I think Galaxy is for like, more the smarter kids than like, Bridge and like... it was kind of more like, the lower kids. They put like, you know, there are a couple of smart kids, like, I could name them in like, that is pretty sad if you can name the smart kids in one academy.

When asked what type of student attends her academy for the most part, she stated: “kind of like, lower on the academic list maybe. There is a couple of really smart kids in Bridge, but like, the majority of them are like, no.” Linda was asked how this impacts her motivation and her academic identity. She made the following statement:

I guess it is kind of like messed up because you can't pick like what you want to do and kids that want to experience more challenge they can't because they have to stay in that little box and that is not good because you can't really express yourself because it might make them feel like they are getting dumb down a little bit.

The interview responses above revealed a perception that the Thrive Academy was offering a different academic program. An interview with Skyler, 12th grade student, Galaxy Academy, offered a similar impression about Thrive Academy. However, his observation was not as distinctly tied to the academic program:

It is just the rules they have. Like one of them will give more rules than the other one. Like in Thrive if you are late twice you automatically get like Friday school. It is either Friday or Saturday school where you have to stay here for like three hours and do work or something like that. I can't remember exactly what it is.

In this case, the student is pointing to a different norm in the Thrive Academy, one that could be tied to academic performance and expectations for students.

John is also a student in Thrive, and he reflected on the Explorer Academy; however he did not seem to be making a judgment, but was just stating who the Explorer is designed to serve:

Explorer is supposed to be like buildings and like being real constructive and using a lot of hands-on so it may not require you to use much of thinking.

This implies that while the Thrive Academy has a label, other academies have them, too. For example, Crystal made this statement about the perception of the Bridge Academy: "I think the people in Bridge are like the worst kids. Because there is always like a lot of fights going on in that academy. Something wrong is going on in that academy everyday." The label that is held about Legacy was offered by Stephanie, a student enrolled there: "Legacy is worse. because they have all the teachers – all the boys' basketball coaches that teach at this school are in Legacy." This suggests that these teachers are not pushing academic success, but rather athletic success for their teams. This was mentioned by two students, the other who is enrolled in the Bridge academy.

This information about tracking is pointed out here, as the Gates Foundation holds up equity as one of essential elements of a good school.

These students are reporting that they do not see equity in these small schools, and this implies that tracking is the reality. They go on to say that it is a well-known fact in the school. Myra and Crystal are proud that they are where the “smart kids” are. Others outside of the Thrive Academy are being sent a message about their academic identity by their placement; as Linda puts it, where the “lower kids” are. Even Skyler’s reflection that Thrive has tougher rules indirectly offers his awareness that something different is happening in the Thrive Academy. Michael points to the conversion and to equality as being impossible:

I don’t really think like having small schools is – how can you divide everybody and put them all in groups and say everybody is equal? You don’t have the same teachers. Every teacher is not as smart as the next one. There is like subject matter. I mean different teachers teach different things.

This information points to the conceptual framework, and the variables presented in that framework. It is designed to illuminate environmental, tangible, and subliminal factors that formulate African-American student interpretation of curriculum rigor, choices for the future, and college readiness in the small school conversion. It also relates to student perceptions of the benefits of a small versus large school setting. Students like Myra, Crystal, and Linda share the same awareness, that they are not receiving the same

opportunities to succeed based on their academy placement. This perception of inequity is certainly a factor in shaping academic identity and aspiration for these students. On one hand, Myra and Crystal are getting a positive motivating message, while Linda is receiving the opposite message about how she is viewed in this environment.

Myra goes on to state that: “the conversion is working the way it is supposed to work for Thrive. I think the teachers in Thrive know exactly what the point was of turning to small schools and they are using it in the way they were supposed to.” When she was asked, Myra offered this perception of the attitudes of teachers as this relates to the Thrive Academy. She responded by saying, “I don’t ever hear them like protesting the whole conversion but I hear about them always complaining that Thrive has the smart students. So that possibly might be a reason why they have no motivation for [it] either.” Myra was asked, was this an accident that the so-called “smart kids” are in Thrive. She shared that she knew how students in Thrive came to be there: “It is mainly because [during] my freshman year I had Advanced Placement (AP) courses and so all those kids who had advance placement courses just went into Thrive Academy. That is how it happened.”

Myra is not a typical student in this high school; she is the Student Body President, and articulates her plans for the future in great detail. She is highly engaged with educational experiences daily, along with both her

college goals and her career goals. This suggests that there is a more than a kernel of truth in the shared perception that Thrive Academy expects something different from the students there. High expectations for all students, a rigorous and relevant curriculum with all the proper support for students is at the center of the small school conversion and inextricably tied to closing the gap in academic achievement for African-American students. When Crystal was asked about her understanding about the difference in how Thrive Academy is perceived compared to the other academies, she just shook her head and said: "I don't know why Thrive is so different from any other academy; it is just that way."

The students seem to be aware that the academies are different in more than just theme. They are pointing to perceived differences in rigorous curriculum, teacher expectations, and student body profile. However, this does not mean that they think the model is a bad one. We will see in the interviews that students relate academic identity and aspiration to culture and gender, a stated variable in the conceptual framework presented earlier. These variables, along with the structural model, all come together to ultimately shape African-American student identity and aspiration. The student perceptions are not contested here, as this study is focused on their interpretations of what is occurring, in their own view, during the moments that they spend in the school setting.

*Relationships with Teachers In Small School Conversion*

The goal for each meeting was to remind these 13 African-American students to become critical observers of their interactions with teachers in the academy structure. The information captured could suggest that students began seeing their teachers differently with the conversion to small academies. Each student was asked to give an example of a relationship with a teacher in his or her academy, good or bad. The following are some of the statements that were made about teachers in the different academies. The sentiments were mostly positive, in particular from two of the students who are in Thrive Academy. Myra, 12th grade, offered this statement:

I have seen a teacher make more effort to see what is going on with a kid if they don't come to class. I know during a teacher's planning period she will be like okay let me go check his [the absent student's] fourth period class right now and see if he is there and ask him why he wasn't in my class. That sort of thing.

The following statements were made by Crystal, another student in the Thrive Academy:

I don't know I think like when I am at school and around like my teachers that have been helping me out lately. I don't know I just like feel different like I feel like they are now actually trying to help me go

somewhere. So I think that is really good and so I am just excited about that. And I am keeping my grades up, too. . .

Like yesterday when my teacher, I am her TA and she is my teacher for fifth period math. Her name is Mrs. Land, and I had turned in an assignment and I got one number wrong. I was like one number oh well. She was like Crystal go back and do it again. I was like oh man do I have to. I was like I'll just take the score that I have. She was like no I want you to get a better score. And so I did it over and so I got 100% on that assignment. It raised my grade up to A minus.

This example suggests that some students do appreciate being pushed. If asked to perform, in many cases some students will. Skyler offered this reflection on teachers:

Some of them are real helpful. But you know they, it has gotten a lot better. Like they actually take the time out, they sit down, they try explaining things. Cause a lot of students they really struggle here. I don't know whether it is like that they weren't challenged or they didn't try earlier or some of them just really don't care. Yeah, but teachers actually sit down and take the time to explain things out in detail, step one, you got to do this, step two, you got to do that.

Even with his reluctance about the benefits for himself personally,

Skyler began to make statements about the relationships with teachers since the small school conversion: "I think it has been since the small schools. I noticed I have the same teachers a lot, you get to know them a little bit better." Statements like this came only after being asked to become a more critical observer of the daily interactions with teachers. These kinds of responses might suggest the idea that students are beginning to see the structural change that they found so frustrating initially as a benefit to their relationships at school. The following student response hints at this as well.

John, a 12th grader in Thrive, made this statement about his relationship with teachers:

Understanding how my teachers teach. Because you get to see, you have them for--well I have had them for the last three years. So you basically, you know your first year you kind of get used to them. By your second year you know you should know how they are going to teach, how you can become successful, and what type of things they would be looking for. So in that way you can pass a lot easier.

Anita, 11th grade, Explorer Academy, shared the following about her

Impressions of some teachers when asked about how they make her feel:

"Like my math teacher. She makes me feel smart. She just encourages me to do what I have to do to you know and she helps me whenever I need help you know. If I don't understand something she is willing to explain it." Anita

went on to describe the benefits of knowing a teacher better: "I think the better you know a teacher the more they are going to know you and so if they know you then they know your work habits, if you procrastinate, you know if you need help with certain areas and things like that." This type of reflection implies that students are interested in better relationships with their teachers, even when that relationship uncovers some areas where they need help. Similar to Anita, Brian, 11th grade, Bridge Academy, offered this example when asked about a teacher he felt closer to since the small school conversion: "I guess my English teacher. She knows me pretty well and she knows that I am lazy sometimes and like for the most part I am a good student and I like to get my work done." Here again, Brian is suggesting that his teacher knows he can do the work even if he is not always on point; this evokes a level of trust and openness.

While the examples presented here represent similar comments that each student could give an example of a better relationship with a teacher since the small school conversion, several gave examples of some disappointment in working with their teachers. In some cases it is in fact quite the opposite or an improved relationship. Kellie, 12th grader in Explorer Academy, feels that she is not really seen by her teachers: "I don't know my teachers, they don't know me at all. They just know I show up for class. I am quiet and that is it."

However, the goal of the small school conversion is to help students make real connections with an adult in their school life. Kellie was able to share her feelings about one adult, Dr. J.:

My principal for my small school is Dr J. She pays the most attention to probably all the African-American kids in our school. It is more than any other teacher that I have ever seen. And that goes for all of them . . . A lot of the other teachers they won't take time out to ask you well how is life treating you. How is your school work going? How are your grades? They have you for that one period of the day and that is it. Dr. J it goes deeper and I think that – because I have had her for like my whole Conversion High School life. . . I was talking to Dr. J. and you know like she sat and she talked to me and you know she told me how like how she saw me kind of grow up and excel over the years, and how she seen me change. Especially freshman year I was bad. I was not like just off the wall bad but like oh whatever school is boring I don't need to be here. I was bad and every time I am getting in trouble there she is, there she is, and there she is. I am just like okay.

So, in Kellie's case, her teachers in the classroom are not making a positive connection with her, but she does feel she has an advocate in one adult in the school, and she knows that Dr. J cares about her academic success. This is an important point in Kellie's case.

Ronald, 11th grade, Legacy, shared his disappointment in teacher relations with his parents on his behalf:

My mom hardly ever gets calls about missing work or whatever. So every time conferences come around they just now find out about all my missing assignments and I get in big trouble for it. So however, there are teachers out there who do care and would go the extra mile to make sure that the students do get their work in. They let their parents know on time and that is just how it is to me. I think we need more teachers like that. More teachers who actually take time to contact your parents, to see what is going on with this student at home and even hand out the phone numbers too just in case they have a question on an assignment. They [parents] have some way to reach the teacher.

Ronald had stated earlier that he takes responsibility to connect with his teachers; however, his reflection here is insightful and speaks to broader educational issues, not just relative to his high school experience.

#### *Relationships with Peers in Small School Conversion*

The interviews about the academy model here present student impressions about the relationships they have with their peers. In the interview sessions, students shared a great deal about their relationships with peers outside of the classroom. However, for this study they were asked to

reflect purely on their interactions with regard to their school lives and, in particular, in the classroom. Many of the students, boys in particular, were forthcoming with the fact that talking about what goes on in the classroom is not something they readily engage in. For the most part, if they are in class that is where talk about what goes on in class is likely to occur. Michael, 12th grade, Bridge Academy made this statement when asked what speaks to him as an academic person and motivates him to be more ambitious about his future:

Your peers. When you are in class like now that we have small schools everything every part of the lessons are group-wise. They are not really just focused on the teacher telling you how to do stuff and then everybody does it individually. More everything kind of pushed more towards group. So like you do, most of the time we do everything in groups now. We don't really do nothing just -- this is your homework for tonight go home and do it. Most of the stuff we do is in class. Like most of the kids barely have homework now because they are doing most of it in class.

This suggests that the classroom experience has the potential to become an environment rich with in-depth inquiry, as the Gates Foundation had hoped would occur. However, we will learn more as students reflect on the interview questions about the curriculum content. The

statement from Skyler, 12th grade, Galaxy Academy, could be seen as in support of Michael's earlier statement above:

In the small school I am--there are a couple of smart kids in each class. And they are like I try to be like friends with them. Like my friend Tad, my old friend Ralph he is not in any of my classes anymore. But yeah, I try to stay with them. Because I know if I sit with them I am going to get work done.

Crystal, 11th grade, Thrive Academy, stated she feels a sense of family with her peers: "it has been three years now, and over those years we have grown like basically brother and sisters with everybody." She also shared a story about how her peers encouraged her to take tougher courses: "My friends they are like pushing me more to do like harder things. Like take harder classes." She went on to say:

Like I got out of my AP class for English cause I was like I don't know. First I said it was too hard and then the teacher, I thought that she was like piling up work after work after work and I was starting to fall behind. That is why I got out of the class. My friends pushed me to try to get back in. So I was like I want to get back in there and they were like, you can't. So I was like I just missed out on something good cause I really wanted to take that class but I just felt like it was too stressful for me to do it.

Crystal regretted not listening to her peers and staying in the class. She and her friends support each other in taking on academic challenges. They also talk about their future, and have connected their daily experience at school to their future. She was asked if they talk about college, and Crystal stated:

Yeah. Almost every other day we do it. Cause like and then we talk about what school we want to go to. And what we want to major in things like that. So everybody is like saying well I am going to move out of the state and go up to this school and do all these things.

The students in this study are not unique in their approach to school or learning; their responses support idea that some African-American students do make their school work a priority. While this sample population is small, it suggests that the broad generalization by some that Black students do not make education a priority is an over-generalization.

Ronald, 11th grade, offered this reflection on his conversation with peers about school work:

I do talk about how hard the work is in class. One of my friends will say hey why don't you come over man and we will play video games. I am no man I can't. They are why not? I got this huge essay got to do man, what are you thinking? When we do talk about stuff like that, we don't

talk about – we just briefly discuss what we are doing, whatever and so yeah.

Anita, 11th grade, Explorer Academy, gave me a glimpse of how she and her peers discuss their school work, “we talk about our assignments and things that we have to do during the weekend related to school or you know we ask each other like, class was boring today what did you do in your class today, you know—we talk.” Despite the initial protest about losing close ties with friends, each of these students had an example of getting to know fellow students better due to the smaller learning community and the regularity of interactions with a smaller group of peers around learning.

