
CHAPTER TWO

The Multiple Meanings of Success: Tensions, Conflicts, and Crises for African American Students

I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has had to overcome while trying to succeed.

—Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington's oft-quoted words remind us that everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, must face some challenges in order to attain success. However, African American people face unique obstacles to success based upon their social positioning as a "minority" within the United States, and the racist and discriminatory forces that work to oppress, marginalize, and isolate them (Hacker, 1992). In this chapter, we explore some of the complex challenges that African American students, from kindergarten to college, have experienced on the road to school success. We first turn to an issue that is salient for many African American youth: the development of racial identity. In her story, Jennifer describes her own racial identity development by highlighting the "acting White/acting Black" dilemma.

NARRATIVE BEGINNINGS—JENNIFER D. TURNER: "SUCCESS IS TRYIN' TO MAKE IT IN TWO WORLDS"

What is success? All of my life, I have been straddling two worlds, a White cultural world and a Black cultural world. Now, you might think that this is because I am biracial, but I'm not. Both of my parents are African American, yet they have always deeply believed that my siblings and I should know about and be comfortable in the White world. I was born and raised in Philadelphia, but unlike many "city kids" who never left their neighborhood, I had many early experiences within the White community. From the time I was about 6 years old, we went to a Mennonite church in Lancaster,

Pennsylvania. My father worked for a telecommunications company in the suburbs of Philadelphia, and had become good friends with a man who lived in Lancaster and attended this church. He and his family lived in a very rural community, and we often visited their house after church. Needless to say, we were the only Black people in this congregation, and as I grew older, I remember that this began to trouble me. I thought my father's friend and his family were very accepting, but some of the members of the church would slide off the pew and move to another part of the church when we came in, or they would not touch the napkins after we had taken one during the midday meal that the church served in the fellowship room. I remember asking my parents about this in the car one Sunday afternoon during the hour-long trip back home, and they shrugged it off and told me, "Some people feel that way but it has nothing to do with you." But I felt that it had everything to do with me, and I wondered why they seemed to treat me differently.

We stopped attending that church soon after, but I attended a predominantly White, parochial school for Grades 4 through 8. Again, I thought that things were fine; my best friends were an Italian girl and another African American girl who was bused to this suburban school like me. But there were some White kids who let me know that I didn't belong. I remember all the kids on the bus singing, "Oh you can't get to heaven" when we went on field trips. The first part of the song talked about being redeemed by the blood of Jesus and the power that it had to wash away your sins. But the other part of the song talked about all of the things that wouldn't get you into heaven, like wearing dirty blue jeans (God didn't have a washing machine) or wearing roller skates (You'd roll right past those pearly gates). One of the verses also said: "Oh you can't get to heaven with nappy hair, 'cause God don't have no grease up there." On the day that this verse was sung, I remember feeling my cheeks burn with embarrassment, and a child peeped around from the seat behind me and said, "Well I guess *you* won't be going to heaven." I was stunned. I felt so ashamed and I remember quietly saying, "Yes I will go to heaven." I felt that I might not have the "good hair" or right color to get into heaven, but I would do everything in my power to "act White." I was always shy and quiet as a child, but after that incident, I became excessively polite and obsessed with behaving impeccably. At that point, success for me was about fitting in and making certain that I interacted in a way that would be pleasing to White people. I knew that being smart and getting good grades was part of "making it" in the White world, but I also knew that talking and behaving in certain ways were also critical components of the success that I craved.

At the same time, I also wanted to have success in the Black world. Although I traveled back and forth across the boundaries between the White and Black worlds, I always knew that I was Black. I grew up in Mt. Airy, a

community that had the reputation of being “nice” and “uppity” compared with other neighborhoods in Philadelphia. When my parents first moved into their house in the mid-1970s, I was 5 years old, and nearly all the neighbors on our block were White. There were a few Black families, too, and I quickly became friends with those kids. We played at one another’s houses, had sleepovers, and went to the movies together and to the library. Over time, our families became so close that we went on vacations together, and my family decided to attend the Black church that one of our close friends went to so that we could all go to church together. I felt so comfortable at this church, and I was really excited when my family officially became members.

At the church, and with my friends on the block, my Blackness was never called into question. But I learned early on that others could and did judge my Blackness. In my own family, we had members who thought that we were not “Black” enough. My cousins and aunts and other family members on my father’s side always called my siblings and me “Whitebred” because of the way we talked and acted. “You talk funny, just like a White girl,” they would laugh and point at me, and we all would fall silent to stop their teasing. Some relatives even made fun of my father, who had been told in high school that he was not “college material” and encouraged to enter the military, where he ended up fighting in the Vietnam War. However, this never quelled my father’s love of learning, and he kept reading and taking classes until he completed his bachelor’s degree in the late 1990s. Rather than encouraging my father’s educational pursuits, my uncles scoffed at him, saying things like, “Them books ain’t gonna do nothing for you. You still a N-word no matter how much you think you know.” My uncles’ statements remained with me for years, and I couldn’t help thinking that *choosing* to become educated in the White world meant that you automatically failed in the Black world.

Questions about success, race, and identity continued to intensify for me in high school. I attended the Philadelphia High School for Girls, an institution known for its academic rigor and high standards of educational excellence. The school was diverse, drawing girls from a variety of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. I enjoyed going to school in such an environment, and made friends of many social and cultural backgrounds. But there were two groups of African American girls who seemed “untouchable” to me. One group comprised the “fly girls,” the pretty girls who wore the latest designer clothing and sneakers, had the most expensive purses and jewelry, and wore trendy hairstyles. The other group was also very attractive and wore nice clothes and jewelry. However, these girls were members of Jack and Jill, an exclusive social club for African American children, and they had an untouchable air of sophistication due to their social status and upbringing. I didn’t fit neatly into either of these groups. I was a nerd; I wore

thick glasses and terrible clothes, and as the oldest of four children, I could not afford the numerous trips to the beauty shop necessary for keeping my hair coiffed in the latest styles.

I was attracted to the strong African American cultural knowledge and identity that the Jack and Jill girls had, but I knew that I could never fit in with them because my family didn't have the wealth or the social connections necessary for an invitation to join. But I thought I could be successful in attaining the kind of Blackness represented by the fly girls. So I worked to earn money and bought contacts, new purses, and "fresh" new sneakers. During the late 1980s, big gold chains, earrings and rings with your name etched into them, and big belts were considered fashionable in urban neighborhoods, and I was wearing them by senior year. Because I wasn't allowed to listen to secular music, I listened to my father's Walkman at night to sneakily learn all the latest R&B and hip-hop songs. I became adept at code-switching, using slang when I talked to the guys around my neighborhood, and "Standard" English at home. Code-switching became even more important to me when I began dating, and because I wanted desperately to be cool, I went out with several guys who were into criminal activities. I did all of this because I wanted to be "Black" in the same way as my cousins and those girls at school. And I felt that I had indeed achieved this level of Blackness. I have a scar on the right side of my face resulting from the removal of my birthmark, and in my freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania, all of the gold jewelry and the athletic wear made me look so tough that several students asked if I gotten that scar in a street fight. I remember laughing while simultaneously feeling proud that I had finally captured such an authentic level of Blackness. I felt that I had finally proven that I wasn't an Oreo—someone who was Black on the outside but White on the inside.

