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African American Women Baccalaureate Success: A Reflective Look at Pre-Collegiate Years Influencing Transition, Persistence, and Degree Attainment

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AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN BACCALAUREATE SUCCESS:

A REFLECTIVE LOOK AT PRE-COLLEGIATE YEARS INFLUENCING

TRANSITION, PERSISTENCE AND DEGREE ATTAINMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

African American women are graduating from college at rates higher than their Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino, Native American and even their African American male peers. This level of college persistence and success is occurring amid the challenges they face and share with their peers of the same schools, neighborhoods and society. Similar to many of their peers, these young women experience under-resourced schools and limited college preparation. In addition, they have unique school challenges including experiences with negative stereotypes and harsh discipline policies. African American women also face societal challenges through experiences with trauma, foster care and disproportionate early parenting, to name a few. Nevertheless, they persist. To date, the literature is lacking in studies that represent successful African American women who have encountered challenges yet achieve their educational goals.

Through a reflective case analysis, this study investigates how the high school experiences of African American women who have experienced trauma and persisted toward college and eventual baccalaureate attainment. I sought to investigate, specifically, *how the high school experiences of African American young women shape and support their transition to college and ultimately degree success.* Through the use of an initial questionnaire administered to twenty-four respondents, followed by phenomenological interviews with nine of these women, I was able to ascertain a wealth of information highlighting the voices of these thriving women. Using Critical Race Theory, I explore the assets these women bring and center their voice in sharing how they pursue success for themselves, their families and their communities.

The study's findings indicate that while there were a number of traumatic events that these African American women experienced, supportive persons and services in educational settings were advantageous for their academic and social development. The significance of the study lies in its potential to inform educators, counselors and other supportive stakeholders of ways to improve the rate of baccalaureate attainment among African American young women and their similarly situated peers.

DEDICATION

"The average black girl that I know had courage that surpassed her every fear…"
(Johnson, 2015)

This study is dedicated to the phenomenal African American women in search of a better life for themselves through the pursuit of education. This is also dedicated to the women in my study, who beyond all obstacles and challenges that life brings, continue to take care of themselves, their families and their communities by staying true to our ancestral heritage. I thank them for trusting me to tell their stories of challenge and triumph. I also thank them for reminding us that we RISE!

Next, I dedicate this to my first teacher and role model, my mother Norma Ruth Stoker-Mtume. I watched her work 3 jobs and pursue her Bachelor's Degree while I was in junior high school. She then completed her Master's Degree when I was in 10th grade amidst all of the challenges she faced. Her persistence and dedication lighted a fire in me that never dimmed. She continues to inspire me to greatness

Finally, I dedicate this to my two African American girls, Khadijah Kharriem and Aaliyah Regine. I pray this makes you proud of mommy! Thank you for sacrificing so much of your time and energy to help me pursue my goal of the Ph.D. Thank you for always doing your best to make a difference in our world. May God continue to bless. Much Love

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ for the opportunity to achieve this dream. I have been blessed with some of the most powerful African American Women to grace the earth as guides to my educational experience. My first schooling took place at Oakland Community School, run by the Black Panther Party There I not only learned to love me, but to love my people and to fight injustice.

I also thank God for the motivation and financing of my paternal grandmother Glorya Jane Armour and my aunt Hilda J. Craddock who supported my educational goals through high school and into college and shared, often, there great expectations for me.

My pursuit of the PhD began with my Master's degree practicum professor, Dr. Sharon Grant-Henry. I promised her I would one day "earn this PhD from a reputable university." Although she has left us here on earth, I know that she beams with pride as she looks into my life today. My first course with Dr. Joi A. Spencer led me to one of the most challenging and inspirational courses of my education; the reading coupled with the pregnancy were an interesting match made in heaven. However, it did so much more than that –it led me to my mentor and friend. Your belief in me, your patience with me, and your high expectations were phenomenally important as I pushed through this six-year journey. Thank you for always being there to encourage me.

To my advisor in this program, Dr. Lea Hubbard, thank your for believing in the dream I had to powerfully share the voice of people of color and specifically that of African American women. I appreciate your insight and feedback into this process.

Dr. Christopher Newman, I thank you for being a willing and important participant on this roller coaster ride. I appreciate your thoughtfulness, your

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

I have spent the last 20 years as an educator with some of the most underserved youth in San Diego County. This privilege of serving both as a teacher and an administrator has guided my understanding of our current public K-16 school system. The youth I meet each year impact the manner in which I think and behave with all children and deepen my commitment to providing education for all students. Education can lead particularly those with challenging life circumstances toward a brighter future.

I was most impressed and astonished at the population of African American young women who participated in this study. They share stories of resilience and persistence toward a baccalaureate education. The incredible educational stories we typically hear of young African Americans include academic struggle, failure and lack of educational achievement. Stories of success, persistence and academic commitment of this population are rarely told.

As an educator, I knew there had to be success stories amid the complexities of these young women and their lived experiences. As a successful African American woman and mother of two African American girls, my heart told there must be. Nonetheless, there are few studies that investigate this important student population. Learning how African American women successfully navigate high school and college, in spite of their challenges, can provide educators with much needed insight on how to support these same African American young women more generally, and possibly their African American male peers, and other students of color, seeking Bachelor's degrees.

The Statistics

The milestones often associated with young adulthood that lead to a four-year college degree elude 89.5% of African American secondary students (National Center for (Educational Statistics (NCES) Snyder, de Brey & Dillow, 2016a). The African American undergraduate college enrollment rate of attendance has increased from approximately 30% to 33% in the last two decades, (between 2002-03 and 2013-14) and the immediate enrollment (students enrolled the October after graduation in a two or four year college after high school graduation) rate increased from 59%-63% in the same time period (Snyder et al., 2016b, c). Interconnected with this overall picture of African American students is the rate of college enrollment for African American women. Over the last two decades, their enrollment has increased from 25% to 37%. In addition, their rates of conferred bachelor degrees (BA/BS) are the highest among all people of color (African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino and Native American) at 11.9% (Snyder et al., 2016a) as indicated in Table 1. The overall (male and female) percent of African Americans conferred a baccalaureate degree continues to be approximately 10.6%[1] (Snyder et al., 2016a).

African American women rates of conferred degrees are higher than most students of color including their African American male counterparts. In addition, Table 2 displays the total number of conferred degrees to all US citizens for the years 2009-10 through 2013-14. This means the table represents the total number of degrees conferred to all US citizens disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender.

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[1] The African American conferred baccalaureate rate is determined by averaging the rate of African American women at 11.9% and African American men at 8.9% to arrive at approximately 10.6%, may not sum to totals because of rounding.

Table 1
Bachelor's degrees conferred, by race/ethnicity of student:
Selected years 2009-10 through 2013-14

| | Percentage distribution of bachelor degrees conferred to U.S. citizens | | | | | | |
Year	White	Black Female	Black Male	Latino	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Native American	2 or more races
2009-10	72.9	11.8	8.2	8.8	7.3	0.8	---
2010-11	71.1	11.9	8.3	9.3	7.3	0.7	1.2
2011-12	70.0	12.3	8.7	9.8	7.3	0.7	1.6
2012-13	68.8	12.1	8.9	10.5	7.3	0.6	1.9
2013-14	67.7	11.9	8.9	11.2	7.3	0.6	2.5

Note: For 1989-90 and later years, reported racial/ethnic distributions of students by level of degree, field of degree, and sex were used to estimate race/ethnicity for students whose race/ethnicity was not reported. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Some data have been revised from previously published figures.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Fall 2000 through Fall 2014, Completions component.

Table 2
Total Bachelor's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions,
by race/ethnicity and gender of student:
Selected years 2009-10 through 2013-14

Year	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Black Female	11.80	11.90	12.30	12.10	11.90
Black Male	8.20	8.30	8.70	8.90	8.90
Latino Female	9.30	9.80	10.30	11.00	11.80
Latino Male	8.10	8.60	9.10	9.80	10.50
Asian/ Pacific Islander Female	7.00	6.90	6.90	6.90	6.90
Asian/ Pacific Islander Male	7.80	7.80	7.80	7.90	7.80
Native American Female	0.80	0.70	0.70	0.70	0.60
Native American Male	0.70	0.70	0.60	0.60	0.50
White Female	71.10	69.40	68.20	67.30	66.10
White Male	75.20	73.40	72.30	70.90	69.90
2 or more races Female	no data	1.30	1.60	2.00	2.60
2 or more races Male	no data	1.10	1.50	1.80	2.40

Note: For 1989-90 and later years, reported racial/ethnic distributions of students by level of degree, field of degree, and sex were used to estimate race/ethnicity for students whose race/ethnicity was not reported. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Some data have been revised from previously published figures.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Fall 2000 through Fall 2014, Completions component.