The examples offered here of students describing talking about their school work with peers and how the small school environment has created opportunities for new and deeper relationships with peers is one thing to consider. This is referred to in the conceptual framework presented earlier, as students talk about school work; especially when they see themselves in group work contributing to the successful completion of the assignment will impact academic identity and academic performance. While this gives the impression that these students offer positive reflections for the most part, learning if they felt like the conversion has helped them become better learners and fostered a better sense of belonging in the academic domain is

critical. Thus far the impact on learning has been alluded to; however explicit dialogue about learning needs to be sifted out.

*Learning, Rigor, and Relevance of the Curriculum*

The discussions about the academy model set the stage for discussion about the relationships with teachers and peers. They also helped guide as a prompt to go deeper and talk about the curriculum and learning. The following reveals students' perceptions about themselves and whether they feel that the small school conversion is offering a better curriculum, one that they feel ties into what is meaningful in their lives, and helping them become better learners. Specifically they were asked about what happens in the classroom with assignments and groups. Michael gave this description:

Well the teacher she will tell you everything that you need to do. Everything that follows inside the project, all the outlines and all that. Then she will break us down into groups and most of the time the teacher will just pick every group. And then after that then the groups will be together and the groups will start talking, after that it falls all into the groups. Then the teacher will walk around to see what their group is doing and occasionally but for the most part it is just us. In a way that makes you learn more because you have to obtain all that information you have to gather all that information and then you have to try to put it

together and a presentation and all that. So if you go over all that much information then it has to stay in your mind.

Stephanie, 11th grade, Legacy Academy, offered these examples about the way she works with her peers since the small school conversion:

When you get together in small groups or whatever to do like projects and stuff that means you have to communicate more with your peers that you are working with. Because nine times out of ten you are not going to get to work with your best friend in the class. So you get to talk with them and actually learn different stuff.

Another example from Stephanie:

Like my friend Brittany she is like really smart too. She has like high, a lot of people have high expectations for her because she does cross country, track and all this other stuff and she is really smart. And so like she was helping me figure out ways to actually write that stuff about muscles down and do stuff like that. I didn't even know she like really could like help me with that. Cause like me and her have been talking for a long time but I never knew she could help me with stuff like that.

Anita, 11th grade, Explorer Academy, offered this response to a series of questions about the curriculum, how she feels that she is able to get her work done, and if it is related to her personally: "In most of our essays and things we write about ourselves and what we are doing. Things like that."

However, at this point Anita was not offering that the curriculum on the whole was better or that it was helping her feel stronger academically: "I like it because you know you are trying to bond with your teachers and you know you are trying to get with they already have so a bond is good but I think it is not – I haven't seen any a deeper curriculum connection yet." Michael's comments imply that he shares Anita's opinion about the curriculum. He was clear in his remarks about the curriculum not meeting students' real needs: "well it can meet their needs but it won't meet their personal needs. Personal like I mean something personal to me could be something else personal to you, it is different." The responses about the curriculum implies that these students are connecting better around the material that is offered to them; however, they are not finding it more relevant to their interests. This suggests that the smaller environment is achieving greater compliance on the part of these students, but not greater engagement with a relevant curriculum.

The real benefit seems to be around building relationships with peers in learning. Skyler points this out in his response to my question about working on assignments in teams:

Yeah, I know people that I probably would not know a lot better because I am around them so much. If I was to switch classes every semester and never see the same people, I would just see them that semester and then never see them again, some people that I would

never usually be friends with, I am around them so much that I just accidentally get to know them.

The variation in perceptions about curriculum rigor in the academy model presented itself in my conversation with Kellie, a 12th grade girl in Explorer Academy. Kellie was asked about the benefits and challenges of the curriculum now offered in the small school conversion, as seen from her viewpoint. She stated that there was not much of a challenge for her, and she went on to say:

I picked Explorer because it is an Explorer Academy. Like--but it was funny as the years went on like people started to see like which academy teachers are more easier to have. So you know like next year I am going to be in Explorer and Explorer is kind of the easy academy in a lot of the teachers are just kind of easy going.

She was asked about her views on the rigor of the curriculum and the level of expectation from teachers. "They don't make you work that hard and the work is really not challenging, it is more boring, that is what makes it a challenge."

In most of the other interviews students were hard pressed to share some descriptions of specific lessons or topics for discussion that they found to be interesting or relevant. Two students were able to offer a description. Brian talked about how a teacher leveraged the class' interest in Starbucks as

a springboard for discussion. He described how a teacher involved the students and made the work fun at the same time:

We learned yesterday that Starbucks said they could be getting more money than they are because like as you see now they will have a Starbucks on one side of the street and if you have like a four way street, we were talking about putting one on the other side so that people who are going this way don't have to turn around. They don't want to do that they will just pass the Starbucks.

Brian was asked to describe how this was made fun for him, and he shared that he is a Starbucks consumer. He felt like he could relate to the desire for the easiest way to both make money and get the products he uses.

Michael offered this reflection on diamonds: "My International Trade class is challenging. It is like trying to find all that information and in a short amount of time. It is kind of hard. Everyday we are doing something new, every day. It is not like we are just like grabbing our textbooks, like reading out of our textbooks". Our discussion focused on the question of what "blood diamonds" are. He shared the following:

I know you know Kanye West mentions blood diamonds in the song *Diamonds Are Forever*. So I thought that was an interesting lyric to throw in there because a lot of people don't know about it. It makes

them interested. Like if he is talking about it then it must be something important.

So while this does not represent an in-depth, rich inquiry, these two students are suggesting that a curriculum using images and artifacts that are significant and interesting to them is important; they find some of the curriculum interesting and they hint that it may help them connect with what they are supposed to master ultimately. And of course, let us not forget the teacher: “good teachers teach their subject matter well, great teachers engage students in the learning tasks of the moment and instill in them the desire to keep learning long after graduation” (Sadowski, 2003, p. 15).

What the interviews regarding the curriculum suggest is that the students interests are deep, rich, and varied; they represent opportunities for teaching and learning that can transcend tightly prescribed subject matter that is valued by one sector of the school community, the adults. The focus on student mastery and demonstration of skill should prevail over curriculum coverage. “The curriculum represents the school’s agenda. While it is critical that this agenda be met, it is similarly critical to meet the students where they are and to learn their agendas” (Sadowski, 2003, p. 16): “From an educational standpoint and in its most ideal sense, cultural equality promotes parity among groups by enlarging the intellectual territory we call ‘knowledge’” (Carter, 2005, p. 170). TheodoreSizer, former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of

Education puts it aptly: “the myriad, detailed and mandatory state ‘curriculum frameworks’ of whatever scholarly brilliance, are attacks on intellectual freedom” (A. Thernstrom & S. Thernstrom, 2003, p.25). This implies that these frameworks are missing the mark with it comes to leveraging the life scholarship that students bring to the table. This, of course, would require a value for the scholarship of the nondominant culture. This would require teachers who are interested and capable in navigating multiple cultural spheres and offering a curriculum that grows out of that knowledge: “A teacher who inspires and excites students to grasp multiple kinds of knowledge, including reading, writing, and using analytical skills, and who respects the integrity of her or his own culture and other cultures fits the image of the multicultural navigator” (Carter, 2005, p. 150).

### *Persistence of Racial and Cultural Stereotypes In Small Schools*

The students interviewed for this study acknowledged that ethnic and racial stereotypes existed in their school environment. When asked about stereotypes related to race and academic performance, each student stated that Black students were more likely to be stereotyped as being less interested in academics, being lower performers academically, being more interested in sports, being loud, being overly social, talking back to teachers, being troublemakers, and being interested in wearing the right clothes. They

suggested that it is common knowledge that you have to disprove these profiles held by peers and teachers, if you are an African-American student at Conversion High School.

The costs and the dangers of ignoring what the students imply here are not new, and teachers in small schools need to ask themselves what images are playing in their heads when they encounter African-American students initially. Delpit (2002) draws our attention to a Canadian study that endorses what these students are saying. The study found that “teachers evaluate pupils academically on the basis of their voices, and also their physical appearance, even when they have available relevant academic work on which to form their judgment, such as written compositions and art work (Seligman et al., 1972). That is, a teacher may base serious systemic judgments about a pupil’s intellectual abilities on totally irrelevant information” (p. 67).

One example related to academics, was this statement by Anita:

[W]ell I mean, I am not saying that they think that all Black kids are, you know, stupid or anything, but you know when it is – when you think about it though you know you would think if they compared me to a White person you know, they would think that maybe the White person is smarter because of you know their race.

Anita discussed how this example shows up in the classroom, and she shared the following: “because like certain teachers they will look at another

person and then look straight past me. So it is sort of different in the classrooms because like my English class I can raise my hand about three times to read to get participation points and I won't be called on." When Anita was asked how she reacts to being overlooked to read, she replied, "like I just try and be more up like out loud instead of just raising my hand I have to say, I'll read or you know something like that." Anita states this as if it is just a fact of life. Being an African-American student at Conversion High school, one has to prove oneself to be different than the negative stereotypes and deal with the stubborn assumption that African-American students would not be interested in academic success. Anita expressed her frustration with her peers who help to maintain the negative stereotypes: "I just don't understand how they can just be like that. Because to me it is kind – is really embarrassing cause I think that once they see like a certain amount – the teachers see a certain amount African-American kids acting that way they are going to think all of them act that way and that is not even how it is." Black students, like any other group of students, represent a continuum of academic commitment.

The interview moved to a discussion of how the environment either challenges or supports the negative stereotypes of African-American students. Once again, Anita pointed to the initial profiling that students have to face. "Because you are Black minority going to Conversion High they [teachers] are going to think down upon you because of that. Because of the environment

that we are in here, nobody is looking up to Black kids here except for athletes.” The interview questions then moved to how Anita copes with her feelings of being labeled, and she shared her strategy: “sometime, you know, like the teacher, you know, when I showed them that I am an individual and I am just not some loud Black ghetto girl, you know, they actually take that into mind for the next time they approach me they know – they don’t have to use slang or whatever just to get my attention.” The statements made by Anita were consistent with what I heard from the 13 students in this study. There is just a matter of fact description of dealing with the overwhelming, negative stereotypes experienced as a part of being an African-American student at Conversion High School and this perception ran across all the academies.

Kellie from Explorer, the academy described as being for students focused on the arts or “wanting more hands-on” talked about her school life as being very important. She made statements about her ability to navigate within a school environment that was steeped in stereotypes about Black students. She described ways of coping that were consistent with what Anita shared. Kellie goes to school daily, purposeful about her efforts to make herself “seen” by her teachers and peers differently than the negative image of a student or learner. This implies that being present for learning in the classroom is in competition with the daily realities of school life, and involves consciously being aware of and challenging all that these stereotypes imply. All 13 of

these students talked about overcoming adversity both in the classroom and with administrators. They showed a determination to succeed in an environment that they felt did not see them for themselves. Each of these students gave examples of how they challenged the negative stereotypes of Black students and academic ability. They also felt they were able to change the minds of some teachers and peers about who they are academically.

African-American students in some cases have internalized, and can contribute to, the maintenance of negative stereotypes through messages they give about how they see fellow African-American students. All 13 of the students in this study are African-American and for some, although not all, the notion of being loud, particularly for African-American girls, came up regularly. Myra and Crystal described the stereotypes that label Black girls as being loud, “ghetto”, wearing tight jeans and little bitty shirts, and perceived as more sexually active than other girls and not interested in academic performance. Crystal proudly stated that she intentionally avoided being loud and therefore prevents being perceived as not smart. She offered this reflection:

Because like there this is boy named Rego and he has made that comment to me before. Like you are just like all the other Black kids. I am like how do all the other Black kids act? Rego: Oh, they are loud; they are ghetto; they are rude; they don't care about school, and they are this and they are that. But I was like okay, Rego, I will show you that

I am not like that. And so I mean I acted the same way I did and after that, he didn't say anything to me.

Crystal stated that in order to be seen as smart, she made sure she hangs out with a racially mixed group of students, and does not "act Black." This suggests that "acting Black" is a way of *being* and not exclusively behavior by Black kids. So she was asked if other students "acted Black" and, if they did, who was seen as smarter in her opinion? Her response: "I would say the White kids who try to act Black." She was asked for a characteristic of "acting Black" other than being perceived as loud, and she offered: "Acting Black' is giving up." This perception was supported by statements made by Skyler, when he voiced his amazement at an exchange he overheard between two girls: "Like these girls were talking and this guy he is Black, right. But I guess they see him as nerdy or something like that. Then one of them said, she was like, why you act so White, I am Blacker than you. She wasn't Black." Skyler offered that nerdy is commonly associated with being less social and more focused on school that is consistent with the label at Conversion High School.

In the interviews with other students, these narrow descriptions of being African-American, being smart or interested in school, and being perceived as loud were not mutually exclusive. For instance, Stephanie owned being loud: "I am loud, I will admit I am loud. I have been loud forever but like I am smart and I am not as everybody sees me because I am a really nice person. So

Stephanie is challenging the stereotype that being loud is a predictor of her academic ability." A lot of people say sometimes when I am not smiling they think I am mean. But if I am not smiling and I am not mad it is most likely I am thinking of something." This implies that Stephanie is aware of the stereotype; however, she is not adjusting her way of being. She did not indicate that she is loud at all times, in the classroom for instance.

An interview with Kellie revealed her reflection on this stereotype:

I have a friend named Shendetta and she is wild as I don't know what and ghetto. Like she is going to college, she makes straight As. So even if you are loud Black and ghetto it doesn't mean that you have to be treated like someone who is just trash, or that you are not smart.

This echoes the finding of Carter (2005) that, "talkativeness and being sassy (often identified as problem behavior among Black students) do not preclude a mastery of the cognitive skills required to perform satisfactorily in modern schools" (p. 69). This study revealed that the stereotype about being loud and therefore not smart is placed on girls more than boys; however, boys are aware of it.

Ronald had this to share: "I think people label us like, only because they can. And they have the ability to, and so, basically, what they are trying to do, is change us to be like them. Where we are not so loud and believe in the same things and try and get our grades up, they like us. We can still believe in

different things, we still do different things. But we can still have the ability to get our grades up; it is free will that guides us to get better grades; you can do that if you are loud.” This implies that students understand what the negative connotations are with regard to stereotypes about African-American students and what the consequences are. Carter (2005) found that, “behaviors subject to sanctions by teachers and officials included loud verbal play and communicative style that might easily be misunderstood by an outsider unfamiliar with it” (p. 68). So, this highlights the fact that some students are conscious of the stereotype and make a choice not to buy into it, to be loud if they wish and challenge the notion that they are not engaged academically. Kellie shared her approach: “I think that by them seeing us that way that they probably think we are like that all the time and that we probably don’t take too many things too seriously but we do. I know I do and the people that I have for friends who I am loud with, I know they do.” Being judged by one’s outward appearance is not experienced exclusively by one group of students. However, the association of intellect with style of dress and a greater value for being overly social is a popular myth about African-American students at Conversion High School.