Thankfully, my experience at the University of Pennsylvania helped me redefine my understanding of Blackness. As a sociology major, I took several courses to learn more about African American culture and people. I read books like *The Mis-Education of the Negro* by Carter G. Woodson (1933) and *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/1995), who I was pleased to learn conducted seminal sociological research at Penn in the 1890s. I also was nurtured, guided, and challenged in my thinking about African American culture by two extraordinary African American professors. They cultivated my spirit of inquiry and helped me develop questions that represented my passions and interests in urban culture and African American life. This was an important breakthrough for me, because it was the first time that I truly believed that I could be both Black and an intellectual. Later, I took a class on African American and Afro Caribbean women's literature, which helped me to see what various images and meanings of Black womanhood there were, and as I devoured books by Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Alice

Walker, and Edwidge Danicát, I began to also realize that I had the power to name myself, to tell my story with my own voice, and it was OK if it was a mixture of Black and White and common and elitist and religious and secular. I learned that my identity as a Black woman should not be defined by others, even if they are Black people whom I admire, or members of my own family. I do believe that race matters, and that our racial identity is a critical part of who we are. But after leaving Penn, I also believed that I could define Blackness myself.

But I still haven't resolved all of my race-related identity issues. Several years ago, when I worked as a high school counselor in the Philadelphia neighborhood where I grew up, I was talking on the phone with my supervisor, and after I hung up, one of the students said to me, "Miss Jen, you were talkin' like a White girl on the phone." For a split second, the word "Oreo" flashed in my mind, and I got angry. Then I realized that I had already defined my own racial identity: I am Black, and academic excellence and educational success are part of my culture. But this young lady was obviously trying to figure out these differences between White and Black, educated and ignorant, nerd and cool, and she needed help breaking down those false dichotomies, just like I did. But as strange as it may sound, I did not have the words to help her, or to allow her to critique what she had said. I had thought that I had healed, but the wounds were still too raw, too personal, and too painful. And I still come back to that place, because now I have children, and I want my boys to understand that they, too, have the power to define their own racial identities. But I am still struggling with the right words that will help my children, as well as other African American children, define success in their worlds on their terms.

STORIES FROM AFRICAN AMERICAN ELEMENTARY STUDENTS: TRYING TO BE "COOL" IN CONTEMPORARY CLASSROOMS

Jennifer's story of schooling centered on identity issues that stemmed from the acting White vs. acting Black dilemma that many African American students experience. But this may not be the entry point of identity conflict and turmoil for some African American students. In today's classrooms, African American children, especially boys, are enmeshed in dilemmas stemming from a different identity-related phenomenon: being cool.

The stories told in this section were formed from conversations that Jennifer had with three African American, elementary-aged children. Isaiah (8 years old) and Elijah (6 years old) are Jennifer's sons, while Amani (10 years old) is Jennifer's niece. Isaiah and Elijah attend an elementary school in a large district along the eastern seaboard. The elementary school is small, serving about 400 students, and is somewhat diverse. Isaiah and Elijah are

part of a handful of students of color in their classrooms, and often they are the only African American boys. In contrast, Amani lives in Philadelphia and attends an all-Black elementary school in her neighborhood. All three are excellent readers; Elijah was reading at a first-grade level in kindergarten, and both Isaiah and Amani tested into their respective schools' gifted and talented programs. However, all three have been confronted with issues of being cool in the past year and have begun to consider what it means to be cool, particularly in relation to literacy.

Elijah's Story

Elijah completed kindergarten in the 2008–09 academic year. He likes reading fairytales and other fiction books, and listed *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* and *The Three Little Pigs* as two of his favorite books. However, when asked if he liked to read, he shouted, “Nooo!” and told this story:

I don't like reading because reading is not cool. Reading is for babies. I like to play video games like *Lord of the Rings* and *Madden* and *Wii Sports Resort*. And I play soccer and football at recess and I would play with my friends, and we like to play tag. And we would play spy on the girls.

Being cool means to be popular. That means you have a lot of friends. Being a friend means helping people. I am a good friend, and I was cool and I had a lot of friends. And I had a great birthday party and everybody said it was awesome! Everybody in my class is my friend and everybody in my class is cool.

Isaiah's Story

Isaiah, who completed second grade in the 2008–09 academic year and enjoys reading science fiction, fantasy, and adventure books, says:

Being cool means that you have a lot of money, and cool clothes that are shiny and good and people want them, but they can't have them because they are too expensive. And, if you're cool, then you have a lot of friends. I think that there are cool people on television, like Carly, Sam, Freddy, and Fred [from *i Carly*, a popular show on Nickelodeon].

My friends and I like to write during recess. We write *Lord of the Rings* stories. The other boys, they all play sports like soccer at recess. And I don't want to play because I like sports but I like writing better.

I don't think I'm cool but I don't want a lot of friends. I only want two friends because then I don't have to be nice to everyone. You have

to work too hard to be nice to everyone. You can't just be mean to them. But if you're friends, you're friends, but if you're not, you're not. If someone doesn't like you, then they won't be friends with you and they won't sit with you.

Sometimes I try to be funny, and when I do things like walk funny or I'm being weird, then people laugh and say I'm funny. So then some of the girls said it and then everybody was saying it. And then sometimes even when I wasn't trying to be funny, they would laugh. But that was OK, because it made me cool!

Amani's Story

Amani completed fourth grade in the 2008–09 academic year, and she loves reading and math and playing video games that offer varying levels of adventure and challenge, like Pokémon. She enjoys mysteries, like the *A to Z* books and the *Nancy Drew* series. When asked about being cool and popular at her school, Amani told this narrative:

At my school, cool kids know everybody in the class, and lots of people outside of the class. Cool kids say “hi” to everyone, and everyone says “hi” to them. Cool boys in fourth grade are boys who play basketball and football, and sometimes they curse because they think that makes them sound cool. Cool girls know lots of sixth-grade boys, and they sometimes chase them. They wear fancy clothes, and they wear these boots and sometimes the boys will say that their boots are cute. Their hair is done almost every weekend and they change their hairstyle every week—sometimes they wear braids, or pony tails.

I'm not a popular girl, but I do have friends. Smart kids at my school aren't really popular, and I was one of the smartest people in the class. Sometimes kids wanted to sit near me, but that's because they wanted to copy off my tests and get higher scores. That made me really angry. I think that reading is cool, because reading can make you smarter and you can learn a lot more by reading than watching television sometimes. But other kids in my class didn't think that reading was cool at all.

Sometimes, I would try to be cool in school. I did not want to be in too much trouble, so I tried to get in a little trouble. My friend would drag me into her messes sometimes, and then I would get into trouble. Sometimes kids would tease me, and I didn't like that. They would say things like, “you are so smart, you're just trying to go to another school” or “you're so smart, you are gonna skip so many grades that you won't need school.” They were just saying that because they want to be as smart as me.

I feel like being popular is a good thing, but it gets harder and harder to be popular when you're smart.