As one can see, the rates of baccalaureate attainment have increased for most all students of color; however, the rates for African American young women have been and continue to be greater.

Problem Statement

The story of African American young women is complex. On the one hand, they are excelling beyond their African American male counterparts and other students of color. On the other hand they face a unique set of challenges and circumstances. African American women are surpassing their peers in their rates of Baccalaureate degree attainment and currently we know very little about how these young women who obtain their Bachelor's degree persist and succeed. The level of degree attainment is particularly of interest as young African American women face particular challenges in schools, similar to both their male peers and other students including: under-resourced schools, lack of academic preparation for college and issues of college preparatory course accessibility ultimately necessitating remediation (ACT, 2015; ED, 2011; Shulock, 2010; Smith-Evans, George, Graves, Kaufmann, & Frohlich, 2014). In addition, African American young women face issues of negative stereotypes and harsh discipline practices (Crenshaw, Ocen & Nanda, 2015; Grisby Bates, 2015; Smith-Evans et al., 2014). Some African American young women also face limited access to extra-curricular activities that can lead to college success (Knight-Diop, 2010; Smith-Evans et al., 2014).

As well, African American young women face numerous challenges in their communities and in society as a whole (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). These challenges are often related to issues of low self-esteem, trauma –sexual and emotional, and disproportionate experiences with foster care (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Smith-Evans et al.,

2014; West & Johnson, 2013). Finally, although declining, the effects of teen parenting disproportionately affect African American young women; their rates are 31.8 per 1000 females aged 15-19. These rates are down 49% from 2007 when the rates were 62.0 per 1000 (Hamilton & Matthews, 2016; Smith-Evans et al., 2014; Wiltz, 2015).

Nevertheless, many African American young women attain great success in school and in their private community lives as well. As stated earlier these represent 37% of college attendees. Of all of the degrees conferred in the US, African American women have Bachelor degree conferral rates of 11.9%, Master's degree 15% and Doctoral or professional degree attainment of 9% (Snyder, et al., 2016a). African American women head households, care for parents, engage in civic, social and religious organizations and have stood at the forefront of efforts to improve the educational opportunities of young people in the United States and abroad (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). The reasons for the success of African American women demand further investigation.

Theoretical Lenses

"Education is the key to unlocking the world, a passport to freedom." (Winfrey, 2008)

The pursuit of education as a means of liberation is not new to African Americans. The notion of "freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship and leadership" (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003 p. 6) was invoked early on as enslaved men and women sacrificed their lives to learn to read. After enslavement legally ended, the establishment of institutions of higher learning continued to carry this tradition of educating African Americans toward the goal of freedom through literacy.

An asset based/anti-deficit approach. My study uses an anti-deficit approach to understand the resiliency and success of young African American women. Similar to the

work of Howard and Associates' (2017) study of African American Males and Latinos in Los Angeles, this investigation centers on African American Women's progress and achievement. As such, Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), because of its effort to place the voices of the marginalized at the center of research, was a primary theory in my study. Howard's study also gives a further recommendation as to the plight of girls under the section headed "Girls Matter Too!" (Howard & Associates, 2017). My study intends to continue in this vein and highlight the narrative from the voices of African American young women. Their stories are just as valid and necessary as the stories of males of color.

Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) seeks to study and inform issues of race, racism and power in our society. The tenets that serve as it's foundation are: 1) racism is ordinary and the way we do business in our world, therefore it is not easily 'solved'; 2) "'interest convergence' or material determinism… because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (psychically)"(p. 7), for example, African Americans have jobs that make white elites rich, but they argue because with it they are able to care for their families; and 3) that people of color should have a central voice in their story because it is an experience unique and valid to them.

Critical Race Theory was first brought to the field of education in 1995 by Ladson-Billings and Tate stating that, "race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States" (p.48). They further expanded Critical Race Theory by focusing on the idea of the US being based on property rights. Education, it contends, is a property right and therefore is handled often time like any other rights

regarding people of color in the US, inequitably. They highlight, "the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48)." Meaning, we can begin to look at things like unequal funding and inequities in course offerings or 'intellectual property' as issues better understood by the challenges of social inequity that has plagued the US since its inception as a country. Solorzano and Yosso (2001) further elaborated on these and applied them to teacher education programs.

The tenet I drew on most was *Centrality of Experiential Knowledge.* As Solorzano and Yosso (2001) share, men and women of color are legitimate sources to research. Furthermore, as people of color, we are the most authentic voices on racial subordination. It also validates their voice by stating we can authoritatively speak about racial subordination and our space in our world (p.3). I used *Centrality of Experiential Knowledge* as it caters to the voices of marginalized participants in society; the *counter-narrative* is what is used to tell the other side of people of color's stories, from their perspective. Ultimately, CRT gives way for the voices of the young women in this study to be centered in the conversation of their lived experiences and allows for the ways in which they navigate them to success to become visible.

Purpose of the Study

Preparation for bachelor degree attainment begins long before college enrollment. The purpose of this reflective case analysis study, utilizing a questionnaire and three phenomenological interviews, is to explore how the high school years of African American young women, who suffered trauma, served as support toward baccalaureate attainment. From an asset-based lens this study sought to understand, specifically, how

the educational system supported these young women who experienced issues of disproportionate foster care, sexual and emotional trauma, as well as early parenting. This study offers insight on what educators can do to improve the support of African American women who manage these challenges daily while moving toward success in achieving their academic goals. There is a need for us, as K-12 leaders, counselors and teachers, to understand successful models of students of color who persist and succeed academically. If we can understand, then we may be able to replicate the success.

Research Questions

I sought to understand how African American young women use the philosophy of freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship and leadership as motivation for their persistence in education. In addition, I wanted to ascertain the ways they used their lived experiences and support from educational systems to achieve their educational goals; hence, I asked the following research questions:

1. What challenges (academic, social and/or personal) do African American young women face in pursuit of their educational goals?

2. How do high schools support or challenge African American young women in attaining their educational goals?

3. How do African American young women, who have experienced trauma, successfully navigate the college experience?

4. In what way does African American culture shape/support the educational success and persistence of African American young women?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Education, on the other hand, means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light only by which men can be free." (Douglass, 1894)

Despite the dismal pictures painted of African American education failure, there is a historical legacy of African Americans pursuing education. African Americans, in particular, have gone to great lengths in an effort to attain a meaningful education. Douglass' quote highlights African Americans' thinking, since enslavement, on the value of literacy and education and what it meant for their freedom. Just as freedom and liberty are inseparable aspects of African American identity, so too is literacy. Stepto (1991) posited that the pursuit of education sustained African Americans for generations. The notion of "freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship and leadership" (p. 6) was raised early on as enslaved men and women sacrificed their lives to learn to read. Reading provided them with access to the economic and political system of the United States, allowed them to bring cases to court and prevented their exploitation in business and commerce. During enslavement and especially after, establishments of higher education were created to ensure the liberty won via the Civil War was sustained. This literacy for freedom, I contend, is still being pursued today through the attainment of college degrees. This literature review was conducted with this notion in mind.