In these interviews there was an attempt to have students reflect on why this is a popular stereotype and where it started. For the most part, they could only speculate, but in reality they understand the stereotype is not true

of all African-American students; however, many do not openly question it. Ronald stated that in his opinion some of the stereotypes comes from the messages African-American students hear about themselves: "I think they don't try to do better, or they behave a certain way because that is what they are told about themselves." Even Skyler, the varsity basketball player who wears Jordan's sometimes, has a 4.0, and is in his sixth semester of French, realized he was buying into this stereotype as well.

It is the way they dress, it is their exterior appearance that makes you make a judgment about their smarts. Like some people you would just be surprised, oh you are doing good in school? You would never know because of the way they act in school – the way they dress.

African-American boys and girls are faced with common negative stereotypes about their lack of commitment to being successful academically. However, for boys, the athletic identity dominates their value in the school setting.

The interview with Skyler put forward the idea that some of the behaviors that are seen as negative, such as back talk by African-American students and the challenge to authority by some athletes, are an outgrowth of how athletic ability is valued above academics. Students learn this disrespect from the adults:

They are not having really much respect and that is because they are letting a lot of the athletes get away with stuff. Like grades and stuff like that. They will just go ahead and push their grade up if they have them in class. Just to let them keep playing. And then like the students start losing respect for them a little bit.

This notion that African-American boys are valued for their athletic talent is not a new one, and at Conversion High School it is not challenged. As stated earlier, this study includes three boys who are varsity basketball players in this study and one girl who hoped to be on the varsity team in the fall. They all shared their daily reality of being valued at Conversion High School for their athleticism over their academics, and they also shared that they observed this was not true for the couple of White students who are on the team. Tony, a basketball player, was asked how he would describe the African-American students at Conversion High School; he said: "Good at sports. That is, basically, all the Black people play sports." He was asked if there were any other racial groups on the team and how they were perceived. This response was captured, "There are a couple of White boys on the team. They are the ones that get like all As and all that and all that." Further probing revealed that Tony stated he gets good grades, too. However, he did not state that he saw this, as being in opposition to the stereotype. Brian, another varsity basketball player, offered the same reaction. Brian ranked African-American students at

the bottom academically, and his own grade point average of 3.2 did not influence his rankings. While Tony is the boy who is most focused on his athletic performance as a key to his future success, he also stated that he feels that athletic prowess is a safer bet for college entrance for African-American students. This implies that he has little faith that he can succeed without being a good athlete even though he has good grades.

For Stephanie, the only girl in this study who played basketball, a similar opinion was expressed when I asked about her perceived self-worth as an athlete, and how that relates to being African-American, being valued, and being recognized at Conversion High School: "I don't even think we have – I think we have one girl who is White and Pilipino. There is, like, no White girls on the basketball team. None!" Stephanie revealed that she can only refer to the girls' basketball team, which also went to participate in State Championships, as offering celebrated images of African-American girls at Conversion High School. She went further to explain that the Legacy Academy is where all the athletes and coaches are clustered: "Well, in, like, the academies for Legacy, it is mostly like athletics. So, it is really diverse, but it is more basketball players and football players than anything. So, mostly the Black kids, because we do like football and basketball." This was consistent with what was offered by Michael, "All the boys' basketball coaches that teach at this school are in Legacy." This interview data supports the notion that the

school culture recognizes athletic prowess, and celebrates it in African-American students; in turn, many students gravitate toward this system of currency. Amy, a 12th grade student who shared her deep dislike of the academy model, also felt that the school overall has upheld the athletic identity as something African-American students should aspire to in order to gain recognition. She sees athletes as the favorites:

Because, like, the way, I feel, the teachers look at Black students differently, than they look at Whites. Like when you go to, like, basketball games, you see mostly Black students playing basketball, like on the varsity team. I think they [teachers] play favoritism toward the White kids and they think they are smarter.

This stubborn image overshadows the students who are succeeding academically as well as those who are leaders in the larger school setting.

The Student Body President, Myra, is an African-American girl. However, the Student Body President does not associate, for the most part, with Black students:

It is kind of funny, because you know how we were talking about just the Black kids here at Conversion, and stuff like that. I pretty much realized that I don't like most of them. Seriously, like I just don't. I don't like the way they carry themselves and they, you know, it just creates – justifies a lot of stereotypes about Black people.

Myra's opinion suggests what Cross (1991) calls the anti-Black attitude in the pre-encounter stage of identity development. This statement by Myra implies that she is profiling her African-American peers based on the same superficial markers that have been associated with being anti-intellectual and not engaged in school:

I mean they probably have the potential to be smart, they just don't show it, they hide it or something, I don't know. They don't apply themselves, because they are more about the social, instead of academics. They are way too focused on what their outfit is going to be tomorrow.

Upon further questioning, she did offer a response that reminded me of Michael and his pride in being popular in this environment and how there is a currency for African-American students that is endorsed.

There is one White girl on our cheerleading squad too. Like, even though, you know, we are, actually—the Black people- are always outnumbered by White people even here at Conversion High School. Even though they [African-American students] are not the smartest and they are loud and they are rude, they are still considered to be the most popular people. If you are a White person it just seems like it is bad to be White.

Anita with her defiant stance toward the stereotypes even admitted to seeing Black students as less committed to following through academically.

My best friend, she is White and she is pushing herself and she is doing like everything that she has been wanting to do. Like, she has been succeeding in probably like beyond what she has been pushing herself towards. Like, I see Black kids trying to do that and once it gets hard they just give up. It is, like okay, I am not going to do it anymore. Like, a senior in my class, she did that.

The dynamic presented here in these small schools, represents a pattern that is consistent with the images and stereotypes that permeate the school settings in the large comprehensive high schools. Those include: notions that being African-American and being loud equates with not being smart; being fashion-conscious equates with not being focused on academic self development; and being an athlete is where African-American students excel, and not in the classroom.

The interviews revealed a variety of coping strategies among students. Some students attempted to maintain a connection to speaking loudly, wearing the latest fashions and maintaining a focus on their academics along with those who went out of their way to reject students who behaved this way. They all recognized the need to cope with this stereotype as an obstacle to their focus on learning in their daily school environment. Anita put it like this:

It is creating a lot of obstacles because I know I am having the obstacles of doing well in school and you have another obstacle in front of you and that is to prove yourself to other people and you have to prove to everyone else that you aren't that type of person. You are not ghetto, you are not a product of your environment.

In such circumstances, these environmental factors can have a devastating impact on the development of a strong academic identity for African-American students.

The messages imply that students have to sacrifice their relationship with themselves to be seen as a learner by those who hold a stereotypical standard about who is intelligent. Anita, while expressing her frustration, helped to show how the feedback loop in this pattern keeps African-American students on the defensive:

Some people portray me to be one of the unintelligent. They think that you are unintelligent so they think you are not going to do anything in that class, so they don't make an effort to help you and that is an obstacle. So when you give up, they think you don't want to learn.

This implies that the giving up on disproving the stereotype means that one represents these negative images, and therefore they are not a learner and not interested in achieving academically: As Carter (2005) explains, "First in our society, not all groups, but rather a privileged few get to define what

knowledge is, or the image of an intelligent student. Students [in this study] expressed their awareness of these dynamics, wrestling with the perceived unfairness of it all" (p. 6)

This demonstrates that students can be in a state of cognitive dissonance daily when trying to decide when and how to approach being seen as learners. Kellie put it this way:

It does and sometimes it kind of makes me not want to go to them for help because, you know, you get – there is just a lot of, don't know; it is just really weird because you go and ask for help and then it probably depends on who the teachers are, and they look at you like, wow, you are asking for help! Like "you" are asking for help! And it is like, yeah! And they are, like oh, okay, like, what did you expect, what did you think? It is like that.

The outcome could be described as a self-fulfilling prophecy for those who see the students are disengaged as learners when they shrink from asking for help, for fear of their desire for help being questioned.

Kellie and Linda were asked what they would tell the educators who are converting a large comprehensive high school into small academies. They responded in strikingly similar ways. Kellie said:

I would tell them if you are going to change or thinking about changing the school into small schools, that you would think about every obstacle

that would have to come or that would come into play with every child or, you know, young adult, and I would tell them to think about race.

Linda offered the following: "Not to, you know, stereotype or to think of African-Americans in a certain way. And race plays a big part and so does gender."

What these two students are implying is consistent with Claude Steele's research on stereotypes and quoted by Noguera (2003): "[I]n the United States we have deeply embedded stereotypes that connect racial identity to academic ability, and children become aware of these stereotypes as they grow up in the school context" (Sadowski, 2003; p. 25). "If students regard Blackness as being equated with playing basketball and listening to rap music but not with studying geometry and chemistry, then it is unlikely that changing the school alone will do much to change achievement outcomes for students" (Noguera, 2001, p. 38). What is suggested here in the 13 student interviews is that racial stereotyping is perpetrated by students and staff. These interviews suggest that racial stereotyping is in the fabric of the culture of the school, and that each student in this study, irrespective of whether they are perpetrators of the profiling or not, know it is a reality.

*Small-School Conversion, African-American Students, and Academic Identity and Aspiration*

The interviews with students from each of the five academies at Conversion High School suggest that supporting the cultivation of a strong academic identity and personal aspiration is not at the center of their daily lived experience at school. In fact, this language was new to all of them, and many of them felt that no one really cared. While many of these students stated that they now have better relationships with their teachers, they did not, however initially claim that the school environment receives them differently, even after being in the small learning community for three years for some. The stubborn reality is that these 13 African-American students at Conversion High School are entering their small learning communities daily with a conscious awareness that they have a dual role, one to accomplish their learning objectives, but also to cope with the messages about their intellect as compared to athletic skill, the perceived connection to a focus on fashion versus an investment in academic success, and to placing their social or inter-group communication as a top value at school.

Skyler offered this reasoning about African-American students and the focus on athletics:

My friend, right, he is real good at basketball. But he switches schools all the time. I was thinking, like, maybe, like, the reason why a lot of

Black students are more valued because of their athletes more than, like, because that is ,like, usually the only way – like, a lot of them, you know, everybody wants their child to go to college. And a lot of them that is, like, the only way that they will get into college is through sports. I think that is probably why.

This is a hint that Skyler is reconciling the messages he is receiving from his school about being African-American and a possible pathway to college for some of his peers:

I don't know. A lot of guys I know they feel that they don't have what it takes to go to college. A lot of them are, the number one job that most people want to be when I was at the business week meeting; they said a lot of people want to be professional athletes.

When we talked about messages he received about being both smart and also an athlete in this small academy environment, he offered the following:

[Y]ou don't really hear about all the real smart kids doing real good. But you hear more about the basketball players. When we are getting like the scholarships, I hear like this kid he made it out of our school. If they knew like you were real good in football and have real good grades, then they really talk about that.

This invites speculation that the focus on being an athlete is ever-present, and that academic success is an extra.

Skyler was pressed to talk more about who are the kids who are just smart and how they show up in the school, and he offered this:

[T]he ones who are smart, they are smart about it, they don't really say nothing about it to the other people. They are not bragging about it because they feel that no one really cares. They know to stay – like, I am not going to go to somebody who is going to get mad if I got into college. They are, like, shut up man, I don't care about that.

The interview concluded with Skyler being asked what he felt was expected from him in his school environment. He responded: "To be just average, just like every other Black kid here." So I asked him to describe that, and he offered, "just doing the minimum and not standing out academically."

We talked about his focus on his future and what motivates and inspires him, he shared that it is his mother who inspires him. This interview question was asked of each student and the answers were consistent, that it is not their school experiences that motivate and inspire them but it is their parents, their home life. If anything, the school presents consistent obstacles and is a place where they have to disprove negative stereotypes, and eventually they will be able to focus on learning. Myra, a vocal proponent of the small schools and the Thrive Academy, was asked about what impacts her aspiration: "I don't think a lot of my aspirations are really impacted by my school at all. I feel that it is mostly at home situation and the fact that my mom is a single mother and I

want to be successful for myself and make her proud.” These sentiments were shared by Crystal who responded:

Actually my family. Especially like my older brother since he graduated high school and what he is doing now like trying to go back to school; trying to get what he needs to get done. Working two jobs and still taking care of his family. That is so motivating to me.

Ronald offered a similar response: “I don’t think it has to do with what color you are, it think it has to do with what is taught at home. You know, what is expected by the parents. My mom is always stressing me about grades and stuff like that and going to college.” John talked about his aspirations and how he is aware of the messages about the low effort regarding academics that some perceive African-American students engaged in: “I try to not let that get to me. Because every person is different, that is what makes us all unique. So my thing is I have a driving force that no matter what I am going to get what I want. I guess that is how I have been raised that if I want something I am going to have to go get it.”

The student interviews captured many valuable aspects of the daily lived experiences of African-American students in a newly converted school setting. After all the questioning about teachers, peers, and rigor of curriculum, how do these students feel about their identity as learners in this setting? I found that for these 13 African-American students, there has not

been a focused effort on cultivating identities that challenge the negative stereotypes about cultural characteristics.

When we talked about academic celebrations and what faces these students see when the awards are given, the following response came from Myra, “During advisory which is a little 25- or 30-minute period where you get with your teacher and it is all part of the small schools program, well I remember last year there were assemblies for all the advisories together and they would acknowledge kids got – who passed the WASL, who got over a 3.0 stuff like that. I don’t remember exactly who was acknowledged.” So the discussion moved on to academic clubs and organizations. The purpose was to learn if African-American students were represented in other venues outside of athletics. Myra mentioned Math, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA), and Knowledge Bowl: “There is a MESA, there is Knowledge Bowl. I don’t necessarily know. I don’t think we have like straight honor roll! Honor roll kids, you know how it is like in the South and stuff. We don’t really have that here.” She was asked about her knowledge of the number of African-American students participating in the academic clubs from her limited perspective since she did not participate in these clubs. As Student Body President, and someone very knowledgeable about what is happening at the school, she was not able to tell me if there were any African-American students in these clubs. However, one should be reminded that Myra self-

reported that while she is African-American, she does not associate with many African-American students at Conversion High School.