We know that kids, whether they are White or Black, poor or rich, want to be cool and accepted by their peers; no one wants to be called a “nerd” or to be unpopular. However, these stories also reveal two critical functions of cool that impact the educational lives of African American students in very unique ways. First, African American students may recognize the pressure to be cool, and pursue popularity in school, very early in their educational careers. Beverly Tatum (2003) suggests that African American children are aware of race at early ages, but that racial identity conflicts and dilemmas, like acting White/acting Black, tend not to become an issue until the adolescent years. However, these stories suggest that African American children like Elijah can identify cool behaviors and cool peers in kindergarten, and that the tensions that arise from the social dilemma to “be cool or be smart” may emerge within the primary grades. Second, African American students may make the decision to pursue a cool social identity rather than academic achievement very early in school. Amani's peers were in fourth grade and, based on her story, they knew that doing well in school, and especially reading, was uncool and were moving further away from the social identity of “smart student.” In contrast to White middle-class kids, and others who are attracted to cool culture, African American students do not have the social safety nets and structures to mitigate the negative consequences of these cool behaviors and social identities, which ultimately can destroy their academic careers (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). So why would African American youth want to be cool rather than be smart? We explore multiple answers to this question in the remainder of the chapter.

LOOKING BACK TO GO FORWARD: RECLAIMING THE MEANING(S) OF SUCCESS

We begin this discussion about academic success and school achievement with Theresa Perry's (2003) words, because we believe that they are at the heart of our discussion about African American students and their literacy learning in schools.

The prevailing assumption among many educators is that the task of achievement for African Americans as a group is the same as it is for any other group. African American children have to be able to do what all other children have to be capable of doing in order to achieve in American schools. . . . But since learning is fundamentally contextual, . . . there are extra social, emotional, cognitive, and political competencies required of African American youth, precisely because they are African American, if they are to be able to commit themselves over time to perform at high levels in school. (p. 4)

Perry's words highlight the notion that for African American students, school achievement requires additional social and cultural competencies that generally are not considered in our current educational conversation. This does not mean that learning literacy is more difficult for African American students due to cognitive or intellectual abilities; we believe that African American students are very bright and capable of learning in school. However, in a society that often devalues African American culture, the unique social and cultural positions that Black students take up fundamentally shape their experience of school and set up unique obstacles to achievement.

MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF SUCCESS

Three primary meanings of success shape African American students' understandings of and perceptions about literacy achievement and educational attainment. *Life success* is known in our national consciousness as "the American Dream"—owning a house and a car, having money and a comfortable life, and a family. The American Dream is propagated through a variety of media, including magazines, television shows, and movies. Even hip-hop stars celebrate the American Dream; the latest street anthem is Drake's 2009 smash "I Just Wanna Be Successful," which glorifies a luxurious lifestyle, complete with an abundance of cars, wealth, women, and clothing. While we contend that life success has many other kinds of definitions and ideals, when we think of prominent messages that African American students are receiving from the media and society in general, this definition is both pervasive and compelling.

Community (with a capital "C" and a lowercase "c") *success* is a term that we use to signify the cultural values, discourses, and norms of the African American Community. Because the term *community* has varied meanings and definitions, we use the capitalized Community to denote the African American Community at large. Historically, the African American Community has been vitally important to African American people. According to Billingsley (1968), before desegregation, the African American Community was an institution to which parents and children specifically looked for strength, hope, and security:

In every aspect of the child's life a trusted elder, neighbor, Sunday school teacher, school teacher, or other community member might instruct, discipline, assist, or otherwise guide the young of a given family. Second, as role models, community members show an example to and interest in the young people. Third, as advocates they actively intercede with major segments of society (a responsibility assumed by professional educators) to help young members of particular families find opportunities which might otherwise be closed to them. Fourth, as supportive

figures, they simply inquire about the progress of the young, take a special interest in them. Fifth, in the formal roles of teacher, leader, elder, they serve youth generally as part of the general role or occupation. (p. 99)

Before desegregation, the African American Community was a “security blanket” for African American children and families (Belt-Beyan, 2004). Through local organizations such as the church and the school, the African American Community represented, enacted, and inscribed uniquely stylized characteristics and values. Intellectualism, freedom, collective success, and hard work were part of those core values, and the Black Community aspired to “pass along the knowledge that success comes with long struggle and requires patience and wit. . . . Children, as well as adults were expected to be resourceful and ever watchful for opportunities to meet any of their life’s goals” (Belt-Beyan, 2004, p. 162). According to Belt-Beyan, many African Americans in the 19th century

acted on the beliefs that their success and their children’s success was inevitable and that the good always win in the end. . . . Many parents expressed the beliefs that even if they did not learn to read and write themselves, they would have considered themselves successful if their children did. (p. 163)

Through the years, these community-oriented values, beliefs, and dispositions have been encoded in long-standing cultural sayings such as “each one, teach one” and “we lift as we climb.” Moreover, the standards of community success were transmitted through the African American literary tradition, which was built upon narratives by slaves or former slaves such as Phyllis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass (Belt-Beyan, 2004).

In addition to the historic African American Community, it is also important to note that for Black adolescents, success in the eyes of their social community, or peers, is crucial. We use the lower-case “community” to represent the cultural forms of interaction and communication that often are respected and valued by other Black youth. While youth culture in the United States may be representative of diverse cultures, Mahiri (1998) contends that “African American culture . . . has generative links to popular youth culture . . . in areas such as music and sports, where black achievements and styles set world standards of excellence” (p. 5). Although the links between African American culture and youth culture are apparent in music, professional sports, and other arenas, it is important to note that standards of success within the historic African American Community and the peer community may be quite different. For example, some Black youth see hip-hop superstars like Lil’ Wayne, Jay-Z, and Kanye West as successful, while members of the larger African American Community may not perceive these artists as exemplars of success based on their standards.

Finally, *school success* embodies good grades, completed homework assignments, strong motivation to learn, good reading and listening comprehension, and critical thinking and interpretations of texts—all of the elements that we typically think of when we talk about “becoming literate” in school. However, we want to be clear that, for us, becoming literate in schools means more than simply learning to read, write, speak, and listen. Rather, becoming literate means acquiring a cultural backpack (Blake, 2009), which includes the discourses, language patterns and codes, symbolic systems (e.g., clothing), behaviors, conventions, and interactional styles of particular groups or communities. All children, regardless of their race, linguistic background(s), culture, or socioeconomic status, have their own cultural backpacks, and the discourses that they have inside these “backpacks” are integral to their social identities. Yet school success requires all students, regardless of their own cultural backpacks, to acquire and appropriately use the discursive conventions, norms, language codes, and practices within a “mainstream, white, middle-class” cultural backpack (Gee, 1991). As societal institutions, schools sanction the “mainstream” cultural backpack because these dominant literacies provide a significant amount of cultural capital within society and are accoutrements of the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1995; Powell, 2009). Consequently, from our perspective, school success and becoming literate are social, cultural, and cognitive processes that are neither neutral nor color-blind.

In this chapter, we have begun to discuss the multiple meanings of success that African American students encounter and negotiate as they learn literacy in school. But rather than focusing on teachers’ and schools’ notions of success, we believe that it is critically important to look at literacy achievement and school success “from the inside out, *from the perspective of African American youth as thinking, feeling, and social and intentional beings*” (Perry, 2003, p. 3, emphasis added). By emphasizing the perspectives of African American students, we illustrate how some African American youth might come to *resist school success* in their quest to attain life and community success, while others may *reclaim school success*. In describing two options available to African American students—resistance to or reclamation of school success—we hope to help teachers, parents, administrators, and policymakers to understand the range of experiences, dilemmas, and conflicts that African American youth may experience as they navigate literacy learning in school.