An Asset Based/Anti-Deficit Approach

My study takes an asset based approach to uncovering the successes and triumphs of this unique demographic. Valencia (2010) posits that a deficit thinking model is one "which the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficiencies"

(p.6). He goes on to describe how these models show up in schools as alleged limited intellect, limited abilities, linguistic issues and a lack of a motivation. Ryan (1971) responded to this model in his seminal book, *Blaming the Victim*. He surmised, "the logical outcome of analyzing social programs in terms of the deficiencies of the victims is the development of programs to correct those deficiencies" (p.8). Meaning that, if we help African Americans and Latinos deal with racism and focus on building up resiliency in low-income families, but do nothing to fix the system that provides improper schooling and health care opportunities for these same individuals, then we are in essence utilizing a deficit-thinking model; we are blaming the victim. Valencia (1997) says that it [deficit thinking] may take many forms, and even be proven empirically inconsistent; it nevertheless, continues to find its way into schools through the construction of policy and practice. We see this in the low number of African Americans and Latino in AP courses; based on the idea that they are inferior in their thought process, for example. In addition, we find this in the low expectations of critical thinking demanded in urban schools. Often time, in the name of helping students "feel good", educators miss the opportunity to assist youth in the mastery of subjects so that they can truly increase their self esteem for the long term. This, Valencia contends, is one of the dangers of "deficit-thinking".

Deficit thinking can also be evident in our word choice. Haberman (2000) asserts, "Language is not an innocent reflection of how we think. The terms we use control our perceptions, shape our understanding and lead us to particular proposals for improvement" (p.203). Meaning, when we comment about who can and cannot achieve, behave, or attend parent teacher conferences, my choice of words may ultimately dictate the policies put in place for those students. For this study, as opposed to finding

something wrong with African American young women and their lived experiences, I have instead found what they have done and continue to do to succeed in both graduating from high school and persisting toward and through graduation from college.

This anti-deficit lens is seen in Harper 's (2012) qualitative study. The study included 219 Black male undergraduates from 42 colleges in 20 states across the country. It was an effort to gain insight on how these Black males became leaders on their respective campuses and how they gained entry into the institution of higher learning of their choice. The criteria for the young men in the study was 1) 3.0 GPA, 2) an established record of leadership, 3) active engagement in multiple student organizations, 4) developed and meaningful relationships with campus personnel, 5) participation in enriching educational experiences and 6) earned numerous merit-based scholarships and honors. In speaking of his goals for the study, he highlights, "This study goes beyond deficit perspectives on achievement by highlighting persons, policies, programs and resources that help Black men succeed…" (p.4). As mentioned previously, this lens has also been used most recently in Howard and Associates' (2017) study of Black and Latino Males in Los Angeles. Howard et al.'s qualitative study utilized in-depth interviews from 201 young men from six high schools in Los Angeles County. The goal of the study was to capture the young men's understanding of success and the contributors to that success. The study sought young men who met the successful student criteria: 1) A 2.5 GPA or above, 2) talent or leadership abilities and 3) evidence of resilience that assist in achieving their success. In this study and in mine, we reframe the conversation on the success of African Americas, in ways often advocated in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and referred to in this comment by Howard and Associates:

We take the time to center their voices, hear their stories, and listen to their

takeaways about how they have accomplished what they are doing and the

recommendations they offer on how to support other Black and Latino young men

just like them (2017, p. 5).

As I continue to center the lived experiences and the voices of African American

young women, as Howard suggested in his study, I sought to gather the stories of their

lived experiences as well as the persons and systems that helped them succeed. While

there are a few asset-based studies of African American males, from their voices, in more

recent years (Harper, 2012, 2014; Noguera, 2008); asset-based studies of African

American women and their experience of successful navigation are rare and from the

voice of the young women themselves, equally rare. Yet, their stories are valid, critical

and important, as Critical Race Theory proposes.

Critical Race Theory

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) describe the effort that seeks to study and inform

issues of race, racism and power in our society Critical Race Theory (CRT). While this

theory was first introduced in the field of law by Bell, Crenshaw and others CRT gained

much of its underpinnings from critical legal studies and radical feminism. At the core of

the themes agreed upon in CRT is the idea of racism as an "ordinary experience for most

people of color in this country" (p.7). Because it is ordinary, it cannot be easily erased by

simple ideas, such as Color-Blindness or Equality for all movements. In more recent

decades, CRT has moved into other disciplines and the challenges of the permanency of

racism, the first tenet of CRT, as well as other themes are explored in a variety of ways.

Centrality of experiential knowledge. In the field of education**,** Solorzano and Yosso (2001) define CRT as "challenging the dominant discourse on race and racism as it relates to education by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate racial and ethnic groups" (p. 2). To this end, their themes highlight the following tenets: The Centrality and Intersection of Race and Racism, The Challenge to Dominant Ideology, The commitment to Social Justice, The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge and finally, The Interdisciplinary Perspective. These themes are seen in education in the pursuit to dismantle the systems that are deficit based and responsible for issues like the underrepresentation of African American students in advanced courses. In addition, these themes validate the experiences of students of color and confront the discourse in schools that is both limiting and liberating in its educational curriculum and instruction.

The theme I will use in framing my inquiry and research is Solorzano and Yosso's (2001) *Centrality of Experiential Knowledge*, which highlights the idea that men and women of color are legitimate sources to research and can authoritatively speak about racial subordination and their space in our world (p.3). It [Centrality of Knowledge] also honors the voice that gives space for the positive narrative of the African American woman of colors' lived experience. This framing will be like other authors who have begun to conduct research through this lens, e.g. McGee, Stinson and Harper and Howard.

Counter storytelling. *Counter-storytelling* is an analytical and theoretical perspective which can inform the way the structural patterns of institutional racism influence the experiences of, for example, African American girls/women in educational

settings and otherwise. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) concur and maintain, "The voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system (p. 58). Dixson and Rousseau (2006) further assert that we cannot simply hear the stories of children of color, but that we must analyze them through a deeper CRT lens that will expose the challenges and successful opportunities in education. They further surmise that this analysis must then lead to action and "the qualitative and material improvement of the educational experiences of people of color" (p.37).

I contend that this study, using the themes identified in CRT, will inform 9-12 leaders, educators and counselors who are seeking to improve the rates of graduation from high school and college for African American young women and possibly all students of color. Ultimately, it gives way for the voices of these young women to be centered in the conversation of their lived experiences and its impact on their future, educationally and otherwise.

The Population

In this study, it is important to center the population and understand the demographic. African Americans make up 13.3% of the United States population and 24% percent are African American youth under 18 years of age. Of the 50.3 million youth enrolled in US K-12 schools, 16% are African American. Public school enrollment for African Americans has declined in the last decade from 8.3 million to 7.8 million and the percentage of African American students decreased from 17 to 16 percent. Of these, approximately 49% are African American girls. This number is projected to decrease to 15 percent by 2025. The African American student population percentages waver based on their location in the US. The West has just 5 percent of these African American youth

and the South has as many as 24 percent. The Midwest and the Northeast are closer in percentages of their population with 14 percent in the Midwest and 15 percent in the Northeast (Snyder et al., 2016e).

African American youth are disproportionately represented in the foster care system. The number of African American youth in this country remains at approximately 16% of the youth population. The AFCARS Report (2015) cites of all the youth in foster care, African Americans are consistent at 24% (about half—48% of those are young African American women). African American youth are also disproportionately represented in the homeless population as well. African American youth experiencing homelessness continues at a rate of 27%, however, 75% of these are young women (Bardine, 2014). The US Department of Justice reports that at the end of 2014, approximately 517,000 black males and 23,000 black females were in state or federal prison accounting for approximately 37% and 21% respectively of the total prison population (Carson, 2015). This would seem to lead to the increased numbers of African American foster youth and those experiencing homelessness as well. These statistics are important because they indicate some of the challenges that many African American women face including the ones in this study.

The Importance of a College Education

For African Americans in particular the future, including opportunities for employment leading to improved life's circumstances, often rests on the coveted baccalaureate degree. Despite the variation associated with one's choice in a major and the multiplicity of options around entry level versus promotional positions, the overall difference in salaries for a person with a bachelor's degree over a lifetime is $2,268,000

compared with $1,304,000 for a person with a high school diploma and $1,727,000 for a

person with an associate's degree (Carnevale, Rose & Cheah, 2011, p.4). As such, a

bachelor's degree offers the opportunity to earn almost a million dollars more over a

lifetime of working and this is significant.

The report "The College Payoff" written by The Georgetown University Center

on Education and the Workforce articulates the seriousness of the baccalaureate degree as

an essential piece of one's earning potential. "Among African Americans, for example,

lifetime earnings are on average 13-16 percent less than Whites" (Carnevale, et al., 2011,

p.11). This means that there is a definite racial disparity in income and potential income

for African Americans. However, the report also describes the baccalaureate degree as

the gateway to other degrees (master's and professional).