This implies that Myra's coping strategy for dealing with the negative stereotypes that she herself holds about her peers is to disconnect with African-American students until they prove themselves otherwise. This is interesting in light of the fact that Myra herself stated that she is loud at times: "I am loud but I am not loud about whatever they are talking about. I will be loud and I will be laughing or if it is something that John just said, John is loud but it is not inappropriate." Myra did state that she judged the content of some of the loud conversations she observed between Black girls was inappropriate, too personal. This demonstrates that Myra holds a double standard about her own actions, compared to the negative stereotype about outward actions and appearances of African-American students. Her academic identity and her aspirations are intact. And all of her fellow African-American students in this study have thought about their futures. All stated what they planned to do with their lives, the loud girls, the athletes, those wearing \$200 Jordan's and those that really enjoyed their friends. What stood out vividly is the fact that they all realize which of their characteristics are being seen and what characteristics are not being seen. Kellie talked about; once again the norm among African-American students is that they just have to work harder: "I have to make myself seen." In making oneself seen, one strategy might be manner of dress

and style of communication. It is the anti-intellectual characteristics that are often associated with this style of self-presentation that are so damaging for African-American students.

When each of the students in this study was asked to describe him or herself as a student, initially a long silence followed. The term "academic identity" was used with them, and this took many of the students into a space of quiet reflection. For instance, Brian, the student who ranked African-American students at the bottom academically, responded to the question about his academic identity in the following manner: "I think I am an athlete and a scholar. Usually, like in class, I tend to get done with stuff early and then I try to go help other people." He stated that he never thought about himself as having an academic identity.

The interview with Linda was similar in that she stated that she never stopped to think about herself and her academic identity before our interview. She was asked to talk about herself and her ambitions and responded: "I am a pretty ambitious person. Like I do my work, I try to get it done on time and I do the best that I can. I am not like a genius or anything." Linda was pressed to share how she approaches school and if her behavior reflects on her new-found definition of academic identity:

Kind of cause like when I first got into like Conversion High School it was just kind of like hurry up and get done with school because a lot of

people just don't want to be here. Then it was like you know, three years went by and it is kind of like you got to focus more on like what you are going to be after you get out, instead of just like doing it because you have to.

Over the course of the interview sessions, each of these volunteer participant, African-American students who all agreed to be in this study, began to talk about their internal drive to succeed. Ronald had this to say when asked about the impact of living and co-existing with the negative stereotypes about African-American students: "It kind of motivates me because I want to prove them wrong. So you can't just fail to make them be right, so you just keep going." The following was revealed when he talked about how he defines his value in his school environment: "What makes me a valuable player is that I am constantly doing my work. There are hardly any times that I try not to. And that is mostly it, I would consider ROTC and scholar as like two main identities." John offered a similar response: "You know no matter what anyone says my, dreams are still my goals, still me. So, people can tell me to do whatever, but it is me who decides in the end."

When Michael, the self-reported most popular person in the school, was asked to describe himself as an academic person, he offered an example of his personal effort and of achieving success in obtaining a class he wanted:

I got into that International Trades class, I knew that would help me a lot. Learning about the world and just like cause most kids just grow up just knowing only [this city] and that is, like, kind of sad that kids, like, just know that, but that is the way the world works. But, I knew for me, in order to be successful once I get into college, there are going to be like millions of people and people from your town, everybody from your college and people coming in and out all the time. I knew that I was going to have to end up learning how to network, and how to adapt to other people's like beliefs and like their structure and how they do things and process. And, so I learned, that if I got into the International Trades class, I would learn more about other people's background and I would be more open-minded.

Michael also reminded me about his grade point average: "I got a 3.23 this semester and I haven't done that since my very first semester of high school--my very first semester."

For the most part the students in this study were able to articulate an image of themselves academically; however, the interview sessions gave them some language to associate with their academic identity. While it proved difficult for some of them, they did not shrink from the question. Stephanie shared her difficulty:

. . . Trying to think about my academic self. I was, like, it was really hard for me to figure out what to write about it because, like, I never actually had to think about my academic self. So, that is why it took me so long and it took a lot of frustration because I couldn't think of anything of what to write. Cause, like, I can do, like, my school work and everything and do what I am supposed to do, but when it comes down to telling somebody about myself—academic self, and not athletic, it is difficult.

The same defiance towards the stereotypes was observed here in accordance with most of the other students in this study:

. . . so, like, how other people look at me and perceive me are, like—what they feel that I am or am not capable of it doesn't really matter to me because I know what I am capable of and I know that either way if they notice me or they don't I am still going to do just a good as I did before.”

Anita said the following when asked for a demonstration of her commitment to succeed in her school environment: “I think, it, like, just me knowing that I can do things that I—I tried and I failed on it. I just go back and doing it over again and having the right people push me and saying oh you can do it. And then, I finally do it.” Each of the students in this study shared his or her career aspirations; these included, Forensic Scientist, Psychiatrist, Social Worker, Businessman, Counselor, Attorney, Medical Doctor, Teacher,

and Surgical Technician. Each of them shared that the small learning community had not impacted these aspirations.

As for the small school structure, the students in this study ultimately did not suggest that the structure is the key to real change for African-American students or offer a positive impact on academic identity and aspiration. Michael offered this reflection: "I mean I think it works either way. The real change lies within the person because you can take anything and make it into something. Every time you get ample opportunity to make anything into something. The format right now for small schools is like better but if like they decided to change and go back to the old format, it wouldn't be really all that hard to explain to kids like why the new format." Michael was asked for his impression of the list of the things that might positively impact academic identity and aspiration. If he were allowed to name five things, what would they be, and he offered the following: "teachers, relationships, networking, peers, and self control." Anita, Kellie, Brian and Ronald suggested that negative stereotypes be challenged. This list was a good starting point, and rest of the study participants were asked the same question. All were astonishingly similar with one addition, the desire for curriculum that relates to their interests and represents a value for who they are in reality. John, Myra and Crystal stated that they wished teachers would use topics that students are interested in to make curriculum more interesting.

Amy, Linda, Tony and Stephanie offered that they would be willing to serve on a student committee to help teachers make the curriculum more relevant.

Stephanie, the student in Running Start, feels that this is happening for her at Clover Park, the college where she attends the program. Skyler offered this as final response about the curriculum:

I don't know if I could say anything new that I haven't already said about the small schools. Like, they are – they help you get to know people a little better, pretty much they help you get to know people a little better and kind of help you in school because the teachers do know you and you know the teachers a little better. The people you meet, it is supposed to be based around what you want to learn too.

### *Summary*

The African-American students who participated in this study showed a commitment to offering their interpretations for consideration in this study. They volunteered to be a part of this study, and they demonstrated an interest in talking about their daily lived experiences in their small schools. What they revealed was positive attitudes about the relationships with teachers and peers. Several of the students in this study had a positive description of how they interact with their teachers, and they attributed that to being in a smaller school with more regular contact. All of the students talked about

experiencing deeper relationships with their fellow students, and getting to know students they would not have been interested in getting to know if they had not met them in their academy. These findings are positive and can be attributed to the small school conversion. However, all is not positive.

For all of the 13 African-American students in this study racial stereotyping is a part of what they have to cope with in their daily moments in the classroom, in the hallway, in the cafeteria, and in co-curricular activities. These students offer testimony about how they cope, and some use the coping strategies described earlier. As stated above, small schools offer the potential for greater attachment and engagement for African-American students; however, there appear to be essential elements missing. These elements should address the obstacles to success that are created by a school environment that devalues nondominant cultural norms, ascribes ability based on negative racial stereotypes, and offers a curriculum that does not engage teachers and students as learners.

## Chapter V

### Discussion and Conclusion

The discussion here highlights the possibilities for real change for African-American students in small schools. Descriptions of how some African-American students at Conversion High School cope with messages about race, culture, and stereotypes are discussed. African-American students' desire for a culturally relevant curriculum is reflected upon. The discussion concludes with a focus on cultivating an awareness of how racial identity development and stereotype threat impact students and staff in school. The conclusion offers suggestions on what should be a critical component of any small school conversion aimed at cultivating a strong academic identity for African-American students.

#### *Small Schools and the Potential For Positive Impact on Academic Identity and Aspiration for African-American Students*

In *A Simple Justice: The Challenge of Small Schools*, Nieto (2000), suggests that small schools have the opportunity to show real promise for equity in education, “[S]mall schools can be the antidote to an educational system that has lost its soul as it has become more bureaucratic and impersonal” (Ayers, Klonsky & Lyons, p. 13). Fine (2003), offers the following in *High Schools on a Human Scale: How Small Schools Can Transform*

*American Education*: “Small ... will produce a sense of belonging almost immediately, but hugging is not the same as algebra. Rigor and care must be braided together, or we run the risk of creating small, nurturing environment that aren’t schools” (Toch, p. 121). What should accompany small size is the courage to forge new connections with students, teachers, without relying on long-standing practices that create barriers to a quality education for all students: “Small school size is not only a good idea a absolute prerequisite for qualitative change in deep-seated habits, not just in rhetoric” (Meier, 1995, p. 107). Lipman (1998) writes:

Caring environments may help break the spiral of cultural misunderstanding, subordination of minority students, student resistance, and censure that contributes to the failure and alienation of students of color. However, change on the part of the adults responsible for the development of students must be central to this process. (p. 36)

What this study suggests is that students hold solid opinions about small schools as well.

The interviews conducted for this study of how African-American students interpret their daily lived experiences in small schools suggests that these students have a great deal to share with educators, if they are asked to do so. Initially, 10 of the 13 students in this study reported a lack of

awareness about why their school was restructured into small academies.

The notion that the newly structured environment was designed to benefit the students, and not the teachers, was questioned by ten of the students, and out-right challenged by three of the students in this study, Amy, Linda, and Michael.

Over time, the interviews of and journaling by the students helped them to make a connection between the change to a smaller learning community, and the benefits that students might gain from it. This implies that a more direct, purposeful message about the interest in helping all students become academically successful would have helped these students make this connection. Gaps in communication like this are what the small school model is designed to address. Other gaps include academic achievement; gaps in meaningful relationships between teachers and students; gaps in the cultural value systems that provide as markers for what intelligent students look like, what intelligent students dress like, and how they speak; and gaps in meaningful classroom experiences with rigorous and relevant curriculum and with peers. Each one of these gaps is stubborn and, even with the structural changes, i.e., converting to small schools, some of these gaps persist more than others. The staff, administrators, and students must take a direct approach to dealing with each of these gaps.

### *The Gap in Culturally Relevant Curriculum*

The students in this study reported that they feel there is little development of a rigorous curriculum that incorporates a value for the scholarship of nondominant cultures. During the interviews, students were hard-pressed to describe a lesson that they connected with personally. Eventually, three of them offered a description; however, they said this was not the norm. This suggests that these students are not experiencing a curriculum that is engaging students through what the Gates Foundation refers to as *Essential Components of Teaching and Learning*. These components include *Active Inquiry*, where students are engaged in active participation, exploration, and research; *In-Depth Learning*, in which the focus is competence, not coverage. Students struggle with complex problems, explore core concepts to develop deep understanding, and apply knowledge in real-world contexts; and *Performance Assessment*, in which clear expectations define what students should know and be able to do; further students produce quality work products and present to real audiences; and student work shows evidence of understanding, not just recall (adapted from How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice, National Research Council, 1999) (see Appendix B). These components were described to the students in this study, and they all stated that these components do not describe their experiences with the curriculum. Lipman (1998) writes: "Articulating the connection of the

culture and power, proponents of *culturally relevant* pedagogy argue that, beyond cultural congruence or responsiveness, schooling must be relevant to the empowerment of African American people “(p. 29). Each of these students reported that they felt the curriculum was driven by what the teachers are comfortable teaching. Lipman (1998) further reminds us that:

According to Ladson-Billings and Henry (1990), unlike assimilationist teaching, culturally relevant teaching . . . uses students' culture to empower students to be able to critically examine educational content and process and ask what role they have in creating a truly democratic and multicultural society. (p. 29)

All students agreed that a different approach to the curriculum would make the academies more meaningful for them.

#### *Approaches to Coping with Messages About Race, Culture, and Stereotypes*

With regard to how African-American students approach academic performance and their interest in academic achievement, overall these students demonstrated an investment in their academic performance. They have developed the ability to coexist with negative racial stereotypes about African-Americans being anti-intellectual, and they demonstrate resilience with regard these messages. Their co-existence is not a meta-cognitive exercise; in other words, they are not consciously operating from knowledge about their

own thoughts and the factors that influence their thinking. They are operating and reacting based on the moments experienced throughout their day, and on the dominant messages about African-American students at Conversion High School. They automatically incorporate these messages when they interact with others.

The work of Carter (2005), in *Keepin It Real* offers a variety of profiles that describe how students of color navigate through the school environments that are built on the dominant cultural values, namely those of the White middle- class cultural norms juxtaposed against the values of people of color. First, these students point out that for them, the notion of “acting White” is not in direct opposition to “acting Black” and has little to do with intellect and more to do with ways of being culturally. This is consistent with Carter’s finding: “What I discovered in this research is that students use culture as a vehicle to signal many things, ranging from the stylistic to the political” (p. 8). Carter adds that: “resistance to ‘acting White’ for many African-American students is about maintaining cultural identity, not about embracing or rejecting the dominant standards of achievement” (p. 53). The findings in this study are consistent with Carter’s, in that the students talked about their investment in academic success, about the value of education, and about holding race as a central part of their identity. These can be described through the lens of the profiles cultural mainstreamer, cultural straddler and non-compliant believer

presented by Carter. These coping strategies are employed, not to camouflage their interest in academic success from their peers, but to navigate a hostile terrain, one marked by the academic racial profiling of nondominant cultural groups, in particular, African-Americans.

The majority of students in this study fit the profile of cultural straddler, as mentioned earlier by Carter (2005):

Cultural straddlers are characterized by bicultural perspectives; they are strategic movers across the cultural spheres. They “range in nature from students who ‘play the game’ and embrace the cultural codes of both school and home community, to students who vocally criticize the schools’ ideology while still achieving well academically. (p. 30)

Skyler, the 12th grade varsity basketball player with a solid college-ready transcript, talked about the connections he maintains with a former friend who is now in a gang. Skyler was asked about this relationship and whether he feels judged by this boy. He stated:

He hasn’t really judged me or anything like that. He is not “Oh man, you are a student.” He doesn’t say anything negative about me. But I am, like, ‘you are messing up’. And he just, like, doesn’t listen--he doesn’t want to hear it. But, a lot of, I think is, as you said, where are the parents at? Because, I know he had a lot of trouble at home with his mother. He had a little brother that went to a gang. His little brother

actually got into the gang before he did. And his little brother's friends were around and he had a lot of older people. They used to give him a hard time so he was dealing with all this stuff.