RESISTING SCHOOL SUCCESS

Students’ resistance to school is not a new phenomenon. Researchers have studied how youth have resisted education and learning in school for decades (MacLeod, 1995). However, resistance for African American students may have persisted for so many years because literacy learning and schooling can

be an assault on their minds, their culture, their identities, and their social existence. As Powell (2009) explains, for some African American students,

a failure to learn *may be intentional*. That is, it is a resistance to literacy that is based upon a racist ideology of White privilege. It is a resistance to a literacy that for them holds no meaning or promise, that historically has failed them in their quest to overcome the hegemonic focuses of power in our society. And it is a resistance to a literacy that they find essentially irrelevant, that denigrates their cultural knowledge, that denies their voice. (p. 5, emphasis in original)

Powell's words not only highlight a number of reasons why African American students may resist learning literacy in schools, but also suggest that this resistance may be seen as a conscious choice. African American students may choose to resist literacy achievement, and school success, based upon their perceptions of, and reactions to, four types of dilemmas: (1) the acting White/acting Black identity crisis; (2) gender identity conflicts arising from "coolness"; (3) ineffective teacher–student relationships and classroom environments; and (4) limited, but realistic, opportunity narratives.

Acting White/Acting Black Identity Crisis

The identity crisis that emanates from the acting White/acting Black phenomenon can be a real issue for many African American students. Teachers and parents may not be aware of the identity tensions that African American students struggle with on a daily basis in school, because many keep these emotions to themselves. Indeed, some scholars have even challenged the veracity of the acting/White acting Black phenomenon. For example, in their study of eight high schools in North Carolina, Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) found that Black students' academic achievement was not hindered by the acting White phenomenon, and that both White and Black students who were high-achieving were teased and/or ostracized by their peers. More recently, Diamond, Lewis, and Gordon (2007) interviewed Black and White students in a desegregated high school, and concluded that while Black students perceived race-based limitations to their opportunities for getting ahead and were cognizant of racial patterns of track placement within the local school context, there was no evidence that Black students opposed school achievement.

Yet there is compelling evidence that suggests that the identity crises arising from the acting White/acting Black phenomenon are indeed part of the lived school experiences of a significant number of African Americans across the country. Fryer (2006) cites a study conducted more than a decade ago in which a group of African American students were asked to identify "acting-White" behaviors. The students included a range of specific actions, such as

speaking Standard English, enrolling in academically advanced courses, and wearing clothes from certain mainstream stores like the Gap. While not all of these behaviors are academically oriented, they do suggest that social popularity, race, and achievement may be interrelated. Harvard economist Roland Fryer has been studying this relationship and has found that, in racially integrated schools, African American students' social popularity drops significantly as their GPAs increase (Fryer, 2006; Fryer & Torelli, 2005). Fryer's work also suggests that adolescent males pay a higher social cost for academic achievement; African American males begin to lose friends at a lower GPA (3.25) compared to African American females (3.5), and they lose friends at a greater rate than their female counterparts. While some may contend that perceptions of acting White/acting Black are found only among low-income Blacks, research suggests that the acting White/acting Black phenomenon also may be a contributing factor for the academic disengagement and low achievement levels of Blacks in affluent suburban schools (Ferguson, 2002; Ogbu, 2003). Even President Obama, then Senator from Illinois, referenced the phenomenon in his speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, declaring that we must "eradicate the slander that says a Black youth with a book is acting White."

Where did the acting White/acting Black identity crisis come from, and why is it such a dilemma for so many African American students? Historically, White culture and Black culture have been socially constructed in diametrically opposed terms. Fordham (1996), an educational anthropologist who has extensively studied the acting White/acting Black phenomenon, noted that from the end of slavery to the rise of the modern Civil Rights Movement, people of African descent were forbidden to "act White." Jim Crow laws ensured that African Americans did not enjoy the same privileges and rights as White people, and as a result Blackness was defined as "not White." As Young (2007) observed:

Legal segregation produced an intense social schizophrenia in blacks which they had to vigorously control in order to escape both legal consequences and the system of sanctioned vigilantism (i.e. lynching). Even when blacks . . . understood themselves to be no different from whites, they were forced, by condition, to be only black. Hangings, Jim Crow train cars, and "white-only" establishments reflect some known consequences of this condition. (p. 128)

After desegregation ended, African American people began to have access to the same institutions (e.g., schools) and privileges that Whites had. However, integration had several unintended consequences. According to Fordham (1996), Black people had more opportunities, but they were obligated to "act White" in order to compete in society with White Americans. Some Blacks actively resisted this obligation to act White, and fought for the

right to maintain their cultural practices, through social movements such as the Black Panther Party (Young, 2007) and through the development of an oppositional identity (Ogbu, 1995). According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), an oppositional identity constitutes “a sense of peoplehood in opposition to the social identity of white Americans because of the way white Americans treated them” (p. 176). Although African Americans did lose some of their native African language, customs, and traditions through American enslavement, some cultural elements remained intact and combined with other cultural practices to form new behaviors, conventions, and discourses that became their cultural backpack, or their frame of reference (Ogbu, 1995). Some African American people view their cultural frame of reference as a “boundary-maintaining mechanism” (Ogbu, 1995, p. 88) between themselves and White Americans, and often perceive “learning or speaking standard English and practicing other aspects of white middle-class culture as threatening to their own minority culture, language, and identity” (p. 88). Within this oppositional framework, there is no middle ground: African Americans must choose to be Black and enact practices that are part of that perceived cultural backpack or risk being rejected by their cultural community, including peers, and even family members, like the uncles in Jennifer’s narrative.

Consequently, in schools, many African American students feel the “burden of racial performance” (Young, 2007, p. 131), and a significant number believe that they must choose whether they will be successful in the academic realm or in the realm of their cultural community. For these African American students, success in the academic realm means “acting White” and acquiring and enacting specific behaviors, norms, and conventions that are perceived as consonant with “White or mainstream” culture, while success in the community realm emanates from a close alignment to what they perceive as “Black culture.” As a result, in some African American peer groups, those students who strive to succeed academically, speak “conventional” English, and engage in reading and writing at school are viewed as “acting White,” while those students who are popular, are disengaged from school literacy, and speak other dialects (e.g., African American English Vernacular) are perceived as “acting Black.” Therefore, some African American students resist doing well in school, not because they are lazy or unintelligent, but because they want to avoid the “racial schizophrenia” (Young, 2007, p. 131) that emerges from trying to be both academically and socially successful. By choosing to act Black rather than doing well in school, these African American students view themselves as having a successful Black identity based on the standards set by their peer group. Unfortunately, however, this type of community success does not correlate with school success, and the African American students who represent “acting Black” in such ways often undermine their achievement within the classroom.