Although the lifetime income of most African Americans is considerably less than

Whites, as Table 3 displays, it is still better to earn a degree for a number of reasons.

They include greater earning potential for employment options and greater amounts of

income earned; hence, increasing the ability to care for one's self and family. For African

American women, this need is great and even greater for those heading households.

Table 3
Average hourly wages, by race and education, 2015

	White	**Black**
Less than HS	$13.57	$11.25
High school	$18.00	$14.24
Some college	$19.80	$15.85
College	$31.83	$25.77
Advanced degree	$39.82	$33.51

Source: Gould, E**.** Economic Policy Institute website, *State of Working American Wages,* 2016

School Challenges for African American Students

African American women enroll in college at rates of 37% of the total each year, however, their graduation rate remains at 11.9% (Snyder et al., 2016a,b). African American students struggle to attain Bachelor's degrees for a number of reasons, including the quality of education received in secondary schools, challenges in being offered the proper curriculum, and challenges of rigor when the correct curriculum is offered. A report by the National Center on Public Policy revealed that although many students have met the criteria to be college-ready, they often arrive to their school unprepared for the expected level of college work (Shulock, 2010). This is far too often the case with African American students.

College preparedness. One of the primary issues facing both African American (females and males) is the issue of college preparedness. California provides an important case. "Despite a system-wide [California State University] admissions policy that requires a college-preparatory curriculum and a grade-point average in high school of a B or higher, 68 percent of the 50,000 entering freshmen at CSU campuses require remediation in English/language arts, math, or both" (Shulock, 2010, p. 3). These students are not slackers and have engaged in a college-preparatory curriculum and maintained a B average or better, as stated for required admission. Many other states are having similar issues of large placements in remedial classes with their freshman classes as evidenced by the national statistics. According to the 2012 publication by Complete College America, 19.9% of students entering a four-year college are enrolled in remediation courses; of those enrolled, 39.1% are African American (p. 6). Only 35.1% of those freshman that have entered college and completed remediation, graduate within

six years. Of those who don't take remedial courses, 55.7% graduate in six years. In fact, remediation and non-credit bearing courses tend to hinder a large number of students, irrespective of race, age or economic status (p. 8).

The Center for American Progress reported to Congress on the lack of college preparedness amongst African American secondary students (2015). Their study focused on states with the highest disparities in achievement for English and Math, by subgroup. Their particular findings were that schools with overall high achievement scores often mask the performance of the lowest achieving subgroups [including African Americans]. In fact, "In many states, the achievement gaps in the highest-performing schools are considerably larger than in the lowest-performing schools (Sargrad, Marchitello, & Hanna, 2015, p. 4). The study also found that low performance is not confined students coming from low-performing schools. Even within some of the nation's highest performing schools, African American students who graduate are still underprepared for college. The data imply that while some of the population is being prepared for college going success, far too many are not. The study also implies that addressing only the lowest performing schools in the nation, as some would suggest, would fail to eradicate the issue of under preparedness Among African American students.

College preparatory curriculum. It is widely argued that standardized tests are only one limited way of measuring student preparedness. The American College Testing Program (ACT) reported that there is a need for students to take a core curriculum in order to be college ready, "More than 43 percent of ACT-tested 2013 high school graduates who completed the ACT-recommended core curriculum met three or four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks. In comparison, about 22 percent of students who did not

complete the core curriculum met three or four Benchmarks" (2015, p. 8). This

curriculum includes:

- Four years of English
- Three years of mathematics, including rigorous courses in Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II
- Three years of science, including rigorous courses in Biology, Chemistry, and Physics
- Three years of social studies

California operates on a very similar system with minor difference in history and social

science. This is known in the state as the California State University/University of

California (CSU/UC) A-G curriculum. There is also one year of a Visual and Performing

Arts and one year of a college preparatory elective required. Nevertheless, highlighted in

just these two examples are the variation in state requirements and often the subsequent

variation in rigor expected of the college going freshman.

Course rigor. Another common measurement used for students' future success is

the preparedness stemming from the rigor of high school courses being offered and

students' grades in those courses. Many schools offer honors, Advanced Placement (AP)

and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses in various subjects. Course offerings vary

across context. While some schools have many rigorous offerings, others have few,

leading to the inconsistency in access. Mayer (2008) and Swanson and Nagy (2014)

found that students need great support and an accessible means of engagement to succeed

in college readiness courses such as Honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and International

Baccalaureate (IB). Dougherty, Mellor, and Jian (2006) conducted a study that followed

over 67,000 8th graders in Texas to determine the impact of AP courses on baccalaureate

attainment. Their study found for African Americans, only 10 percent of those who did

not take an AP course graduated in five years, compared with 37 percent of those who

took an AP course, but did not pass the exam. Also, 53 percent of those who took an AP course and passed the exam graduated in five years. This points to a need for experience with academic rigor in order to be more successful in college.

Course access. For many small, rural, and schools that are in lower socioeconomic areas, the accessibility of AP courses and other advanced courses are limited or non-existent. The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights reported in 2011 that 3,000 high schools serving nearly 500,000 students offer no classes in Algebra II, (ED, 2011). This is significant in that Algebra II is necessary to perform adequately on both the ACT and the SAT, the assessments used by most college and universities for admission. These statistics are telling as to the necessity of African American students taking advanced courses. The College Board Advanced Placement Program's (AP) 2014 report to the nation, states, "All students who are academically ready for the rigor of AP —no matter their location, background, or socioeconomic status —have the right to fulfill that potential" (p. 28). However, it goes on to state, "African American students in the graduating class of 2013 were the most underrepresented group in AP classrooms and in the population of successful AP Exam takers (p. 30). This points to the limited opportunity.

The issue of course access. As previously discussed, there is a need for students to have access to higher-level courses in order to prepare for college success. There are statistics from NCES that show that the access to high-level, college preparatory courses has increased. However, the statistics also show the rates of courses offered and students' success in these courses as below others and overall that African Americans have less opportunity.

According to NCES the percentage of African American graduates completing calculus from 1990-2009 increased from 3 to 6 percent, and the percentage completing Algebra II/ trigonometry increased from 44 to 71 percent. In science courses, African Americans who completed chemistry courses increased from 40 to 65 percent; in addition, the number of African American graduates who completed at least one course in biology, chemistry, and physics increased from 12 to 22 percent. While this represents an increase, " In 2009, a higher percentage of Asian (54 percent) and White (31 percent) graduates had completed the combination of biology, chemistry, and physics courses than had their Black and Hispanic peers (22 percent and 23 percent, respectively)" (Snyder et al., 2016f). Again, course access leads to course familiarity with the level of preparation needed for college and for the tests needed to attain admission.

Test preparedness. According to ACT, in 2014, only 20% of African American secondary students met the benchmark necessary for college admission on two of the four readiness assessments, English, reading, mathematics or science. Only six percent met the benchmark for all four. According to the ACT studies, "A student who meets the ACT College Readiness Benchmark on any of the four ACT subject-area tests has a 50 percent chance of obtaining a B or higher, or about a 75 percent chance of obtaining a C or higher, in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses in that subject" (ACT, 2015. p.1).

ACT is just one of many indicators which highlight the lack of college readiness amongst African American secondary students. The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) administered by The College Board is another test whose scores are used, along with a multitude of other items e.g. grades, leadership skills, and extracurricular involvement, as

indicators of potential college success and therefore admission. The College Board that administers the SAT reports that merely 16.1% of African Americans met their college readiness benchmarks (Adams, 2015).

These statistics show college readiness as having far reaching impact into the rate of college persistence for African Americans and thereby African American young women. A longitudinal study of first time students revealed that the more academically prepared for college students are, the greater the likelihood of graduating (Stewart, Lim & Kim, 2015). In addition, the study found that the greater the number of remedial courses taken, the less likely the student would graduate.

Under-resourced schools. African American secondary students attend a disproportionate number of under- resourced schools. High-poverty schools are schools in which 75% of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Forty-five percent of African American students attend such schools. In addition, mid-poverty schools are schools where 50-75% of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Twenty-nine percent of African American students attend these schools (Snyder et al., 2016d). The research continues to report that schools located in areas of affluence are better resourced than those who are not (Kozol, 1991; Rabinovitz, 2016).