This is just one example of how Skyler is able to straddle the divide between being a popular athlete, focused on academics, and able to simultaneously navigate the terrains of his peers at school and in his neighborhood. He is vocal about the limited utility of the small schools for him, but he does believe that the smaller community has benefited some students and he even admits to feeling better about teachers. Skyler, who wears his hair braided, also sometimes wears Jordan's, talks about the cultural messages that are formed about this: "People probably either assume that I am just like any other Black guy, probably good at rhyming or poetry or something like that but not the smartest guy in the class." Skyler does not attempt to conform to the dominant cultural model of what an intellectual should look like, and he understands that people are making judgments about him as moves through his school day.

Ronald presents characteristics of the cultural straddler profile in his discussion about his musical taste:

I honestly don't know, I mean, I listen to rap, I listen to rock and so, because I listen to rock, people say I am White. I honestly think they are idiots. But, I only listen to music because I like it and me listening to

music has nothing to do with me going with either Afro-Americans or Caucasians or whatever. I just try and even myself out.

This is an example of Ronald being a “strategic mover across cultural spheres.” He is able to articulate his personal taste, and his reference to “idiots” implies that he has been challenged on this issue and is standing by his personal way of being. All the students that I categorized as cultural straddlers possessed this trait.

Anita and Kellie are friends who were approached to be in this study while they were having lunch. They each took a different approach to dealing with the stereotypes and straddling the cultural spheres. Kellie talked about the “loud Black ghetto girl” stereotype. She knows about the negative connotations associated with this image, but she refuses to let that determine her way of being or her investment in education. She talked about an observation she had during our interviews. In this case she was approached by a teacher in the hallway:

Like, there are these girls whose lockers who are by his classroom and, like, they are really loud and, like, every time they are out there he will be, like, get out my hall. You guys are always loud and I don't understand why all you guys are so loud. You need to go to class and learn something.

She was asked if they were all Black girls. In this case they were; however, Kellie pointed to the teacher's statement about "you guys" and she felt that [the teacher] meant Black girls. She was asked if other girls, besides African-American girls, were loud and she said: "Yes, but that stereotype goes for a lot of us. Because I know when I am with my friends I know I am loud. And, like, I know there are a lot of other people at Conversion High School who are not Black students, that they are just as loud."

Kellie went on to share that she knows how to behave in situations where she is not with her friends, as well as in class. In fact, she stated that she does not feel "seen" by her teachers: "In class I am just mellow." Kellie went on to say that she feels that most teachers do not know much about her, except that she comes to class and is quiet. We talked about her group of friends, and Kellie said she feels that she has diverse group of friends. However, she described the ways that cultural differences can put stress on friendships: "Some things you just can't talk about with them – like, I have this one friend, Samantha. And, she is Irish, White, and, like, one of my guy friends, he was like, "Oh, what is up." He is, like, slang talk, and she is, like, "I don't understand why he talks that way. I didn't understand one word he just said" and I was, like, "Well he said hey how are you doing are you coming over later?" I was, like, "yeah." She said, he said all of that and you understood. I was like, "yes." She was, like, "you guys are weird." While this kind of divide

can create tension, Kellie does not discount the value of having friends from different backgrounds and of knowing when and how to straddle the cultural divide. As Tatum (1997) notes, "Not only are Black adolescents encountering racism and reflecting on their identity, but their White peers, even when they are not the perpetrators (and sometimes they are), are unprepared to respond in supportive ways" (p. 60). Similarly, Carter (2005) writes:

Often we ignore the very real tensions between the symbolic, cultural boundaries established by racial and ethnic minority students--which have little to do with their desire for achievement, mobility, and success--and the cultural markers used by educators to mark intelligence and to categorize students" (p. 52).

Cultural straddlers "show great ability to calculate which cultural capital provided them with the greatest return in various contexts" (Carter, 2005, p. 64). The 10 students I categorized as cultural straddlers demonstrated this characteristic through their testaments about their internal drive to succeed alongside their knowledge that they are stereotyped initially, and they make conscious efforts to dispel those myths; they are aware that they are not representing the dominant cultural codes, and that they must navigate through them. As Carter points out, "They can move back and forth between their peers' slang and cultural codes and Standard English and other academic

signifiers of intelligence and compliance” (p. 39). This strategy is quite different from the one employed by the cultural mainstreamer.

Myra, Crystal, and John are all enrolled in Thrive, the academy described as where the “smart” kids are. Two of these students are formally elected leaders in the school: Myra is the Student Body President and John is the Vice-President. They, as Carter puts it, “fit the teacher’s student ideal” (p. 33). Consistent with Carter’s study description, these students expressed negative attitudes about their peers, in particular, African-American peers who did not seem to understand how to act. While John was not explicit in his communication about how he distances himself from students who exhibit behaviors that are not seen as good by the dominant culture of the school, he made it clear that he makes good choices. He knows that he is rewarded in his school environment, hence his leadership role in the school as the Student Body Vice-President.

In contrast, Myra and Crystal had a great deal to say about their fellow African-American students and indicated they do not necessarily like them. They both make a conscious choice to disassociate with Black students until they prove themselves otherwise. Myra stated flat out that she does not like most of the Black kids at Conversion “because they are not going anywhere. They are loud, ghetto, because more Black girls are pregnant than any other

girls and they just represent the negative stereotypes about African-Americans.”

Both Myra and Crystal described how they are purposeful about who their friends are (mostly mixed groups) and they feel that the school is able to see them differently because of who they hang out with. They also described and how they express their disgust for those students who they feel confirm negative stereotypes about Blacks. Both girls talked about their relationships with their teachers and their awareness that these adults do not see them in the same way as other African-American students, especially not “loud,” “ghetto” “dumb” girls. That is the description from Myra when asked about the Black population at Conversion: “The reputation is everybody here is ghetto and stupid. And I am not ghetto and I am not dumb.” While she feels this reputation goes across race sometimes, and the entire school perpetuates stereotypes, Myra shared strong feelings about the Black students:

“Talking about just the Black kids here at Conversion and stuff like that. I pretty much realized that I don’t like most of them. Seriously, like, I just don’t. I don’t like the way they carry themselves and they you know it just creates – justifies a lot of stereotypes about Black people, you know what I mean? Like, seriously, it gets on my nerves. Like, I realize that I get irritated every time I hear some loud little girl in the hallway, yelling down the hallway. Like, I get really irritated, like, probably for the

rest of the day. Like, there is no reason for you to be that loud type thing.

The cultural mainstreamer profile is a better fit for these students:

“cultural mainstreamers emphasize both the similarities between racial and ethnic minority groups and Whites and the incorporation of the former into the opportunity structure. They expect group members to act according to traditional assimilationist values, which call for individuals from minority groups to accommodate to and ultimately be absorbed into American schools, workplaces and communities” (Carter 2005 p. 28). In addition, “Cultural mainstreamers accept the ideology that nondominant group members should be culturally, socially, economically, and politically assimilated” (Carter, p. 29). Myra and Crystal represented this viewpoint through our interviews when we talked about Black students. The two girls said they believe some Black students’ actions are maintaining styles of dress and communication that are negatively impacting their success. Myra and Crystal stated that they do not have friends that do not comply with the norms of the dominant culture at the school, one which offers negative images about the nondominant culture.

Amy, on the other hand, is the only student in my study that resembled the profile of noncompliant believer. Amy reminisced about her past academic performance as being really good at first, and at the time of this study she was showing little attachment to school at all. The description of school attachment

and engagement presented by Carter and others is used here: “*attachment*—that is the degree to which students feel embedded in, welcomed or as part of the school—from the behavioral component of their *engagement*, whether students put effort in schools, are attentive, complete homework and so forth” (Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder, 2001; p. 11). Here, the research points to African-American students being less attached to school and more likely to be engaged in school.

Amy’s vigorous criticism of the small schools could be described as her attempt to justify her level of attachment and engagement and the time spent on MySpace:

A lot teachers said the small schools were supposed to get students closer to the teachers and that they were going to help us more, but I think it is pointless because it doesn’t like – its not even like we are really in small schools. We have all the regular classes that you used to and you are just like in different sections of the school but – it hasn’t got me closer to none of my teachers and I haven’t got more help than I did last year. So I think it is kind of pointless. The small schools is a waste of money.

This, along with her admission that she wants to get better grades but is on Myspace for four hours per day, even when she knows she has homework,

demonstrates little engagement in school. This was also evident in her unwillingness, initially, to take responsibility for her grades.

Amy had to reschedule one of the weekly interviews twice as she was at the hospital one night with her cousin, who is her age and having a baby, and another time she had her wisdom teeth pulled. Amy seemed angry at times when she talked about school; one example was when she was asked to purchase a book, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, for her class. She stated that it would be a waste of money and she could not understand why the teacher would pick that book for everyone to read. Amy described reading one page and not being able to tell what she read when she was done. She felt that the teachers in her academy, Galaxy, did not confer on homework assignments and therefore, she was overwhelmed and fell behind. Amy also talked about her English teacher's praise of White students who did a family tree presentation and had members of the family come to class. The teacher commented that she "Knew they would do a great job." Amy felt that was a "slam" on her and fellow African-American students; she read the comment as meaning that the teacher did not expect them to do a similar great job. Amy fits the profile of the noncompliant believer as she "views education as a means to an end"; however she is not demonstrating a level of engagement that would support this belief. This is what Carter et al., and colleagues (2005, p. 11) refer to as the "attitude-achievement paradox" that marks those who

perform poorly in school. Those students whose school performances contradict their beliefs in education may act out and talk back to teachers, cut classes, or fail to do their homework because they feel less attached to, or welcomed in the school.

Amy's grades dropped, she was challenged to stay in school by her social life and her job at Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) food chain, and disengaged from schooling in ways that Carter describes as leading either to academic failure or low school performance. Amy is a dancer, and she stated that is the only venue where she feels "seen" by teachers as a contributing member of the Conversion High School community. She hopes to attend Clark Atlanta University; she has visited the school and has a cousin that attends there. Amy talked about the adoration that her family lavished on her cousin when she was accepted there and she wants that kind of adoration as well. She aspires to become an attorney. By the time the interview sessions ended, Amy stated what she would do differently to keep her grades up. She admitted to not trying as hard as she could and said if she had to do it over again, she would give it 110%. Amy was forthcoming with her belief that education is a way for her to become successful. However, she had some real issues with teachers and the messages about the value of African-American students at Conversion High School. At the end of the interviews, Amy's aspirations to go to college and become an attorney had not changed. She

demonstrated her understanding that education is critical to her success, and she also understood that her expectations for achieving these goals would require her to behave differently. To quote Carter (2005): “Aspirations are not equivalent to expectations. However, as aspirations signify what a student dreams of or envisions given ideal conditions, while expectations take into account the student’s reality, and his or her actual material, familial, or academic circumstances, which may or may not support one’s aspirations”(Carter, 2005, p. 41).

What is offered here is a glimpse of how the African-American students in this study interpret the impact of the small school conversion on their academic aspirations and the development of their academic identity, and the impact is not a positive one. Even within the small schools, these African-American students are continuously coping with the various gaps that impinge on their ability to come to school purely as a student. For these students, ranging in grade point average from 2.0–4.0, one of the most persistent gaps lies within the cultural value systems that continue to compete with the development of meaningful relationships between teachers and students, particularly, the markers for what intelligent students look and dress like and how they speak.

*Consideration of Racial Identity Development and Threats to Academic Identity Development*

The responses to the question about how African-American students interpret how being in a smaller learning community or academy impacts their academic identity and aspiration suggests that the schools, while a work in progress; that is, the schools are missing critical markers for positive impact and meaningful change for these students. What was implied here is that matriculation in these smaller learning communities calls upon these 13 students to convince a smaller group of teachers and peers that they are individuals. Their manner of dress, status as an athlete, and intergroup relations do not define their investment, their academic achievement, or their intellect. However, messages focused on the development of one's academic identity are subtle, and 11 of the 13 students in this study had to search when describing instances in their classrooms and the school environment that deliberately spoke to their academic identity. There is no purposeful dialogue on the part of school leaders to develop language and value for one's academic identity. However, I would suggest students are not alone in stages of identity development, and dialogue about identity development in general may uncover obstacles to learning and building meaningful relationships between students and educators.

The teaching force in Conversion High School is similar to that of most schools in the United States, overwhelmingly White and female. Many of these individuals come to the profession with good intentions and carry their values consciously and unconsciously into the classroom; messages about different racial groups are a part of those values. Lipman (1998) writes: “. . . [T]eachers ideologies influence how they construct student identities and this in turn influences the reproduction or disruption of social inequalities, for example, what knowledge students have access to or which track they are assigned to” (p. 27). In her study to track ideological processes in the context of restructuring, Lipman captured how teachers talk about African-American students. She also captured some of their educational practices with regard African-American students. Lipman writes:

From conversations and observations, I identified four, non-mutually exclusive explanations for African American students' low academic achievement. The four explanations were:

1. A *deficit model* that attributed school failure to deficiencies in students' social and economic condition, their families and culture (cf. Flores, Cousin, & Diaz, 1991) and which were labeled 'at risk';

2. *A social relations model* that assumed that students did not do well because of an absence of support from school adults and because of a lack of sense of school membership;
3. *A critique of racism* that emphasized the role of racial inequality, racism, and marginalization and powerlessness in the low achievement and alienation of African American students;
4. *An educational critique* of curriculum, instruction, and school policies (p. 73).

These findings imply that for the most part, teachers locate the problem of low achievement in African-American students themselves. This suggests that the impact of teacher biases is not considered here.

In schools, like Conversion High School, with a student population that is urban and ethnically and racially diverse, teachers may have a heartfelt desire to effect change for these students. But they may not yet be fully aware of the depth at which their dominant cultural norms may impede the teaching and learning process. Teachers, administrators, and students need better resources to explore how these cultural norms impact students. Critical self-exploration on the part of staff and students will help these small learning communities achieve meaningful teaching and learning goals.

Tatum (1997) writes: "We are better able to resist the negative impact of oppressive messages when we see them coming than when they are

invisible to us. While some may think it is a burden to children to encourage this critical consciousness, I consider it a gift" (p. 47). This critical consciousness should be cultivated in all members of the school community, large or small. This includes students, teachers, administrators, and support staff. The community should consider the stages of racial identity development for students and staff. For this study in which African-American students are the focus, the stages of Black Identity Development described in the work of Cross (1991), and mentioned earlier, serves as a valuable resource. The stages of Black Identity Development are described as: Stage 1: Pre-encounter, depicting the identity to be changed. Stage 2: Encounter, isolates the point at which the person feels compelled to change. Stage 3: Immersion-Emersion, describes the vortex of identity change. Stage 4 and 5: Internalization and Internalization-Commitment describe the habituation and internalization of the new identity (p. 190). A commitment to learning more about these stages of racial identity development and how they shape what is meaningful for African-American youth can offer a bridge to reach students and create a platform for shaping the teaching and learning experiences between students and educators. Forming meaningful relationships between students, teachers and staff is at the core of small school transformation, and racial-identity awareness and exploration should be undertaken by all, including those who are members of the dominant, White middle-class culture.