Gender Identity, Racial Identity, and “Coolness”

For some African American students, the racial identity crisis emanating from the acting White/acting Black phenomenon has been exacerbated and complicated by gender. In recent years, the literacy practices and worlds of African American male adolescents have attracted major attention from literacy scholars (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Mahiri, 1998; A. Tatum, 2005). Previous research (e.g., Maynard, 2002) suggests that boys may resist and reject reading because they “view it as a passive, ‘female’ activity” (A. Tatum, 2005, p. 11). However, the link between masculinity and coolness may be even stronger for African American males. Young (2007) contends that “the difference between black boys and white boys is that black boys not only feel coerced to give up their masculinity if they do well in school, but they also feel forced to abandon their race—the ultimate impossibility” (p. 90). Consequently, in response to this “feeling of racial and gender endangerment” (p. 90), some African American males resist school success to pursue coolness.

Coolness is a “ritualized expression of masculinity that involves speech, style, and physical and emotional posturing . . . that many black males use . . . to evoke distance from, contrast to, and superiority over outsiders” (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009, p. 280). As exemplified by the African American boys that Kirkland and Jackson studied, many African American boys associate coolness with Black culture and with a particular racialized “identity kit,” such as sports jerseys, clothing brands worn by hip-hop artists, and language codes hybridized from American English and hip-hop slang. Being cool, however, does not mean that African American adolescents are illiterate. Researchers like Alfred Tatum (2005) have shown that adolescent males are indeed literate, and that through practices that they perceive as cool, Black, and masculine, they can express the cultural, social, and emotional literacies in their lives. We recognize that African American youths’ personal literacies are important, yet we are concerned that many of these boys shun school success because they associate academic literacy with the conventions, discourses, and identity of the “uncool” (nerdy, White) students.

While cool culture is viewed as the purview of African American males (Majors & Billson, 1993), there is growing evidence that a number of African American girls are pursuing cool literacies and identities as well. Recent research conducted by Sutherland (2005), Skinner (2007), and Gibson (2009) suggests that African American adolescent girls are reading and engaging with popular media texts that they perceive as “cool,” such as hip-hop music magazines like *Source* and *Vibe*, reality television shows (e.g., *American Idol*, *America’s Next Top Model*), and family sitcoms (*That’s So Raven*). Also popular is urban fiction, a genre that incorporates slang/nonstandard English to address realistic issues such as sex, drugs, crime, and violence,

through graphic imagery, resulting in a cautionary tale designed to help readers learn from the experiences of the adolescent female protagonist. Although some of the girls in these studies were good students, several had not attained high levels of school achievement and were disengaged from the literature and the discussions that occurred with their teachers during class. African American girls, like their male counterparts, are literate, and often these girls rendered interpretive perspectives and critiques of the texts they chose to read that were both sophisticated and nuanced. However, because these texts are not often sanctioned within the literacy curriculum, these African American girls are often positioned as “nonreaders” within the classroom and are “marginalized because they [do] not draw upon the same recourses as mainstream students who more closely emulate the roles, take up texts, and exhibit the practices privileged in traditional [classrooms]” (Skinner, 2007, p. 346).

Over time, this sustained marginalization and isolation in the classroom can lead to African American girls’ resistance to school success in exchange for being cool (e.g., passing around urban fiction books to other girls, talking about them during and after class) and attaining respect and success within their peer community. Clearly, the literacy curriculum cannot include every text that interests adolescent African American girls. However, teachers can reduce the isolation that adolescent African American girls might experience in the classroom, and increase the “cool” factor of school literacy, by acknowledging that they are readers, learning about the ways that reading and writing impact their out-of-school lives, and helping them to think critically about popular media texts as well as those mandated within the literacy curriculum.

Ineffective Teacher–Student Relationships and Classroom Environments

We believe that teachers have been contributing factors in African American students’ resistance to literacy learning and school success. We say this not to blame teachers, but to call attention to the fact that African American students *do* know when their teachers dislike them, and they are frustrated, hurt, and confused by this realization. Consider the voices of several African American teens in West-Olatunji, Baker, and Brooks’s (2006) study:

Interviewer: How do you think your teachers feel about you?

Jamal: When my teacher go home, she probably be talkin’ about me to her kids.

She don’t like me and . . . you know what I be sayin’? I don’t like her neither.

Adam: Two wrongs don’t make a right.

Brandon: My teachers hate me.

Jay: It don’t mean *jump* to me! (p. 6)

Irvine (1990) contends that a *lack of cultural synchronization* and a *lack of cultural responsiveness* between teachers and African American students can create barriers to school success. A lack of cultural synchronization means that teachers and African American students do not share a common understanding of verbal and nonverbal language, manner of personal presentation, or ways of processing information and knowledge. As a result of these cultural misunderstandings, teachers sometimes “rush to judgment and hold false assumptions about [African American] children” (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin., 1999, p. 11). For instance, in her work, Michelle Fine (1995) noted that urban high school students were not only routinely dissuaded from drawing on their own personal experiences, language, family traditions, and community practices in class, but were also warned by their teachers on numerous occasions: “You act like that, and you’ll end up on welfare” (p. 211).

In other classrooms, a lack of cultural responsiveness results in negative expectations by teachers and by the students themselves, as well as in a pattern of differential teacher–student interactions and behaviors that cause tensions and conflicts. For example, two types of problematic interactions between teachers and African American students in classroom contexts are *racial spotlighting* and *racial ignoring*. Dorinda Carter (2005) argues that teachers sometimes *spotlight* Black students as *Black* students, positioning them as hypervisible by Whites in the learning context when they do not seek to be. Racial spotlighting can occur in three ways: (1) the role of native informant (e.g., publicly asking a Black student to talk in class about slavery or a controversial racial issue like racial profiling); (2) racialized stares (e.g., looking pointedly at Black students when certain racial and/or culturally diverse topics are discussed); and (3) guilt by association. The latter is closely connected to stereotype threat, a phenomenon studied by Claude Steele. In his work, Steele (2003) reports strong empirical psychological evidence that when Black students believe they are being judged as members of a stereotyped group rather than as individuals, they do significantly worse on achievement tests. Along similar lines, the African American students in Carter’s (2005) study reported that they perceived that they had to constantly “prove wrong” negative stereotypes about their intellectual ability and racial-group cultural patterns, and this was both psychologically and intellectually draining for them. Not even higher education provides relief from this burden, because research has found the “prove them wrong” phenomenon to be common among some Black students in predominantly White colleges and universities (Fries-Britt, 1998, 2002).

On the other hand, classroom teachers also can racially ignore African American students, positioning them in ways that render them “racially invisible” by Whites when they desire to be visible. Carter (2005) identifies

three strategies for racially ignoring Black students: (1) devaluing of thoughts, meaning that teachers and/or students do not “take up” comments made by Black students; (2) no eyes on me, meaning that teachers do not call on Black students as often as other students, even when their hands are raised; and (3) dehumanizing, representing instances when teachers use racially derogatory slurs in talking with students. In *Black in America 2*, aired by CNN (O’Brien, 2009a), Bertram Lee Jr., a Black freshman at Haverford College, an elite private institution in Pennsylvania, described an incident where he was called the N-word by a course instructor.

In light of these challenging teacher–student interactions, some African American students begin to view school as a “cultural battleground” (Blake, 2009, p. 129). Over time, these students may grow weary of the battle and resist school success in a number of ways, including misbehaving in class, refusing to complete assignments, losing focus in class, and even dropping out of school (Fine, 1995).