Arguably the greatest challenge in an impoverished and/or under-resourced school is the ability to hire and retain well-trained faculty. Darling-Hammond argues that one way to address this issue is by paying higher wages and providing well-sourced classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Smith-Evans et al., 2014). Schools that are impoverished also struggle to provide college preparatory curriculum. Finally, these and more affluent schools often lack the willingness/ability to provide a culturally responsive

pedagogy and practice which holds success for African American young people as one of its key tenets (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Lack of culturally relevant pedagogy. Gay (2002) asserts, "Because culture strongly influences the attitudes, values, and behaviors that students and teachers bring to the instructional process, it has to likewise be a major determinant of how the problems of underachievement are solved" (p. 114). Addressing the underlying thoughts and beliefs of the children being taught is a critically important place to begin the analysis of the challenges African American children face to achievement, subsequent graduation and baccalaureate attainment. Thus, the study of the art of teaching is where this analysis of culture begins.

Pedagogy is defined by Smith (2012) as: a) the art of teaching – the responsive, creative, intuitive part; b) the craft of teaching – skills and practice; c) the science of teaching – research-informed decision-making and the theoretical underpinning. This description defines not only the art and craft, but the science behind teachers' decisions made in a classroom. In her seminal work, The *Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (2009) describes a pedagogy that is culturally specific and relevant to African Americans. A culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) she argues is, "A pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 20). This theory of culturally relevant pedagogy resulted from her study of eight schoolteachers (updated to 15) who were successful in teaching African American students. Using a grounded theory approach, she found these successful teachers to engage in the following practices:

- Teachers were professionals and took the job of teaching and students as learners seriously.

- The creation of a classroom environment of collective learners with responsibility for one another was critical.
- These teachers held knowledge as something that was flexible and ever changing and hence, taught it as such so that students could see themselves as producers of knowledge as well.
- These teachers helped students understand their culture and how it was important as they learned the dominant culture carefully teaching the dynamics of each.

Ladson-Billings emphasizes " the sociopolitical underpinnings of schooling" and the importance of schools … "making connections between their in-school-lives and out-of-school experiences" (p. xi). These cultural lessons are critical to creating success for African American youth.

Successful Educational Experiences for African American Students

There are successful models of educating African Americans secondary students. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CPR) highlights what educators must know and think regarding the children they teach. As Ladson-Billings highlights, no two teachers in her study were exactly alike. For example, some were stricter disciplinarians and others gave less homework. However, their thoughts about the education of the children and their belief about the students' ability and responsibility to learn were strikingly similar.

Houchen (2013) in Florida, was an English teacher who utilized the components of CRP in assisting 24 students divided in 9th-10th graders and 11-12th graders, primarily African American in gaining the skills needed to pass their state sponsored test for graduation. To this end, Houchen used literary works that were culturally affirming and appropriate for critical discussions and learning. She was able to ensure the students were prepared to learn, think and apply the knowledge as necessary and thus they were able to improve in their overall exams, experiencing academic success. Eighty-four

percent of the students passed in the academic year and/or had at least one year in learning gains.

Wiggan (2008), as a teacher in a predominately African American school experienced successful students often. He states this was a contradiction to what he continually read about African American students. He conducted a study of seven students, six female and one male, who had recently matriculated to college and were freshman or sophomores. The study asked students to share their perspectives on how they achieved success. The students expressed the idea of engaging vs. disengaging pedagogy. They stated that the teachers, who had practices that were engaging, greatly assisted them in achieving success. These were practices such as having high expectations of the work required of the students and emphasizing the completion and appearance of the project completed. Teachers were also perceived as engaging when they were prepared to teach and interested in their students' learning.

Vega, Moore and Miranda (2015) studied the perceptions of African American and Latino high school students. The study found that of the 18 students (10 African American and 8 Latino), 12 stated they wished they could change their teachers. One student said, " Some teachers love what they do…but other teachers are not into their jobs, and they're not helping students"(p. 44). The students in Wiggan's (2008) study were also straightforward about what a disengaging teacher was and described them as those who were "dismissive, teacher-centered, and who showed low levels of interest in preparing for class or teaching" (p. 332). Many students in the literature shared this sentiment. They appeared to understand intuitively when the teachers did not believe they

could learn or that they should be learning at high level. The students felt the education they received was ineffective.

Finally Dr. Gay (2002) describes a type of teaching environment that is culturally responsive as one that uses "the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 106). Gay (2002), along with other studies, highlights the five most explicit strategies as they pertain to working with African American students: know the students' diverse communities (Rife, 2010), seek diverse curriculum content that is culturally appropriate (Houchen, 2012) create a positive atmosphere through care and community building (Knight-Diop, 2010; Stinson, 2008) communicate effectively with diverse students (Stinson, 2008; Williams & Bryan, 2013) and deliver instruction in a manner that is diverse and appropriate for the students being served (Swanson & Nagy, 2014). These strategies were the most effective in teaching African American students and from the perspective of the students, the best learning environments that produced outcomes toward graduation and college enrollment.

School Challenges for African American Young Women

Schools are microcosms of the communities in which they serve. Therefore challenges to African American young women's success are experienced in both in-school and out-of-school settings. Some of these issues are further exacerbated by the experiences African American young women are having in society. These will be further discussed later in this chapter. I began with some of the specific school related challenges that threated to undermine their success. They included: negative stereotypes, harsh discipline policies and limited extra-curricular activities.

Negative stereotypes. African American young women face stereotypes that affect their self-esteem and often affect their achievement in school. The most pressing of the stereotypes are that they are unruly, loud, and unmanageable. They also include being perceived as angry or aggressive and hyper-sexualized, (some of the same views Black women have been fighting since the days of slavery) (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Smith-Evans et al., 2014). The difficulties with these labels are their subjectivity, meaning there are a number of ways to interpret students' words and actions. These labels are often the reason for much of the discipline African American young women receive from teachers and administration. Disciplining the stereotype has been seen as a way to encourage African American young women to adopt more "acceptable" qualities of femininity, such as being quieter and more passive, dualities defined from a dominant perspective (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Smith-Evans et al., 2014). When the school leaders, while holding these underlying beliefs, exercise disciplinary measures against Black girls, it is often with the belief that a redirection or adherence to policy is unable to be reached. In other words administration rarely uses options such as counseling and restorative measures to settle disputes among African American girls. Instead they are disproportionately excluded from the educational environment. Unfortunately, these stereotypes left unchecked affect the way African American young women are treated, how they see themselves and how they are disciplined at school.

Harsh discipline. The stereotypes teachers and administrators hold can lead to harsher discipline for African American young women. The Civil Rights Data Collection found that during the 2011-2012 school year, suspension rates for K-12 African American young women were 12%, as much as six times that of their white female peers.

Studies also show that African American young women feel unnecessarily disciplined and that the discipline is not fair in that there is differentiation among students (Jones-DeWeever, 2009; OCR, 2014). The studies further assert that young African American women are disciplined on subjective offenses like disruption or defiance, because they are not perceived as conforming to behave in a "ladylike" fashion; or for issues of dress-code, citing dress that is provocative in nature (Vega, Moore & Miranda, 2015). More objective discipline issues (like fights) are equally problematic for African American young women. Instead of giving fair consideration when students are involved in fights, teachers and school leaders often assume the worst of African American young women and accuse them of being overly aggressive and out of control. This leads to severe consequences for issues such as fights, no matter the reason (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Jones-DeWeever, 2009; Smith Evans et al., 2014). Tragically, these actions are more often criminalizing what was once considered adolescent behavior leading to a greater number of girls being pushed out of school and funneled into the juvenile justice system at astonishing rates in recent years (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2012). The ED Office of Civil Rights (2014) reports, African American girls were suspended, meaning excluded from school, at a rate of 12%; this is higher than girls of any other race or ethnicity. This rate is six times as often as their white counterparts.