In *Black and White Racial Identity*, Helms (1990) describes the stages of White Identity Development. They include Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independence and Autonomy. She describes them as follows:

1. Contact:

Obliviousness to racial/cultural issues. A person in the Contact stage typically approaches the world with a color-blind or cultureless perspective and general naiveté about how race and racism impact on herself or himself as well as other people. Such a person generally views Blacks with curiosity and/or trepidation. The person rarely thinks of herself or himself as in racial terms.

2. Disintegration:

Awareness of the social implications of race on a personal level. During this stage, the person may feel caught between White and Black culture, oppression and humanity. On the other hand, she or he does not want to assume responsibility for discrimination by acknowledging his or her Whiteness and the benefits that result there from; on the other hand, because one and (usually) one's social environment are not Black, one cannot identify entirely with Blacks or Black culture.

3. Reintegration:

“Idealization of everything perceived to be White and denigration of everything thought to be Black. Anger covertly and overtly expressed as well as projection of one’s feelings characterizes the person in this stage.

4. Pseudo-Independence:

“Internalization of Whiteness and capacity to recognize personal responsibility to ameliorate the consequences of racism. The person has an intellectual understanding of Black culture and the unfair benefits of growing up White in the United States.

5. Autonomy:

Bicultural or racially transcendent world view. He or she has internalized a positive, non-racist White identity, values cultural similarities and differences, feels a kinship with people regardless of race, and seeks to acknowledge and abolish racial oppression. (pp. 68-69)

Self-examination and the understanding of what stage of White Identity development one is experiencing is a critical undertaking. If educators, especially those working with African-American students, are sincere in their desire to serve students, they will embark on this deep meaningful journey. Educators and students who do the work of understanding the stages of racial identity development and how they are impacting the schooling of African-

American students, in particular, create an opportunity to build a school environment that will value all members of the school community. This community includes the classroom, the hallways and the cafeteria.

Educators in urban schools like Conversion High School would be well served if their teacher and administrator preparation programs provided them with more than a surface look at multicultural education. Tatum (1997) argues:

Schools concerned about meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population should be looking specifically for teachers of all backgrounds with demonstrated experience in working with multiracial populations, with courses on their transcripts like Psychology of Racism; Race, Class, Culture and Gender in the Classroom; and Foundations of Multicultural Education, to name a few. (p. 125).

Educators who teach multiracial student populations should develop critical observation skills around racial and cultural issues. They must also be learners, and be open to being challenged and supported by those from the nondominant culture. Carter uses the term multicultural navigator to describe individuals who might serve as coaches in the school and in the classroom.

### *Multicultural Navigator*

A multicultural navigator is an individual who demonstrates an appreciation for the value of dominant and nondominant cultural capital and its

meanings for diverse student groups: “While dominant cultural capital can play a critical role in socioeconomic attainment, the possession of nondominant cultural capital is critical to the status of individuals from socially marginalized groups—to their sense of belonging, connection, and identity” (Carter 2005, p. 161). Here, I concur with Carter’s suggestion that we must engage multicultural navigators, with a specific goal of both illuminating the value of nondominant cultural capital and how the stages of racial identity development shape experiences in the classroom for everyone involved.

Schools must enlist the skills of multicultural navigators to help shape learning communities with formal institutional support of the role these individuals play in the entire school. We know that teachers, in particular those teaching in high-poverty, high-minority schools, frequently cite a lack of resources as reason for low performance. It would serve small learning communities like those at Conversion High school well to invest in staff with a focus on multiracial populations. Becoming seasoned in this area can take a tremendous amount of time, and proper guidance for students, teachers, and staff is critical. Carter (2005) writes: “Learning to recognize cultural and institutional racism and other forms of inequity without also learning stages to respond to them is a prescription for despair” (p. 49). These individuals should possess advanced knowledge and skill at critical observation in racialized environments. They should have personally evolved to advanced stages of

racial identity development regardless of their race. It is important they bring personal value and understanding of how dominant and nondominant cultural norms benefit all in the school setting.

Carter (2005) writes:

When dominant social groups define and circumscribe what is appropriate for success and achievement, the choices made by low-income African-American and Latino youths can have negative academic consequences. It should be a matter of personal choice whether individuals listen to hip-hop music or soft rock, dress FUBU or L.L. Bean, or maintain mixed-or same-group peer associations. (p. 75)

A suggestion like this one was offered by one of the students in this study.

Michael, a 12th student in this study, suggested that student academic identity and aspirations could be developed with what he called "chaperoning." He was asked to describe how this would work: ". . . the chaperoning in support of your academic identity. Not just your athletic identity or social identity." This suggests that Michael feels that chaperoning is occurring to develop the athletic identity and social identity of African-American students. When asked if the small school model should provide this, he replied, "Yes. Now a new format can hone in on your academic skills and it can make sure that you try to get the best opportunities that you can and get like the best

grades and stuff. Because now, sports like that really shouldn't be the issue right now." Carter (2005) comments:

Multicultural navigators, as sources of social capital, facilitate relationships of trust and reciprocity between the cultural gatekeepers and these youths. They demonstrate how these kids might negotiate the not so easily penetrable boundaries of the opportunity structure without forsaking their origins as "raced", "ethicized", and "classed" beings in a stratified society. (p. 152)

The individuals can help illuminate the subtle and not so subtle messages that fill the teaching learning moments and block true connections.

A good multicultural navigator or chaperone, as Michael suggested, is not only someone of the same race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status as the student. He or she would need to be a person experienced in crossing multiple cultural borders while maintaining the agility as a teacher and learner; such a person would need to model the skills of critical observation, active listening and engagement. Feagin and Sikes, (1994) suggest that establishing currency around the nondominant cultural capital would be an essential skill set for these individuals: "As sources of social capital, multicultural navigators become critical to the lives of low-income African-American and Latino youths because they are successful at negotiating the different dynamics that ethnic

and class minorities encounter when they enter White-dominant, middle-class social organizations” (Carter, 2005, p. 152)

The benefits of having multicultural navigators collaborating with teachers in the classroom would create coaching opportunities in relation to messages from the curriculum, that is, possible dialogue about a hidden curriculum or unconscious messages posited through the curricular content. Our students need teachers who are willing to join them in the learning journey. As Carter suggests, “they need teachers who have not only pedagogic skill and cultural sensitivity but also deeper social understanding and some capability to handle the many ways that students will differ from one another. As long as educators refuse to acknowledge the hierarchy of cultural meanings in schools, they help to reproduce a class of noncompliant students, students at risk for limited educational attainment and economic dependence” (p. 156).

The small schools movement is in the midst of many defining moments in their transformation. These moments might be seen as opportunities to engage a variety of stakeholders in the pipeline to serving all of our children equitably in schools. Teacher education programs for example could take a closer look at their own biases in recruiting and admitting future teachers. Delpit (2002) asks the question: “Do the assumptions of the teaching profession socialize Black teacher candidates out of the cultural and linguistic

dispositions which would make them more effective with Black children?" (p. 182). Thereby, diminishing their potential to become good multicultural navigators themselves.

Multicultural navigators might be resources from a variety of sectors in the community. They may be successful by standards valued in any culture, such as leadership, power, and status. However, they should also possess experience and the awareness of how to navigate multifaceted social and cultural borders. These individuals can help students and teachers through role modeling and relationships. Multicultural navigators seem to have "made it" without appearing to have acculturated or given in to the establishment. Why is this so important? "These youth, though aspiring to social and economic success, want to make it in another way, not in the perceived 'White' way, and not in a way that requires them to denigrate their dynamic linguistic, interactional, musical or clothing styles" (Carter, 2005. p. 155). I would like to suggest that small schools could benefit from cultivating a permanent role for such individuals as staff members. It may serve to be a wise investment. By schools doing so, students who leave these environments with a strong academic identity--greater attachment and engagement to school may stay connected and thereby a pipeline is created for real systemic change. As Carter proposes, "If we can figure out how to acknowledge and affirm the multiple capitals that exist while avoiding the structuring of achievement by

race and ethnicity, then we could be one step closer to increasing these students' attachment and engagement in school" (p. 76). A purposeful focus on eliminating negative stereotypes and cultivating awareness about the importance of seeing the individual first should eliminate the need for students to come to school with a dual purpose: not being seen negatively which is in competition with their focus on learning.

Academic racial profiling proved to be a big obstacle for students in this study, and the small academy model has not addressed or diminished this in their opinions. Creating currency that is purposely tied to academic achievement for African-American students is missing for these particular students.

The myth that "style of dress" and "manner of being" are indicators of academic skill needs to be unpacked, addressed and ultimately challenged by all in the school setting. The students in this study reported that the athletic teams were overwhelmingly comprised of Black students. Dispelling the myth that Black students bring the most value through athletics needs to be addressed, and purposeful integration of athletic teams is needed. Obliterating these stereotypes needs to become part of the culture, and a way of doing business for all parties in the school, "Because they have been in place for so long, such patterns of separation have been rationalized as the

project of choices made freely by the students” (Noguera, 2001, p. 34). I

concur with Noguera’s statement that:

because many students and teachers have come to accept this form of racial separation as voluntary and therefore unavoidable, there has been relatively little willingness to take responsibility for the wide disparities in academic outcomes and the social tensions that accompany these patterns, nor has there been much acknowledgement that these patterns profoundly include the future opportunities available to students. (p. 34).

The acknowledgement that stereotyping in any form should be challenged and should involve the school site as a whole in self-discovery, in the dismantling of negative social stereotypes, and in empowering students through a curriculum that involves them as both teachers and learners.

Curriculum that highlights the acknowledgement that intelligence is not fixed and not a function of race should be an intentional component of the dominant discourse among students, teachers, and administrators. This will help to challenge the stereotypes about students of color and the value they bring to the academic identity of the school.

In *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality and Development*, Dweck (2000) points to the research done by Aronson (1998), in which African-American undergraduate students were taught the

“incremental theory” of intelligence. These students came to understand that intelligence is not fixed and is not tied to race. “For this purpose they used a short film presenting scientific explanations, researchers’ testimonies in neurological graphics, and research findings to the effect that every time people meet a challenge, exert mental effort, and learn something new, their brain grows neurons and they become smarter” (Dweck, 2000, p. 37). Steele (1997) describes how Aronson’s study impacted the academic performance of African-American students in the study: “For example, having African-American college students repeatedly advocate the expandability of intelligence to their elementary school tutees significantly improved their own grades” (p. 625). Focusing on this kind of topic in *Active Inquiry* (see Appendix B), where students are engaged in active participation, exploration, and research, activities draw out perceptions and develop understanding: “Schools are more than institutions where teachers impart skills and lessons; they are places where teachers transmit cultural knowledge” (Carter 2005, p. 47).

The school environment perpetuates messages, as we have learned from the stubborn message about stereotypes. Taking this model and applying it to messages about why and how students are to benefit from the small school conversion seems necessary:

As educators who should be committed to helping young people realize their intellectual potential as they make their way toward adulthood, we

have a responsibility to help them find ways to expand their notions of identity related to race and in so doing, help them discover all that they may become. (Sadowski, 2003; Noguera 2001, p. 29)

Educators stand to gain as much as the students, and, specifically the opportunity to discover who they can become as teachers and administrators. This study suggests that such opportunities are possible and that students are interested in being active participants. While the perceptions and interpretations are those of one small group of African-American students in an urban small school conversion, their voices should be considered as educators move forward in attempting to close the achievement gap through the creation of small schools.

#### *Creating an Environment that Cultivates Identity Safety*

The small learning community is by its structure poised to target other issues that negatively impact African American student performance. Steele (1997) suggests that strategically creating a setting that is focused on what he calls "Identity Safety" is an important step in eliminating stereotype threat (p. 628). The setting should include leadership that is devoted to understanding the cues in the school environment that represent threats to academic performance. The setting should bring students and adults together to engage in building relationships with the understanding of how stereotype threat and

ability and performance are associated. There should be an emphasis on de-racializing the environment and there should be integrated friendships and networks. The environment should be filled with self-affirmation cues to counteract the cues that present a threat.

Steele (1997) further offers ways in which individuals can create identity safety, including: learning goals and self management, attributional strategies, stereotype dilution, and through skill ability creating a role for supplemental education on combating stereotype threat. This can only be achieved if the adults take the first steps. However, this may prove to be challenging if the educators lack the proper resources and guidance.

Tatum (1997) writes:

When I talk to educators about the need to provide adolescents with identity-affirming experiences and information about their own cultural groups, they sometimes flounder because this information has not been part of their own education. Their understanding of adolescent development has been limited to the White middle-class norms included in most textbooks, their knowledge of Black history limited to Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks. (p. 74)

Limitations such as these further marginalize African-American student identity in the academic domain. Educators must be willing to investigate and initiate discussions about race and why so few images of African-Americans positive

contributions are necessary for one to be considered culturally competent. Further, conversations about racial differences are occurring among students inside and outside of the classroom and educators must not ignore the subject.

Ladson-Billings writes: "My own experiences with white teachers, both preservice and veteran, indicate that many are uncomfortable acknowledging any student differences and particularly racial differences" (p. 31). This is an example of silencing or an "undiscussable" that Fine (1998) refers to in describing how schools become paralyzed by what is not being said. Ladson-Billings argues that:

Given the significance of race and color in American society, it is impossible to believe that a classroom teacher does not notice the race and ethnicity of the children she is teaching. Further, by claiming not to notice, the teacher is saying that she is dismissing one of the most salient features of the child's identity and that she does not account for it in her curricular planning and instruction. (p. 33)

Failing to acknowledge racial and cultural backgrounds of students and the legacy of their treatment in our system of education is ultimately in service to the educator's comfort. Lipman (1998) writes: "For example, several studies of desegregated schools show teachers publicly failed to acknowledge the patently unequal status of African American students; a color-blind philosophy

perpetuated racial inequalities despite the salience of these inequalities in the schools” (Clement, Eisenhart, & Harding, 1979; Scherer & Slawski, 1979; Schofield, 1982). Students should not carry the burden of creating awareness about cultural repertoires, especially in the face of the entrenched dominant cultural norms. The student voices in this study offer an interpretation of how some small environments are impacting their educational experience in a positive way. Their student voices also remind us that there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done to create an environment that offers positive affirmations about African-American student academic identity.