Limited, but Realistic, Folk Theories on Upward Mobility

We have adopted Kim’s (2006) metaphors of stepping stones and springboards to explain why some African American students do not perceive that school success is the most viable pathway to life success. Different groups of minorities have different folk theories, or collective stories, of getting ahead in America and attaining life success (Ogbu, 1995). Voluntary minorities are people whose families have willingly immigrated to the United States, and these groups tend to adopt White mainstream folk theories about getting ahead (e.g., working hard, getting a good education). Involuntary minorities are people who were brought to America by oppressive forces (e.g., slavery), and these groups hold very different folk theories because “in the course of many generations of barriers to opportunity structures, they . . . realize that advancement in this society requires more than education and more than individual effort and hard work to overcome the barriers to upward mobility” (Ogbu, 1995, p. 89). For African American children today, this means that the “go to school and get a good education for a great life” mantra may not have significant impact because they have learned that, due to structural forces such as racism and discrimination, this may not be the case. As Mickelson (1990) put it, “due to messages blacks receive from parents, friends, and neighbors, young blacks are not bewitched by the rhetoric of equal opportunity through education; they hear another side of the story at the dinner table” (p. 59). Thus, while African American students value education, and believe it is an important “stepping stone” to life success, they realize that their progress toward life success may be severely impeded by social barriers.

In contrast, African American youth tend to believe that alternative arenas, such as entertainment and professional sports, serve as springboards toward life success. Michael Baisden, a popular African American radio show host, noted, “If you take a young black man and put him on the basketball court with a white kid, automatically that black kid knows that he is gonna kill that white kid. . . . There’s something that, through his experiences, or the media, or whatever, that tells him he’s better” (O’Brien, 2009c). We agree with Baisden, and because some African American youth believe that they can excel in these arenas, they see them as springboards to the American Dream. In many ways, the springboard metaphor is particularly fitting; it propels you upward very quickly, you gain significant momentum, and very little will get in the way of your upward movement. Similarly, young African American men and women have become overnight celebrities, and sometimes instant millionaires, after signing movie, music, or athletic contracts, and on the surface, it seems that very few structural forces like racism can stop their upward trajectory. Consequently, some African American youth stop pursuing education because it seems like just a “stepping stone,” and they begin to perceive these other “springboards” as more viable options for life success. While this type of thinking holds great allure for African American youth, it is dangerous because only a few African American people will achieve that level of success through entertainment and sports.

RECLAIMING SCHOOL SUCCESS

In order to be successful in school, in the community, and in life, African American children must negotiate these multiple, and very complex, dimensions of success in ways that are psychologically, socially, and intellectually healthy. Many of these students find that the path is both uncertain and unknown, but they constantly strive toward reclamation of their academic careers and literacy lives. Swann-Wright (2002) notes that the saying “making a way out of no way” is prevalent in African American epistemology and folklore, because African American people had to create a new life for themselves—one that they had imagined but never fully lived—after emancipation. Years later, African American students who pursue school success are often trailblazers, sometimes the first in their family to graduate from high school, college, or graduate school. We know that these students can’t make it alone, and there are often supportive families, schools, principals, and communities along the way. Yet African American students often walk the hard road toward reclamation and success, using four strategies: (1) building resilience through double consciousness; (2) developing a cool, smart, and Black identity; (3) connecting to school through community organizations; and (4) engaging with caring teachers.

Building Resilience from Double Consciousness

Du Bois (1903/1995) used the term *double consciousness* to explain how African American people are simultaneously “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 45). As African American educators and parents, we have talked about double consciousness as being “the best of both worlds,” meaning, as Pat constantly says, “You understand Whiteness, and you know how to make it in the White world, but you still know who you are as a Black person.” This kind of bicultural awareness seems to be the key to significant school achievement. In a recent article in the *Boston Globe* (March 2009), Meghan Irons reported on a “rising counterculture” of African American youth who are unafraid to acknowledge their intelligence *and* take pride in their culture, as participants in the W. E. B. Du Bois Society, an intellectual group comprising African American high school students from public, parochial, and independent schools.

Several scholars who were interviewed for the article argued that this is a new phenomenon that is beginning to catch on within the millennial generation. Neil Howe, co-author of *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (2000), noted that there are “growing islands” of American teens who are beginning to actively resist the culture of low expectations that surrounds them. In the African American Community, young people are working to break down the stigma that being smart and Black is uncool. For example, the Du Bois Society, which meets on Saturdays at Harvard University to study the works of prominent scholars, was co-founded by the Rev. Eugene F. Rivers III and his wife, Jacqueline in 2001. Since its inception, more than 300 African American youth have participated in the program, and many have matriculated into some of the nation’s most selective institutions, including Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Dartmouth, Duke, Northeastern, and Boston College. Strong racial and cultural pride can lead to continued success in college, particularly for African American women. In a recent study, Cokley and Moore (2007) found that African American college women who see race as being a core part of their identity have higher GPAs than women who do not identify with their race. The researchers suggest that this difference in achievement stems from the need to be seen as a strong Black woman, an identity that entails high achievement in academics.

However, for many successful African American students, carrying two cultural backpacks can become an unbearable psychological, social, emotional, and intellectual burden, for two important reasons. First, the perspectives of smart African American students are not always affirmed in schools. In her study of an eighth-grade language arts classroom comprising African American, White, Latina, and Native American students, DeBlase (2003)

found that the African American girls were often vocal participants; they formed critical interpretations of texts, and offered these perspectives as contributions in class discussions. However, the girls' explicitly racial interpretations of texts were rarely taken up in the classroom, despite their best efforts to steer conversations in this direction. For example, during one classroom discussion, the teacher became frustrated that the students were bringing up points about race when she wanted them to talk about another theme in the text. The teacher makes several attempts to redirect the conversation by asking questions, and the African American girls in the class respond to them. However, the conversation becomes so stilted and exasperating that one of the girls says to the teacher, "But that's not the question we want! We already told you [the answer]. Now can we get back to race?" (p. 305). In this case, the African American girls were taking up the role of "good student" by responding to the teacher's initial question, actively engaging in the conversation by raising a new question, and expressing willingness to think critically about the assigned text. However, the teacher consistently resisted explicit discussions on race, and over time some African American girls were marginalized and silenced within the classroom. DeBlase (2003) concluded that

the enacted curriculum of this class did not acknowledge the ways in which race was implicated in the gendered lives of the girls in this classroom. Consequently, the girls were often left with only their own individual efforts as a means to work through issues of raced identity and its implications as a construct for understanding self in relation to texts. (p. 308)

Schools also may have a difficult time recognizing the academic achievements of African American males. As a student in a predominantly White junior high, Malcolm X (Haley, 1987) was first in his class. He told his favorite teacher that he wanted to become a lawyer, and while the teacher supported the aspirations of the White students who were less intelligent than Malcolm, he told Malcolm to become a carpenter. Similarly, in Jennifer's narrative at the beginning of this chapter, she describes how a high school counselor told her father that he was not "college material" and encouraged him to enter the military. Jennifer's father had done well in high school, especially in math, and went on to have a 25-year career in the telecommunications field. Yet the counselor could not see his academic talent and believed that he was better suited for the military.