Limited access to extracurricular activities. African American young women also lack full access to the range of extra-curricular activities that assist in supporting academic success. A report on the health and well-being of girls showed increased school engagement as well as health, academic and even economic benefits from girls participation in sports (Staurowsky et al., 2015). Such participation also leads to

increased graduation rates. There are a number of reasons African American girls do not participate. First, the schools attended by a disproportionate number of African American girls have limited sports programs for them. When these schools are faced with fewer resources, both physical and human, the tendency is to keep programs for boys instead of girls. Therefore, although it is a Title IX violation, there is rarely a program to encourage and sustain active young women (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). Secondly, as well as transportation challenges that prevent students from staying after school for sports practices, finances keep young women from playing or continuing to play sports. Third, and at a lesser rate, girls report having to care for younger siblings and the need to take on other family responsibilities as a reason for preventing after-school activities. Lastly, African American girls often have work responsibilities. For example, ten-percent of African American 12th grade girls work more than 10 hours a week. Each of these factors has an impact on African American girls' involvement in extra-curricular activities and thus an impact on their access and competiveness for college (Smith-Evans, et al., 2014; Staurowsky et al., 2015).

Societal Challenges for African American Young Women

The challenges African American women face in society further exacerbate the challenges associated with school. These challenges include some who suffer from low self-esteem, trauma (both emotional and sexual) including experiences with disproportionate levels of foster care as well as homelessness, and disproportionate numbers of young women experiencing early parenting.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem is a complex phenomenon, which in its simplest form refers to how individuals like, value, or approve of themselves. In the social sciences,

self-esteem is "a hypothetical construct comprised of one's own value of their overall self-worth, value or importance and it is given a ratio to be deemed high or low" (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991, p. 115). Issues of self-esteem are often predicated on one's environment and experience. Because African American girls live in a racialized society, they face many threats to their self-esteem. Racial Identity, as defined by Helms (1990) "concerns an individual's attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward oneself and others with respect to racial group membership" (p.3). The most widely known model of African American ethnic identity is Cross' Black Racial Identity Model –Nigrescence, in which an African American person goes through the stages of 'becoming Black'. That theoretical model has changed over the last few decades, including the idea that a person has a personal and a group identity (Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, & Fhagen-Smith, 2002). The positive salience within one's identity, otherwise known as the degree to which a Black person is comfortable with their racial identity, is what Cross suggests leads to greater self-esteem.

It is important for African American girls to develop a positive racial identity. This alone is related to greater self-esteem (Buckley & Carter, 2005; Jones-DeWeever, 2009; Smith-Evans et al., 2014). Unfortunately, if a strong racial identity is not developed, African American young women can succumb to normative societal thoughts regarding them. In one study, African American young women reported body satisfaction when surrounded by other African American young women. However, their self-esteem was lowered when around their white peers (James, Phelps & Bross, 2001). There was also reported dissatisfaction and a drive for thinness as well as emulation of media images (James, Phelps & Bross, 2001; Staurowsky et al., 2015). Finally, research also

suggest skin color is an issue that remains for African American young women with perceptions of being too light or too dark and indications of a willingness to alter these in some way (Staurowsky et al., 2015).

      Trauma. The impact of trauma on education is in need of further research as most studies admit. Nevertheless, research suggests a connection between trauma and disengagement in school and related activities. Trauma is related to exposure to violence, sexual harassment and assault experienced far too often in communities that experience poverty and criminal activity (Harrell, Langton, Berzofsky, Couzens, & Smiley-McDonald, 2014). Hence, the lack of mental health services to deal with trauma has had an impact on educational achievement and persistence (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). One study in particular points to the difference between male and female trauma effects on academic persistence. It notes that African American young women have more *Post Traumatic Events (PTE)* that are interpersonal (caused by people they know) including sexual abuse, neglect and domestic violence, etc. Because these women are negatively stigmatized, seeking support is more difficult (Boyraz, Horne, Owens & Armstrong, 2013). Without assistance, these young women are at risk of school failure and continue to put themselves in vulnerable situations that are influenced by their environment. Most recently the involvement in sex trafficking has become a major problem. "Between January 2008 and June 2010, 94% of victims [of sex trafficking] were female and 40% of those where African American (Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011). In addition to many other risk factors, these risks can further lead to incidence of poor physical health, HIV, AIDS sexually transmitted infections and unplanned early pregnancy and parenting.

Early parenting. Although steadily decreasing, African American young women, experience unintended pregnancies at disproportionately high rates, when compared with their white peers, further impacting their educational goals. The Centers for Disease Control (2016) asserts that only 50% of teen parents achieve a high school diploma by age 22 compared to 90% of their peers without children. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (NCPTUP) 2015 update, states of all girls who drop out of high school, 30% report pregnancy as the reason. For African American young women, the same report shows roughly 31.8 in 1000 have a child. This means that African-American teen girls get pregnant at least once before age 20, accounting for about 22% of all teen pregnancies (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Studies suggest African American young women are further impacted by the demands of work, family and the lack of support from educational institutions leading to an inability to persist in their education (Barr & Simons, 2012; SmithBattle, 2007). However, while African American young women have high rates of pregnancy, they complete school at higher rates as well.

Statistics show that only 51% of teen parents graduate or earn a GED by age 22 and 2% earn a college degree by age 30; however, for African American girls, 67 percent of African American girls who give birth before the age of 18 get a high school diploma or GED by age 22 — while the same is true for only 55 percent of white girls (Smith-Evans et al., 2014, p. 26).

California's data looks promising as well. The California data by the US Department of Health and Human Services (2015) states that African American pregnancy rates have declined 65% over the last two decades for young women under 19 years old. The current

rate of African American pregnant and parenting teens in California is 9% compared with 23% nationwide. In addition, the percentage of repeat-births (having another baby before 20 years old) for African American young women in California is 17% and nationwide the rate is 19%. This means, of the African American young women who have children as teens, 17% have another child. Although concerning, these statistics show some promise in the educational achievement of African American young women.

Resilience and Persistence

The statistics show that despite their challenges, African American young women, are persisting and achieving at rates higher than other women and men of color (Snyder et al., 2016a). Also, despite the high levels of traumatic events and other experiences in school and out, African American young women continue to show desire and a level of determination towards academic advancement. One qualitative study of African-American young women that captured the voices of these young women found that their success in achieving college admission was facilitated by their understanding of their position within the African American community, support from peers, and an educational program that held high expectations for their success and self-motivation (Hubbard, 1999).

Winkle-Wagner (2015) highlights in her review of 119 studies, including qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods and literature reviews, that African American women's success is found in the context of individual success, success via relational support and success via the institutional support of the college. Her study is clear to reflect the opinion that African American women need to define success for themselves and not necessarily in the context of others. In addition, there is a need for more studies

on the success of African American women and the view of relationships; this includes the role of peers, faculty/staff and the perception of mentoring. Finally, there is a need to focus more on the way being a parent impacts the college experience and success of the African American woman.

In an effort to ascertain the reasons for their academic success, a qualitative study by Hale Rose et al., (2014) sought the input of 61 African American, Latina and Asian young women. Specifically her study sought to understand the relationship between social engagement, self-determination and academic successes of these women persisting through community college. The data were collected through the use of 15 focus groups at three community college campuses. While the Winkle-Wagner study showed that African American women preferred collective support systems, this 2014 study found that women preferred to be more autonomous and independent. There was also a sense of the women speaking of completing the courses and ultimately their credits without assistance from professors or advisors. This study's findings were unique in that this sentiment was very different than others in the literature. It is important to acknowledge this set of the population as well. It is also important to note that this finding may be because these were community college students and not students attempting to navigate through a university. Nevertheless, some go at the attainment of their education alone and this is acknowledged.

Thomas et al. (2009) conducted a study of academic success of 111 African American women. The participants came from two Historically Black College and Universities and two Predominately White Institutions. The goal of this quantitative study was to examine the relationship between the women's self-efficacy, motivation (intrinsic

and extrinsic) and academic adjustment; these were the variables utilized. The study determined that "self-efficacy significantly predicted Motivation to Know (β=. 36; p<.05); students with increased self-efficacy tended to be motivated for the sake of knowledge" (p.165). The study also found that "Motivation to Know" significantly predicted academic adjustment (β=.38; p<.05). Finally, the study revealed that "self-efficacy predicted External Regulation motivation (β=.28), Identified Motivation (β= .54); and academic adjustment (β=.22)" (p.165). The level of the women's confidence in their ability to succeed seemed to drive both her successful academic adjustment to the college and her inspiration to obtain more knowledge. In addition, it also pushes the women to achieve in order to advance their families and their communities, instead of just themselves.