This study is limited in offering a global perspective on what it means to be an African-American student who enrolled in a large comprehensive high school that was converted into a group of small schools. These limitations preclude the offering information about how students who are not African-American, not consistently identified as inferior intellectually, and not regularly associated with the achievement gap are experiencing small school transformation. The limitations referred to here are important data to gather, and this study may offer a platform for further investigation. I had no predetermined ideas about what being in the small academy model offered these particular students, consequently took care to avoid researcher bias, and came to these interviews as a pure listener and learner. I took great care to listen for how the students felt the curriculum, peers, educators and their

school community impacted their experience. The focus, however, remained on how the small school designed to impact academic achievement resonated with the lived experience of these African-American students at Conversion High School.

### *Conclusion*

For the 13 students in this study there was a discernable concrete connection to the actual benefit of what getting a good education meant for them. The connection was evidenced by their discussions about their future aspirations, which included going to college. However, the strongest support for these aspirations did not come from their school experience; it came from their homes. Even Michael and Amy, the two students who exhibited what is termed “attitude-achievement paradox” (Mickelson, 1990; and Carter, 2005 p. 39), showed an awareness of the contradiction between their stated educational goals and their behavior or “how and why school practices often diverge from educational beliefs” (Carter, 2005, p. 39). I was struck by the dedication these students showed to me as a researcher, who came weekly to their school during their lunch period.

Each of these students maintained his or her commitment to participate in the study, and all of them expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to talk about their daily lived experiences at school. The theme of examining

one's academic identity and trying to determine how the environment is speaking to that identity and student aspiration is something that these students want to continue to explore. Students were asked if they could describe their academic identity based on our established definition in the interview language. Responses included: "I guess it is okay. Like, it is doing good – I would say before the meetings I didn't think about it, yeah before the meetings and stuff it was kind of iffy a little bit." When one student was asked to read her journal entry she offered the following:

Today I went to my lunch with Miss Bobby. I felt pretty good knowing that I really could talk with someone about what was going on at school and in the environment. She asked me some really good and meaningful questions that I responded back to very good. But, I think that going to the session would really help to analyze and go straight to the point. I think that from now until June I will be more aware about my environment and the things they are trying to do to help me be successful in life.

This suggests that these students are interested in shaping their learning environment if only they were asked. "Too often, the generational divide among teachers, parents, and students inhibit the elders from listening to the children" (Carter, 2005, p. 163.) Lipman (1998) offers:

New opportunities for collegial learning and dialogue may foster a critical reexamination of beliefs about and practices with marginalized students and create an arena for advocates of African American students to challenge existing regularities. Yet, another is that the interchange generated by closer relationships with students may prompt teachers to question some of their own taken-for-granted notions about African American students. (p. 36)

I suspected that there were students at Conversion High School who would be willing to meet with me weekly, journal about their daily school lives, and share that with me. This turned out to be true.

When students were approached in the cafeteria to participate in this study, they exhibited a great deal of interest in and appreciation for being in the study. These students did not separate themselves from the general population; they were not the ones in the library, they were not the ones in special clubs. They listened to my presentation about the study and they then volunteered. This also suggests to me that the opportunity to engage the average African-American student, and others like them, in the continuous development of meaningful small learning communities exists at Conversion High School. I suspect the same opportunity exists at other schools. As Carter (2005) has argued: "Educators and other adults must also provide a context in which students can apply their own insights to facilitate positive and potentially

transformative change. Educators must show up as learners, the type of engaged learners that we expect the students to be when this happens: “Educators and students can work together to figure out effective ways for students to engage at “teachers” too” (p. 164).

The students in this study revealed how the intractable obstacle that is set in place by viewing students through the lens of the dominant White middle-class markers of intelligence and decorum is damaging on many levels. These obstacles are significantly damaging when this lens defines what knowledge is and when nondominant cultural capital is devalued by the gatekeepers of the dominant cultural capital. “The challenge remains to acknowledge the relevance and depth of students’ attitudes and beliefs and the critical insight they provide about schooling without trivializing and merely reducing their actions to the outcomes of youthfulness and misplaced values” (Carter, 2005, p. 174).

Carter (2005) writes:

It is in our schools that students begin to accrue dominant “cultural capital” It exists in three forms: embodied; objectified; and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital consists of schemes of appreciation and understanding—for example, a taste for certain music, art, literature, or an elite sport. . . . “Objectified cultural capital inhering in such things as books, artwork, or music collections, yields

specialized cultural knowledge of the ways of life of the middle and upper classes; and finally, institutionalized cultural capital helps one attain professional success by attaining credentials and higher degrees.

(p. 49)

According to the perceptions of the students in this study, the small academies, singularly and collectively, are sending the same message about who is intelligent. In many instances, they use superficial markers to determine this. Many students understand that this is not right or accurate. However, they have not processed the long-term consequences they stand to suffer by not examining what these cultural messages are signifying for them, especially since they are subject to making judgments about their fellow students based on these same cultural norms. Unless they become aware, they cannot begin to understand the impact of these norms or to begin obliterating them. Simple non-conformity with dominant norms, can serve, in the moment, to preserve self-expression. However, the student's attachment and engagement to the school might be sacrificed. If a pupil does not conform to these images, no matter how sharp his native ability, then he or she is marginalized (Carter, 2005). This study presents findings that are consistent with those presented by Darder (1991) in *Keepin It Real*, where students "claim that their school attachment and engagement are often affected by how teachers and principals, the schools' cultural gatekeepers, parcel out rewards

and sanctions according to who abides by the dominant cultural rules” (Carter, 2005, p. 6).

Embarking on a truly sincere journey to find out what is shaping the African-American students’ lived experiences in their school day, and how these experiences impacts their aspirations and academic achievement will require resources that may not be present in the small school model. The idea of including what Carter calls multicultural navigators as resources for students, teachers, and administrators could be critical to the success of impacting African-American student interpretation of how the small schools structure impacts their academic identity and aspirations.

The small school movement is a work in progress. Capturing and applying what we learn about what is demotivating students and depreciating the learning experiences for all students is essential for the small schools to create real change.

Multiple cultural repertoires do and should exist, and the common cultural repertoire that we share should be continually checked and balanced, revisited, revamped, and revitalized to ensure that it is representative of the entire society. At the same time, the students in this study and others like them require some help negotiating, expanding their ideas and presentations of self, and ultimately balancing different social “acts”. (Carter. 2005, p. 63)

As these redesigned schools continue to emerge, it is vital that the design process include resources, both human and financial, coupled with the courage to be uncomfortable initially when dealing with the impact of academic racial profiling and understanding how racial identity development is shaping interactions among all those in the school.

Empowered with the awareness of how racial identity development shapes how students and educators interact can lead to the deliberate focus on eradicating the academic racial stereotyping that is a stubborn reality, even within the small learning communities. Tatum (1997) suggests a number of key questions:

However, the questions that educators and other concerned adults must ask are, How did academic achievement become defined as exclusively White behavior? What is it about the curriculum and the wider culture that reinforce the notion that academic excellence is an exclusively White domain? What curricular interventions might we use to encourage the development of an empowered emissary identity? (p. 64)

Educators armed with knowledge about Black and White racial identity development will answer these questions very differently than others who are not. This knowledge coupled with an understanding of the cues about stereotypes that represent threats to academic performance may prove less

daunting in a small learning community, and may produce real change in student outcomes.

It will be necessary to create common cultural repertoires that refuse to allow students from nondominant cultures to be distracted from cultivating their academic identity because they are busy dispelling negative racial stereotypes, and combating racial profiling about their intellect and the value they place on academic achievement. As Ayers and colleagues (2000) point out, "If we only move the administrators and teachers from large schools to smaller ones, without providing needed resources and further education and other types of support, we will simply end up with small schools that replicate big ones" (p. 14). In this study, the students in the small academies of Conversion High School implied that this is their reality.

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## Appendix A:

### Attributes of High Achievement Schools Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

**Common Focus:** staff and students are focused on a few important goals.

The school has adopted a consistent research-based instructional approach based on shared beliefs about teaching and learning. The use of time, tools, materials and professional development activities are aligned with instruction.

**High Expectations:** staff members are dedicated to helping students achieve state and local standards; students are engaged in an ambitious and rigorous course of study; and students leave school prepared for success in work, further education and citizenship

**Personalized:** The school is designed to promote sustained student relationships with adults where every student has an adult advocate and a personal plan for progress. Schools are small. No more than 600 students (less than 400 strongly recommended). **Respect and Responsibility:** The environment is authoritative, safe ethical, and studious. The staff teaches, models, and expects responsible behavior and relationships are based on mutual respect.

**Time To Collaborate:** Staff has time to collaborate and develop skills and plans to meet the needs of all students. Parents are recognized as partners in education. Partnerships are developed with businesses to create work-based

opportunities and with institutions of higher education to improve teacher preparation and induction. **Performance Based:** Students are promoted to the next instructional level only when they have achieved competency. Students receive additional time and assistance when needed to achieve this competency.

**Technology As A Tool:** Teachers design engaging and imaginative curriculum linked to learning standards, analyze results, and have easy access to best practices and learning opportunities. Schools publish their progress to parents and engage the community in dialogue about continuous improvement.

## Appendix B:

### Essential Components of Teaching and Learning

The Foundation's education grant programs are predicated on three essential components of powerful teaching and learning (adapted from *How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice*, National Research Council, 1999)

**ACTIVE INQUIRY:** Students are engaged in active participation, exploration, and research; activities draw out perceptions and develop understanding; students are encouraged to make decisions about their learning; and teachers utilize the diverse experiences of students to build effective learning experiences.

**IN-DEPTH LEARNING:** The focus is competence, not coverage. Students struggle with complex problems, explore core concepts to develop deep understanding; and apply knowledge in real world contexts

**PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT:** Clear expectations define what students should know and be able to do; students produce quality work products and present to real audiences; student work shows evidence of understanding, not just recall; assessment tasks allow students to exhibit higher-order thinking; and teachers and students set learning goals and monitor progress.

## Appendix C:

### Interview Questions African-American Student Identity and Aspiration in an Urban Small School Transformation

#### Interview Questions:

- What grade are you in currently?
- Is this grade level represented by the number of credits you have and the courses you have completed with a passing grade?
- Have you attended Conversion High School since the 9<sup>th</sup> grade?
- Do you plan on going to college? If yes, why? If not, why not?
- In your opinion, what are some of the impediments to student aspirations for college at your high school?
- What social, cultural and school factors influence these aspirations?
- Is this small, strategically engineered environment working for your betterment?
- What images of African-American students dominate your educational journey in this small school environment?
- How is this environment supporting or challenging your future aspirations that relate to academic achievement?

- How is your identity being transformed by this new environment?
- Are you growing new aspirations?
- Is the environment calling on you to behave differently as a high school student?
- How does race play into this?
- And finally, knowing that there are scholarships tied to these specific schools, how does that resonate with him or her?

### **Script and prompts for students' journal entries**

Please take a few minutes to sit quietly and alone to reflect on the interview questions we discussed and write about any additional thoughts you have about the interview questions.

If you have become more aware of how your academic achievement and future aspirations are connected to the small school you are now a part of, please share those reflections.

Please keep the content of this journal focused on your reflections about your role as a student, your academic achievement, aspirations and how being an African-American student in this environment is impacted.

## Appendix D:

**Profile of Student Participants  
African American Student Identity and Aspiration  
In An Urban Small School Transformation**

	Academy	Classes Out of Academy	Gender	GPA	Father Education	Mother Education	School Leadership	Grade Level	SAT/ACT Taken	Two Parent Family	Visited College Campus
	Thrive	1	F	2.6 - 3.0	Some college not grad	College Grad	No formal	11th	Took once plan to etake	Yes	More than one
	Thrive	0	F	3.6 - 4.0	Absent	Not Grad	Elected	12th	Yes	No	More than one
	Explorer	0	F	2.6 - 3.0	Some college not grad	College Grad	No formal	11th	Plan to take	Yes	More than one
	Legacy	0	M	2.6 - 3.0	No college	some college not grad	No formal	11th	Plan to take	Yes	At least one
	Galaxy	several	M	3.6 - 4.0	No college	some college not grad	Formal athletic team	12th	Yes	No	More than one
	Bridge	one	M	3.6 - 4.0	College grad	College grad	Formal athletic team	11th	Plan to take	Yes	More than one
	Bridge	1	F	2.0 - 2.5	No college	Not Grad	No formal	12th	No	Yes	At least one
	Explorer	0	M	3.1 - 3.5	N/A	College Grad	Formal athletic team	11th	Plan to take	No	at least one
	Bridge	2	M	3.1 - 3.6	N/A	some college not grad	No formal	12th	No	No	More than one
	Thrive	0	M	3.1 - 3.5	College grad	some college not grad	Formal Elected	12th	Yes	No	More than one
	Galaxy	2	F	2.0 - 2.5	Some college not grad	Not Grad	No formal	12th	No	Yes	At least one
	Legacy	majority RS	F	2.4	No college	Not Grad	No formal	11th	No	Yes	More than one
	Explorer	1	F	2.0 - 2.5	Not grad	Not Grad	No formal	12th	Not talked about	Yes	More than one

## Appendix E:

### University of Washington Parent Consent Forms African American Student Identity and Aspiration in an Urban Small School Transformation

**Investigators:** Kim Bobby, M.Ed., Ed.D, Student, Department Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, University of Washington. **Telephone: (253) 861-7738**

#### **Investigators statement**

I am asking your child to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to have your child be in this study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I will ask your child to do, the possible risks and benefits, your child's rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want your child to be in the study or not. This process is called 'informed consent.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

I want to know more about young people, and their lived experiences as students in a newly transformed small school. I will ask questions about their goals for the future and how they plan to reach their goals. I am also interested in hearing if students use information they gained through classroom activities to describe their plans. I would like to interview your child, have your child take part in focus groups, and keep a journal about his or her plans for the future, high school, and after high school.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you choose to have your child volunteer to be in this study, I would like to interview your child about his or her experiences in their high school academy. I would like to interview your child once a week for 13 weeks. Each interview will last up to 30 minutes, and will take place outside of class time, such as during lunch or after school. The interview questions will focus on your child's academic experiences and plans. For example, I will ask "Do you plan on going to college?" and "How is your identity being transformed by this new academic environment" and "How does race play into this?" Your child does not have to answer every question.

If you choose to have your child be in this study, I would like your child to attend two focus groups with other students taking part in this study. The discussion will take about 60 minutes, and will take place outside of class time such as during lunch or after school. We will explore questions about academic identity, aspiration and being in a newly formed small school. For example, we will ask "Is there a connection between small school transformation

and real change for African American student achievement?" and "What are some of the impediments to student aspirations for college?" and "How does race play into this?" Your child does not have to answer every question.