A second problem facing African American students who embrace double consciousness is that, while it may appear to solve their identity conflicts, the cost of this "twoness" is often psychic turmoil, as Du Bois argues. Indeed, the internal conflicts and tensions caused by the "two warring ideals" often are experienced by African American students who have been successful in school, but who perceive themselves to have attained less success within the

peer community. In her story of schooling, Jennifer highlighted the pain of not being White enough to fit into the White Christian schools and churches she attended but not feeling Black enough to fit in with the popular Black girls in her high school. Similarly, Vershawn Young (2007), an African American professor, describes the “racial schizophrenia” (p. x) he experienced (and still experiences) with these poignant words:

Because I ain't no homeboy—though I long to be and would do anything short of killing to gain that identity—I'm not ghetto enough for the ghetto. Because I'm not a white boy, I'm not white enough for white folks. And because I wasn't born in to the middle class, I'm not completely accepted by the mainstream . . . the psychoemotional pain that this liminal existence creates, the pain of negotiating multiple cultural and racial worlds, is too great for many. I've been doing it for a long time and have been able to cope only by transforming my personal problem into an intellectual one. . . . but far too many are not able to do this. (p. xvi)

Both Young's and Jennifer's stories illuminate the “peculiar sensation” that Du Bois explains as emanating from this kind of double consciousness. African American students can draw upon both cultural worlds to achieve school success, community success, and life success, yet an unintentional consequence of this “border crossing” is that they eventually may feel as if they do not belong to either world. Du Bois (1903/1995) offers one solution to this problem: “to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (p. 45). But the question of how looms large, for there is no instant solution, no magic formula that we can share with African American students. This is why we firmly believe that successful African American students learn to “make a way out of no way,” breaking new ground, creating new identities and expressions of Blackness and American-ness that feel authentic to themselves, and seeking out new relationships with other like-minded African American youth.

Being Cool, Smart, and Black

Michael Turner, Jennifer's 38-year-old husband, is an African American man who has defied the stereotypes and been successful in attaining school, community, and life success. Having earned a bachelor's degree in finance from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and an MBA from the University of Maryland, Michael is now an independent IT contractor who has worked with some of America's leading companies. Born the second of five children, Michael grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, in a two-parent family under tremendous turmoil and stress. As a child, Michael longed to escape his home and his neighborhood and achieve something greater. Such dreams are very common among African American children,

but what made Michael unique was his ability to do well in his classes at the magnet high school, play football and basketball, and ultimately win an athletic scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania. When Jennifer asked Michael how he was able to accomplish this, he told this story:

I don't know how or who taught me, but I started reading early. And my mom would leave magazines out for me. We had subscriptions to *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Forbes*, *Money*. And the more I read, the more I learned, and I don't know when it hit me, but I realized that education is important. Growing up, education was a way to get out. I would read bios of people in magazines, and those people always had graduate degrees. And they were always from Harvard, Yale, Princeton. I didn't understand what that meant, but I knew they went to school for a long time. So it never occurred to me to play football in the NFL. Or play basketball in the NBA. I liked playing sports, but for me, I had read enough in those magazines to realize that those people who were profiled were shown to have a lot of money. And back then, rap was pretty new, and rappers weren't making a lot of money. So I thought I could be successful by going to school.

I was in a school with a magnet program [an advanced academic program for gifted and talented students] that whole time, and everybody was doing well. I think for the longest time, I just did well because everyone around me was doing well. And then, I realized that I wanted to get out of my neighborhood—it was so violent. And in high school, I wanted to get out of my house and I didn't know how to do it. My family would tease me, and my sisters and brother would call me a nerd. But that never bothered me because once I decided I needed to get out, I didn't care. My goal was just to go to college. So I studied hard. Sometimes I would go the library and study during lunch and before basketball or football practice. So I tried to do well in both.

There were two [African American] kids in the magnet program with me, and they played basketball. They were good players. And they both dropped out of the magnet program in high school, freshman year, because it was hard. In both of those cases, their parents didn't force them to stay in the magnet program. Because to those parents, it was better that they have time to play basketball than to focus on school. I don't think either of them went on to college, because in my school, if you weren't in the magnet program, you weren't ready for college.

School and sports were both important for me. And at the time, I felt that both made me cool. And the guys around my way would say, "That Turner, he's smart, but he can ball! So don't mess with him." Now, I think cool is feeling confident and not always needing to look to your friends for your confidence builders. And I think success is having a

certain amount of money. I have always been thinking about becoming a millionaire and that thought is always there. But I have two sons [now] and they need time with their family. And if you are chasing money, you just leave them behind. There are things that they need to learn from me and if I don't teach them, it will be much harder for my boys to get it later. Reading is a big part of it. I also want them to have enough time with Dad. So it is my job to make sure that they get all the time they need from me and to figure out how to still make enough money so that we can become millionaires. That would be success for me: if my sons feel like, "Hey, my dad was there for me. He taught me all these things that other people take for granted," and I can earn that extra money.

Michael's story is important because in many ways, he has been able to achieve a cool, masculine, and smart African American identity. Like Jennifer's narrative, the story that Michael tells is one of self-determination, of breaking down the false dichotomies of sports/school, Black/White, nerd/athlete, to develop a sense of self that is personally meaningful and fulfilling. Clearly, Michael did have obstacles in his life, but he had begun to define success according to what mattered to him: being a dad, raising two sons, and providing for his family. While we admire Michael's story, we have been disheartened by the fact that more stories about Black men who are honor students *and* star athletes have not been publicized in the media, and therefore remain invisible to Black youth. For example, the story of Myron Rolle, a 22-year-old African American football player who graduated pre-med in 2½ years from Florida State University and postponed playing in the National Football League in order to accept a Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford University, was not nearly as well publicized as other stories about professional Black male athletes (Cherner & Weir, 2009). Rolle's success story is important because it shows African American men attaining school success, success within the African American community and respect from their peers, and life success. According to Michael Baisden, a popular African American radio talk show host, "What young black men see are rappers and athletes. They're not seeing enough intellectuals, and they are not seeing enough people who are actually impacting us on a scientific level through engineering, medicine, and we need to do more" (O'Brien, 2009c).

Perhaps President Obama, an African American man who was educated at one of America's most elite universities, plays basketball, has a strong family life, and is the most powerful man in the world, will change this. He has become the "new standard" of cool, gracing the covers of magazines like *Ebony*, *Time*, and *Rolling Stone*. However, one thing remains certain: Without these critical intellectual role models, African American boys may not be able to emulate this kind of "inclusive" identity.