This literature review has highlights an important population of our society, African American girls who have experienced trauma. Despite the challenges they face, this review was determined to highlight what we know thus far as challenges as well as possible indicators of successful opportunities. Because African Americans are disproportionately represented among the poor in the nation, there is a need to discover a means to propel the trajectory of African American students and African American young women in particular. There must be a move toward a broader approach to student achievement, high school graduation and baccalaureate attainment, leading to greater success in multiple measures overall for these women.

This chapter has highlighted our theoretical lens of Critical Race Theory and the need to hear from people of color about their experiences. In addition, it briefly gave examples of why college is indeed important. This chapter also captured some of the

school and societal challenges African American young women face. In addition, it highlighted some school practiced that worked well for a similar population. And finally it highlighted the resiliency of this population and the need to expand upon this learning. However, we do not yet know the specifics of how to assist these young women so that they are able to persist and achieve a college degree. Hence, the purpose of my study; to uncover the many avenues African American young women take to get to and through college. The next chapter will highlight the process used in this study to highlight some of these African American women and their lived experiences of persistence and attainment of their degree.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

"The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the "other"…so much research is done on schooling in the United States; yet so little of it is based on studies involving the perspectives of the student...(Seidman, 2013, p.9)

The purpose of my dissertation study was to use a multiple-case analysis (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2004) to understand the academic journey of African American women who experienced trauma. Specifically, the purpose of this research was to explore, from the perspective of African American women, how they account for their success, specifically, the persons and systems of support from their K-12 education that they believed contributed to their success. In addition, the study sought to explore the extent to which these young women's educational pursuits were tied to the African American notion of "literacy for freedom and independence." Ultimately, the study sought to provide perspectives from their lived experiences to assist educators in their attempt to increase high school persistence, transition and matriculation through college graduation. Consistent with the CRT theme *Centrality of Experiential Knowledge,* I centered the voice of the participants by using three phenomenological style interviews as the primary mode of data collection. Combined with a Qualtrics© questionnaire that I administered, the interviews helped me to investigate the following research questions:

1. What challenges (academic, social and/or personal) do African American young women face in pursuit of their educational goals?

2. How do high schools support or challenge African American young women in attaining their educational goals?

3. How do African American young women, who have experienced trauma, successfully navigate the college experience?

4. In what way does African American culture shape/support the educational success and persistence of African American young women?

In this chapter, I will first describe my pilot study that provided the basis for my study. I will also share the research methods I used as well as the attempts to strengthen validity. Finally the limitations of the study and its significance will be discussed.

Pilot Study

A pilot I conducted in 2014 informed this study. As a researcher, I conducted a study of three pregnant and parenting teens that were successful in graduating from high school and continuously enrolling in college, while caring for their child; these were the measures of success for the study. By investigating a successful school-based program designed for pregnant and parenting teens, the study was intended to provide a deeper understanding of possible practices that could be put into place that would be more helpful in assisting a greater number of teens in graduating from high school and moving toward college and ultimately financial independence.

There were two research questions that guided and were answered by the pilot. The first was: What factors contribute to a successful school-based program for pregnant and parenting teens? This answer was found in the cross-section of individual actions and structured school support and services. The all-female environment assisted to this end, and the on-site childcare proved to be vital. The high school curriculum and the progressive pedagogy were viewed as helpful when the girls entered college; they were able to utilize the writing and analytical skills they obtained and they were grateful for

the program. The second question was: What do the pregnant and parenting teens believe is needed from the school, others and themselves to be successful? While this question was answered somewhat in the first, the girls continued mentioning the importance of being mutually supportive of their classmates as they continue to care for their children. The school support found in teachers and the social worker, in addition to the development of an attitude of success in themselves, assisted in answering this question as well (Kirkendoll, 2014).

When I concluded this study, I realized the need to conduct a new study and have it be more extensive. There would also need to be more time to set the stage so that relevant information obtained could be put into context offering further understanding in the richness of their stories. Therefore, for this new study, I chose a phenomenological style of interviewing to ensure more structured time to have more unstructured interviews and get at the nuances of the challenges that African American girls face in pursuit of their educational goals. The next sections describe this new study.

Research Design

Critical Race Theory shapes my research design. Yin (2004) states, "the strength of the case study method is its ability to examine, in-depth, a 'case' within its 'real-life' context" (p.33). He goes even further to say that the case study is important when wanting to understand the explanatory nature—the how of a phenomena (Yin, 2004). In my study, I examine the phenomena of academic persistence among African American women impacted by trauma. The study included a questionnaire and in-depth interviews to understand their persistence topic of persistence through college despite their traumatic event. To give voice to the lived experiences of these African American women, I

conducted phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2013). In addition, I wanted a full

explanation of their lives to date and what it meant to have achieved their level of

schooling and so I conducted the three interview series. Finally, though a daunting task, I

conducted each interview because I wanted them to see me, an African American

woman, and hopefully identify in a way that both built rapport through our common

identity as well as a sense of truth telling as I honored their stories and their lives.

The questionnaire. I used Qualtrics© to administer a questionnaire to African

American women fitting my demographic. The questionnaire (Appendix A) included a

consent form which participants could sign prior to completing their questionnaire. The

purpose of the questionnaire was to locate potential interviewees and to understand the

larger challenges faced by this population. Upon consenting, the participants then

completed the questionnaire which consisted of demographic data: their age, the city in

which they were raised, and the city in which they went to college as well as the years of

college attendance. It also included their educational background, meaning their level in

school or the level of education they have received to now. Next, in the form of a matrix

it asked for their experience with eight types of trauma experienced during their high

school years. Theses traumatic events, according to the literature, often impede

persistence to and graduation from college for some African American young women.

These events include: early parenting, foster care, school disciplinary issues, death or

incarceration of a loved one, domestic violence and sexual trauma. The questionnaire

included a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions having to do with the

support they received to attend and succeed in college as well as their thoughts of where

they attribute their success thus far. Finally, the questionnaire asked if they would be willing to participate in the next part of the study, the three interview series.

   Questionnaire process. The group of young women from which to choose was varied, and not readily accessible or readily identified; therefore, I chose to use a purposive criterion snowball sample (Bryman, 2012; Patton, 1990). The Qualtrics© online questionnaire was distributed using purposeful means. Initially four young women were selected based on my knowledge of and experience with them. In addition, the questionnaire was sent to foster youth coordinators of two Southern California universities as well as the student-parent social workers of two Southern California Community Colleges. I also distributed the questionnaire to fellow educators who had worked with African American young women facing traumatic events and persisting to and through at least the first two years of college. I employed the snowball method requesting that each initial and subsequent respondent recommend others who fit the study criteria. I followed up on each recommendation sending the questionnaire to these new potential participants. Finally, I sent the email to family, church members and my sorority sisters (I am a member of a historically African American sorority- Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.).

   Locating young women to complete the questionnaire proved a challenge. The challenge was that most girls who have completed or are persisting towards an associates degree and/or bachelors degree do not know other women who have had the challenges that they have and are persisting as well. For many, they were the first or only one in their family or in their circle to go to college. Therefore, it proved difficult to find participants using the snowball method.

Questionnaire participants. In all, 30 individuals participated yielding 24 completed questionnaires. All of the respondents, with the exception of one, met the criteria meaning they identified as African American and 1) have experienced challenges in their later adolescence, ages 15-19 years (i.e. have had a child, experienced foster care or homelessness, experienced harsh discipline in schools, experienced a traumatic event and 2) have completed at least 2 years of college in California in the last ten years. After a month of reviewing the questionnaire results, seven participants from the questionnaire were determined eligible for the extended study; after two months I was able to add two more. All questionnaire participants, except one of the 24, experienced at least one traumatic event while eight people experienced five or more traumatic events. Finally, five of the participants graduated prior to the ten-year period that was initially requested. After consulting with my advisor, I felt their experiences were unique and that the knowledge ascertained from this population was important so I included their results with the other questionnaire respondents. From the 24 completed questionnaires, I chose nine of the participants based on their variation in age, experience with traumatic events, college attainment and their willingness to participate in the three interview series.