I would like your child to journal his or her thoughts about experiences in the role of a student. I would like your child to write for at least 20 minutes once a week for 13 weeks. Your child can choose not to write if she or he does not want to.

I would like to audiotape the interviews and focus groups so that I can have an accurate record. I am the only person who will have access to the audiotapes, which will be stored in a secured location. I will transcribe the interview and focus group tapes within 4 weeks of the completion of the site visits. I will assign a study code to the transcript, and destroy the tape within 4 weeks after the transcription is completed.

### **RISKS, STRESS, AND DISCOMFORT**

What we are asking your child to do will not hurt him/her. However, some people do not want to be in research.

### **BENEFITS OF THE STUDY**

I hope the findings from this study will benefit society as a whole. Your child may not directly benefit from taking part in this study. However, I hope that by reflecting on his or her experiences, your child will be reminded of the steps to consider in achieving his or her goals and aspirations.

### **OTHER INFORMATION**

Taking part in this research is voluntary. Your child can stop at any time. Whether you choose to have your child be in this study, or choose not to have your child take part in this study, will not affect your child's grades or school enrollment. Information about your child is confidential. I will code the study information. I will keep the link between your child's name and the code in a separate, secured location until June 2006. Then I will destroy the link. If the results of this study are published or presented, I will not use your child's name. The following groups may need to review study records about your child: Institutional oversight review offices at the research site, the UW, or state; and federal regulators.

Although the research team will take precautions to safeguard your child's privacy, I cannot guarantee that all of the focus group participants will not repeat information presented during the focus groups.

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Signature of investigator

Printed name

Date

### **Subject's Statement**

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to have my child take part in this research As described above in this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later on about the research, then I can ask the investigator listed above. If I have questions about my child's rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

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Signature of subject

Printed name

Date

Copies to:      Investigator's file  
                         Subject

## Appendix F:

### University of Washington Student Assent Forms African American Student Identity and Aspiration in an Urban Small School Transformation

**Investigators:** Kim Bobby, M.Ed., Ed.D, Student, Department Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, University of Washington. **Telephone: (253) 861-7738.**

#### **Investigators statement**

I am asking you to be in a University of Washington research study. I am a graduate student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program in the College of Education. Your participation in this study is voluntary.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

I am conducting this study to learn about the thoughts and experiences of African American students in a small school that has recently been formed from a larger school. All interviews and journal information will focus on the subject of student identity and future aspirations.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in my study, I would like to interview you about your experiences as a student in this program. I would like to interview you once a week for 13 weeks. Each interview will last 30 minutes, and will focus on your beliefs about your current school program. For example, I will ask "Do you plan on going to college?" and "How is your identity being transformed by this new academic environment" and "How does race play into this?" You do not have to answer every question.

I would like you to take part in two focus groups. Each focus group will last 60 minutes, and will ask about the group's experiences as students in this program. For example, I will ask "What are some of the impediments to student aspirations for college?" and "How does race play into this?" You do not have to answer every question.

I would like you to keep a journal about your thoughts as a student in this program. I would like you to write once a week for 13 weeks. I would like you to write in the journal for about 20 minutes each time. You can choose not to write if you don't feel like it.

I want to tape record the interviews and focus groups. I will use the recordings to write down what you said later. I will not put your name on the written transcript of the tape. I will destroy the tape recordings with 4 weeks after they have been transcribed.

### **RISKS, STRESS, AND DISCOMFORT**

What we are asking you to do will not hurt you. However, some people do not want to be in research.

### **BENEFITS OF THE STUDY**

Although we hope the findings from this study will help society as a whole, you may not directly benefit from taking part in this study.

### **OTHER INFORMATION**

You do not have to be in this research. If you choose not to take part in the research, no one will be upset with you. You can stop at any time. We keep information about you private. For example, we do not write your name on our records. If we write about this research study, we will not use your name. Choosing to be in this study, or not to be in this study, will not affect your grades or enrollment in your school program.

Although the researcher will keep what you say in the focus group private, I cannot guarantee that other people in the focus group will keep what you say private.

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Signature of investigator	Printed name	Date
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#### **Subject's Statement**

The study has been explained to me. I choose to take part in the research. I know I can ask questions now or later. I will receive a copy of this assent form.

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Signature of subject	Printed name	Date
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#### **Non-consent:**

I do not volunteer to participate in this study.

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Signature of subject	Printed name	Date
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Copies to:     Investigator's file  
                   Subject

## Kim Renee Bobby

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*I believe education should be used for the common good – to improve the lives of individuals in their communities. To see young people expand their horizons, make the most of their opportunities, to make the most of their lives is of great importance to me. My goal is to help them capture and partake in unique opportunities to serve, to lead, to overcome failure and to learn. I hope to help young people unlock their potential, build connections among people who otherwise might never speak to one another, and give them the skills to create their own bright futures.*

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### Areas of Experience

<b>Budgeting and Financial Management</b>	<b>Leadership Development</b>
<b>K-20 Partnerships</b>	<b>Alumni Relations</b>
<b>College Access and Retention</b>	<b>Strategic Planning and Assessment</b>
<b>Organizational Development</b>	<b>Student Advocacy</b>
<b>School Transformation</b>	<b>Community Engagement</b>
<b>Early College Preparation</b>	<b>Diversity Task Force Strategic Planning</b>
<b>Program Evaluation</b>	

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### Education

**Doctor of Education** - Education Leadership & Policy Studies, University of Washington, Seattle Washington - 2007

**Master of Arts** - Educational Administration and Policy Studies  
- Higher Education Emphasis  
California State University, Sacramento, California - 1994

**Bachelor of Science** - Business Administration – Management Emphasis  
California State University, Fresno, California – 1990

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### Professional Experience

**University of Puget Sound**  
**Access Programs**  
**Director**

**June 1999 - Present**

Responsible for increasing the pool of traditionally underrepresented students who eventually enroll in post-secondary institutions of higher learning. Evaluate the university's diversity programs and activities, and make recommendations for cohesive goals and long-range strategies that are in alignment with the university mission. Develop and administer campus programs targeting middle-school students through college graduation, and build systems for longitudinal study of the impact of early college preparation interventions. Collaborate with Tacoma Public Schools, neighboring school districts, community colleges and universities in Pierce and King Counties to focus collective efforts on increasing the pool of college ready students. Work with the campus community and alumni in support of retention of marginalized student populations, funding development for programs and community involvement.

**Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**  
**Early College Awareness**  
**Consultant**

**May 2001 to Present**

Contracted to support school transformation through advisement, teacher training and building a college culture in middle schools. In particular training middle school teachers in the delivery of a comprehensive middle school early college curriculum, assisting schools in the implementation of the curriculum in a core subject, designing a culminating event to allow students to demonstrate their learning, organizing reflection and evaluation opportunities, and building college centers for use in meeting learning objectives across the curriculum on middle school sites.

**Golden Gate University**  
**Student Affairs**  
**Assistant Dean**

**January 1999 – June 1999**

Conducted assessment of student needs regarding support services for the Sacramento campus and the Northern California regional campuses, including on-line and traditional student services. Handled cases involving violations of the University's Code of Conduct, including Probation and Disqualification and Program and Grade Grievance Policy. Designed special events, coordinated orientation programs, developed career counseling, internship and alumni relations programs for the Northern California campuses. Collected accountability data for university accreditation review, and made recommendations for reformation. Assisted in the ongoing development of a comprehensive student support system for the Cybercampus. Provided advocacy and problem resolution with students as they interacted with each other, faculty, the University and the community. Promoted staff development, crisis



Appointed by the Chancellor of the Board of Education of the City of New York to a senior-level cabinet post to research, advise and provide support for initiatives aimed toward systemic educational reform for the New York Public Schools.

**University of Puget Sound/  
Tacoma Public Schools District #10  
1995  
Access To College Initiative  
Director**

**August 1994 - November**

Founding director appointed by the President of the University of Puget Sound and the Superintendent of Tacoma Public Schools to develop a early college preparation partnership in collaboration with the public schools, private sector and the greater Tacoma community.

**California State University, Sacramento  
1994  
Department of Educational Administration & Policy Studies  
Program Administrator**

**November 1990 - August**

Assisted the Department Chair and faculty in the continuous development of graduate program competencies in alignment with requirements for the Master of Arts in Educational Administration, Administrative Credential and Professional Administrative Credential.

**University of California at Los Angeles  
1987  
School of Law - Clinical Program  
Coordinator**

**March 1983 - May**

Responsible for the daily administrative and student support operations of the Clinical Law Program offering students hands-on experience serving clients. This included administrative law adjudications, child dependency cases, and mediation.

**Qualifications:**

- American Leadership Forum, Member of Class X
- Leadership style that incorporates shared governance, collegiality, openness and respect for diverse opinions.
- Women In Educational Leadership Scholarship, 2004 Recipient
- Research, development and advisement on collaboratives supporting K-16 populations.
- Research, development and advisement in collaboratives supporting student quality of life and retention in conjunction with Counseling, Campus Housing, Office of Admissions, Financial Aid, University Relations and academic departments.
- University liaison to broad constituency of stakeholders in education, including students, parents, administrators, concerned citizens and state and local legislators.
- Academic advisor, coordinator of orientation programs, coordinator of special events.

- Oversight of facilities and scheduling of college and community groups.
- Initiated professional development programs in conjunction with various universities with an emphasis on experiential learning, adult learning theory and technology integration.
- Developed models for classroom management in virtual environments with an emphasis on opportunities for faculty and students to participate in the early transformation.
- Student conduct hearing committee member; champion for raising awareness for tolerance.
- Development of program funding, and responsible for department fiscal management.
- Creation of student support programs and workshops engaging students, alumni, business partners, college students and k-12 students in conjunction with university clubs, organizations and academic programs.
- Acquired paid and field component internships for students.
- Needs assessment and evaluation of Division of Student Affairs program goals, objectives and outcomes.
- Recruitment and appointment of part-time faculty.
- Strategic planning in response to demographic trends in targeted student populations.
- Hiring and supervision administrative support staff.
- Collaboration on future compatible technology infrastructure for curriculum integration, student mobile computing, academic computing and network architecture.

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#### **Professional Affiliations**

President's Advisory Group, University of Puget Sound, 1999 – Present

President's Inauguration Steering Committee, 2004

Diversity Planning Task Force, University of Puget Sound, 2005 to present

Staff Senator, University of Puget Sound, 2003, 2004

South Puget Sound Diversity Consortium, President's Representative, 2000 - Present

Faculty Diversity Committee, University of Puget Sound, 1999 - Present

Admission Committee, University of Puget Sound, 1999 – Present

Advisor, Umoja House, University of Puget Sound, 2003, 2004

Minority Student Recruitment and Retention Task Force, University of Puget Sound 1999 – Present

Math Engineering Science Achievement (MESA), Board Member – 2001 - Present

Elizabeth Wesley Youth Merit Incentive Award, Co-Chair, 2000 – Present

Pierce County Sheriff's Outreach to Communities of Color Task Force, 2002 to Present

Pierce County Sheriff's Department – Board of Professional Standards – Non-law Enforcement Observer, 2005

Gaining Early Awareness and Read Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, (GEAR UP) State of Washington Advisory Committee, 2000 - present

Washington Education Foundation, Washington Achievers Scholarship - Application Reader, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004

Higher Education Coordinating Board, Diversity Working Group. Report: 2001 Opportunity and Achievement in Washington

Tacoma Urban League, Member, 1994-Present.

Treasurer, The Links, Inc., Tacoma Chapter, 2002 to present

Student Retention Committee, Golden Gate University, January 1999.

Community Health and Human Services Collaborative, *SCUSD Representative*, Sacramento City Unified School District, 1999.

African American Advisory Committee, *SCUSD Representative*, Sacramento City Unified School District, 1999.

Asian/Pacific Islander Advisory Committee, *SCUSD Representative*, Sacramento City Unified School District, 1999.

Latino Advisory Committee, *SCUSD Representative*, Sacramento City Unified School District, 1999

Tacoma Consortium, *School/College Liaison*, University of Puget Sound/Tacoma Public Schools, 1994-1995.

Dollars for Scholars, *University Representative*, University of Puget Sound, 1994-1995.

Alternative Scheduling, California State University Sacramento, 1994.

Technology: Future Compatible Campus, *Department Representative*, California State University, Sacramento, 1994.

Technology Advisory Council, *Industry Representative*, Borough of Manhattan community college, City University of New York, 1998.

Chancellor's School-To Career Advisory Council, *Chancellor's Representative*, Board of Education of the City of New York, 1995-1997.

Search Committee for Director of Development, *Chancellor's Representative*, Board of Education of the City of New York, 1997.

Chancellor's Task for on Technology Integration, *Chancellor's Representative*, Board of Education of the City of New York, 1995-1997.

Distance Learning, *Chair*, Imperial Software Systems, 1998.

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### **Selected Presentations**

*Home Visit Project*, American Education Research Association (AERA), 2002, 2003

*Building a Pipeline to Promote Diversity*, American Council on Education 2003

*CollegeEd*, College Board Western Regional Conference, 2003

*The Road To College*, Guest Speaker, KTBC Broadcasting, February 2000

*Building a Network for Early College Programs*, College Board Western Regional Conference, February 2000

*Personal Geography Workshop on Diversity*, Business Leadership Program, University of Puget Sound, Spring 2000

*On White Privilege*, University of Puget Sound, Passages Leaders for New Student Orientation, Fall 2000

*"Innovation in Student Services: Student Services Best Practices"*, IBM Higher Education Executive Forum, March 1998.

*"Learning Opportunities through Collaborative Virtual Environments"*, IBM Higher Education Executive Forum, March 1998.

*"The Role of Computers in the Classroom"*, presentations to teachers and faculty, New York City Board of Education, November 1997.

*"Leading Learning Through Technology"*, Imperial Software Systems, November 1997.

*"The Future of Staffing, Five Trends You Need To Know"*, IBM Management College, July 1998.

*"Integrating Technology into Teaching and Learning"*, IBM Higher Education Executive Forum, March 1998.

*Diversifying Educational Administration: Student Diversity Program* (Thesis Project, 1994).

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**Professional Memberships**

American Association for Higher Education (AAHE)  
American Educational Research Association (AERA)  
American Study of Higher Education (ASHE)  
American Association of Training and Development (ASTD)  
Literacy Tutor – Literacy Volunteers of America – Los Angeles California  
Mentor, Tacoma Urban League Young Professionals, Tacoma Washington  
National Academic Advising Association (NACADA)  
National Association of Computing and Technology in Education  
National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)  
Washington Association of Black School Educators (WABSE)