Connecting to School Through Community Organizations

Nationally recognized community organizations, such as the YMCA/YWCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, have played a critical role within the African American community. According to Fashola (2002), these organizations are the cornerstones of many African American communities because they “provide opportunities for young children to be introduced to new skills and to develop new talents . . . [and] enrich and expand the opportunities of all children by exposing them to a variety of activities” (p. 32). Journey for Change is an example of the kinds of powerful opportunities afforded by community organizations. Founded by Malaak Compton-Rock, Journey for Change is a program that sought to empower and inspire low-income African American youth at the Bushwick Salvation Army, a center in Brooklyn, New York. In August 2008, 30 kids, ages 12 to 16, were chosen to go with Compton-Rock on a 2-week trip to South Africa, and documented their experiences playing with babies in orphanages, dancing in the streets, and talking to elders about their lives. Since returning home, the youths have been busy doing community service projects in Brooklyn, such as serving food in homeless shelters, working in a center for abused children, and cleaning up the neighborhood. When the group was featured on CNN’s *Black in America* program (July 2009), several of the students who participated in this program talked about how transformative the experience was for them; some were motivated to study and improved their grades and behavior in school, while others talked about the self-confidence, compassion, and hopefulness that they gained from the program. Along similar lines, prominent African American celebrities, such as Denzel Washington and Chris Rock, also have spoken passionately about their life-changing experiences in community-based programs. In addition to these powerful testimonials, there is also some empirical evidence that community-based programs help to improve the literacy skills of participating students (Fashola, 2002; Fashola & Cooper, 1999). However, the extent of the impact of community-based organizations on the academic lives of African American youth remains unclear because the research literature on program effectiveness is quite limited.

Engaging with Caring Teachers

Like other students in our schools, African American students are willing to connect with and will eagerly learn from caring teachers. In research conducted on African American elementary and secondary students’ views of effective teachers and schools, these youth consistently reported that (a) relationships between teachers and students affected their academic achieve-

ment, (b) teachers' responsiveness to their personal lives generated positive feelings that led to increased effort in school, and (c) they preferred that teachers establish classroom environments that "felt" like their homes or communities (Hollins & Spencer, 1990; Howard, 2002). As Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) explains:

Relationships matter for learning. Students' trust in their teachers helps them develop the commitment and motivation needed to tackle challenging learning tasks. Teachers' connection to and understanding of their students helps those students develop the commitment and capacity to surmount the hurdles that accompany ambitious learning . . . success depends as much on the strength of these relationships . . . as on knowledge of students' learning styles and technical skills. (p. 134)

Historically, African American teachers in segregated schools were able to build close teacher–student relationships. Research conducted by prominent scholars like Vanessa Siddle Walker (2001), Adam Fairclough (2007), Michelle Foster (1997), and Arlette Willis (2002) has consistently shown that “the African American teacher is a critical figure in a web of caring adults who placed the needs of African American children at the center of the school’s mission” (Siddle Walker, 2001, p. 752). In her book *Black Teachers on Teaching*, Michelle Foster (1997) noted that Black teachers also enacted an ethic of care by demanding academic excellence of their students, disciplining their students when necessary, holding high expectations for academic achievement and social behavior, motivating students to excel, and providing resources to address perceived needs. Some argue that after desegregation, when African American students began attending integrated schools, the disappearance of caring African American teachers and administrators negatively affected the self-esteem and racial pride of African American children (Edwards, 1993). While we do not wish to romanticize segregated schools, we also recognize that these sustained, nurturing, caring teacher–student relationships did not seem to be as available to African American students after desegregation, because

When black children entered integrated schools, they were met generally by white administrators and teachers who were unprepared to deal with their cognitive styles, social values, beliefs, customs and traditions. Because of the discontinuity that developed overnight between home and school cultures, these personnel began teaching black children with preconceived notions and stereotypical views about how they functioned. (Trent & Artiles, 1995, p. 244)

Consequently, in the approximately 55 years since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, African American students have been taught primarily

by White teachers. However, we want to emphasize that White teachers who care about African American students also can support their school success and literacy achievement. For example, in her autobiography *Project Girl*, Janet McDonald (1999) describes the pivotal role that two White educators played in her journey from living in a crowded Brooklyn housing project with her family to becoming an international lawyer in Paris. McDonald was smart and loved to read, and although she graduated from high school at age 16, she was not adequately prepared for college. Frustrated and lost, Janet enrolled at Harlem Prep, an alternative school directed by the Carpenters, a husband-and-wife team of White educators. McDonald thrived intellectually and socially in the nurturing, familial atmosphere that the Carpenters created, and with their encouragement and support, she applied to Vassar and was accepted. There, McDonald did extremely well, and eventually graduated from Columbia Law School and became an international lawyer.

Perhaps the most moving story we have heard about a caring White teacher comes from D. L. Hughley, the famous African American comedian. During an interview with CNN's Soledad O'Brien (2009b), Hughley was brought to tears talking about the teacher who made a difference in his life: his fifth-grade teacher, Lang Boston. Hughley said that Boston saw his potential, and believed in him when no one else did. Ruddell (1995) calls teachers like Lang Boston "influential teachers" who make a profound and long-lasting impression on their students by inspiring them to learn, motivating them to excel, or insisting they never give up on their dreams.

These success stories offer compelling evidence that White teachers have been able to reach out to Black students in ways that profoundly changed their lives. Research has corroborated this critical theme. In her classic work, Ladson-Billings (1994) studied eight teachers who were successful with African American students, three of whom were White, and more recently, Turner (2003) investigated the language arts practices of three White teachers who were effective with African American elementary students. Looking across these studies, the White teachers were able to develop and sustain a positive, nurturing relationship with their African American students, providing them the academic and emotional support essential for successful learning (i.e., intellectual and social achievement) in classrooms.

One teacher can make the difference in the life of an African American student. However, Black students are finding it extremely difficult to find White or Black teachers who can develop those kinds of relationships with them. Many teachers feel harried by curricular demands, increasing class sizes, tight assessment schedules, and accountability pressures, and they don't feel they have the time to personally connect with each student. Other teachers may want to connect with their African American students, but don't know how to do that because they have very little experience talking and

interacting across racial lines (see Chapter 3 for a more substantive discussion of these points). Unfortunately, African American students may have one caring teacher, but without a social network of such teachers in their school careers, they may experience significant challenges in attaining school success through positive relationships with teachers.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

This chapter described the multiple meanings of success that African American students must negotiate as they learn literacy in school: life success, community success, and school success. In writing this chapter, we have been captivated by the powerful messages that African American youth glean from various aspects of the African American Community, and how their interpretations of these messages may lead them to resist school success, and try to attain life success and community success through alternative means, or reclaim school success in ways that enable them to attain success in school, community, and life. Neither road is easy for African American youth to tread, and the intellectual, psychological, and socioemotional toll that both low- and high-achieving African American students pay in K-16 classrooms is extremely heavy.

Although we have attempted to illuminate the perspectives of African American students in this chapter, we cannot help but wish to see more African American students taking the path of reclamation. As we can attest, this road is very uncertain, mainly because African American students, to some extent, must make their own way toward literacy achievement, respect from their cultural community, and success in life. But like Marva Collins (1992), we believe that there is a brilliant child locked inside every African American student. Therefore, we believe that African American youth need some support in making their road, and that is where teachers can help.

Marva Collins (1992) argues that “the good teacher makes the poor student good and the good student superior. When our students fail, we, as teachers have failed also” (p. 32). We know that teachers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds can make a difference in the literacy lives of African American students. Hale-Benson (2001) argues that the solution to creating educational excellence for African American children is found in the classroom, in the activities between teacher and child, and in the teaching and learning processes that are nurtured and sustained throughout the academic year.

But what might these instructional strategies look like? And which ones are “best” for African American students? We address these questions in Chapter 3.