The three interview series. The study utilized the three phenomenological interview series, as described by Seidman (2013), "It allows for the interviewer and participant to explore the participant's experience, place it in context and reflect on its meaning" (p.20). Seidman reminds us of Patton's (1989) idea that without context there will be little opportunities for making meaning of a participant's experience. The first interview established the context of the lived experiences of the African American women. This means that before gathering data around the phenomena of college

transition, persistence and success, I first attempted to understand the participants' background.

The second interview sought to assist in the participants' reconstruction of their experiences with the phenomena of baccalaureate transition and attainment. Seidman (2013) is careful to use the word "reconstruct" rather than "remember" arguing that to reconstruct includes both the recall of information and the participants sense of what is important about that recall. Specifically the second interview asked how they were able to graduate from high school and pursue or complete college amidst and in spite of their traumatic events.

Finally, the third interview allowed the participants to reflect on what they shared; this included sharing the impact of the phenomena, baccalaureate transition, persistence and attainment on their lives. In addition, the third interview ensured they shared the details of their experiences in a way that was meaningful for them (Seidman, 2013). It also allowed them to reflect on the process to and through college and to give their perspective on what might assist others who are facing similar life circumstances.

Interview process and participants. An email went to all 24 respondents with a thank you for completing the questionnaire. Nine women from the 24 participants met the criteria and agreed to participate in the phenomenological interviews. For the nine who agreed to participate in the extended study, a request to begin their study involvement was included in their thank you. They were requested to give dates, times and locations where the initial interview could take place. Because the information was sensitive (revealing personal aspects of the respondents) the interviews were conducted in private locations. In addition, the interviews were recorded and therefore required a quiet space

as well. For these reasons, the interviews were conducted in the participants' home, the

researchers' home, or the researchers' classroom after hours. Due to the participant's

proximity to the researcher, two sets of interviews were conducted via FaceTime and

Google Hangout. The choice was theirs based on their convenience and comfort. The

semi-structured nature allowed me to ask questions of the participants' experiences and to

go deeper as necessary to gain insight on the importance that the participants assigned to

their lived experiences (Bryman, 2012; Siedman 2013). Each of the 27 interviews (9

participants three times each) were scheduled for between 60 and 90 minutes. In total, I

conducted over 16 hours of interviews. The shortest interview lasted 18 minutes and the

longest was 58 minutes.

As one could imagine, scheduling nine women each for the three interview series

posed a scheduling challenge. These women work, have children, attend school and

generally have busy lives. For these reasons, two participants had to do their second and

third interviews on the same day: one began a new job and the other was hospitalized. All

others were given three separate dates and opportunities to review their transcripts prior

to subsequent interviews. The interviews were conducted over a 90-day period. Interview

Protocols are provided in Appendix B.

Transcription process. Every interview was recorded with either the computer or

a transcription application and then sent to a transcription company that guaranteed

confidentiality. The 27 interviews yielded 381 pages and 12,793 lines of transcript. Upon

receipt of the transcript, I 1) numbered the lines of each transcript and removed any

identifying information such as names, 2) reviewed the transcript for accuracy with the

audio, 3) sent the transcript to the participant to identify any corrections or clarifications

needed to ensure the integrity of the interview as a type of respondent validation

(Bryman, 2012). Next I began my transcript analysis.

Transcript analysis. I used a similar process for the initial analysis of all 27

interviews. After sending the transcript to the participant, as I awaited their response

(each participant was given about a week to review), I reviewed the audio and with the

transcript I made note of their experiences and the transcription line number which was

consistent with the literature reviewed prior to conducting this study. After the three

initial-first interviews, the transcript analysis began to include areas of similarity or

contrast with not only the literature, but also with the other young women. I used analytic

memos to make note of areas to be clarified or expanded upon in the next interview in

addition to any area I felt I needed to reflect on prior to the next interview. This was

especially true for those that supported or detracted from what the literature or others

said, in an effort to understand the fullness of the participants lived experience. For

example, knowing how old the participant was and their environment during schooling

became important for the second interview in understanding their context of support

needed to attain their educational goal.

Coding

In Vivo coding (Saldaῆa, 2013) was used for this study to give voice to the

African American young women and their descriptions of challenges, success, support

and persistence leading to their educational accomplishment. As a population that is often

marginalized, their voices were captured so that their lived experiences could be analyzed

in a meaningful way, from their perspective. Initial coding along was useful in

categorizing the data to see what was similar and different in the responses of the

participants. Finally, grounded coding allowed me to continue to use the initial coding and add to them as each set of interviews confirmed and validated the information in the interview before it. I used grounded coding for the first interview. I then applied those codes to the subsequent analyses of interviews two and three (see Figure 1).

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                        ┌──────────────┐
                        │  Conducted   │
                        │  Interview   │
                        └──────────────┘
              ┌───────────────┴────────────────┐
      ┌──────────────┐              ┌────────────────────┐
      │ Transcribed  │              │   1st Interviews    │
      │ Interviews   │              │  In Vivo Coding     │
      └──────────────┘              │   – 3 Themes        │
                                    │    emerged          │
       ┌──────┴──────┐            ┌──────┴───────┐
  ┌──────────┐ ┌──────────┐  ┌──────────┐ ┌──────────┐
  │Researcher│ │Participant│  │2nd       │ │3rd       │
  │reviewed  │ │reviewed - │  │Interviews-│ │Interviews│
  │for       │ │Response   │  │Grounded  │ │–Grounded │
  │accuracy  │ │Validation │  │Coding – 5│ │Coding – 6│
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                             │emerged   │ │emergred  │
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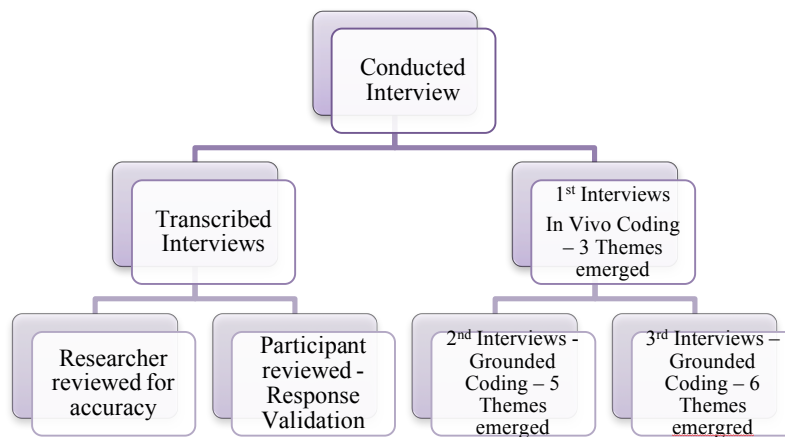
Figure 1 Interview process through coding and the theming of categories.

First interview coding. After each transcript was initially analyzed with notes and transcription lines taken on each interview, including any corrections from participants, I then began a process of looking at all nine of the first interviews, in an effort to stream them into meaning making categories/concepts. The first interview was building context so that as the researcher I understood the background of the women's lived experiences; this interview asked about their schooling from their beginning through their present level. As I reviewed the nine interviews, I found 21 categories of commonality across the nine participants. Utilizing the 21 areas of commonalities as a start, I then further categorized those areas into four themes: multiple traumatic events, challenges, support (people and services) and success/skill (personal qualities). The majority of the traumatic events these women discussed in the interviews had already been captured in the questionnaire; as such this category became redundant. In order to

reduce redundancy, I did not make use of this category. There were traumatic events that were not captured in the questionnaire and these are captured under the theme challenges. The initial analysis of the first interview resulted in three areas for future study. The first theme was what these African American women perceived as challenges. The second theme included whom and what services supported these women in their persistence toward a college education. The final theme included the personal qualities, strengths and skills they believed they were able to obtain in order to be successful in the pursuit of their goals (see Table 4). Appendix C has the categories and themes color-coded.

Table 4
Categories Used for Theming the Initial Interviews

Challenges	Support	Personal Skill and Success
Multiple Trauma	Fictive Kin	Potential
Parent Issues	Significant Teacher	Expand Horizons
Pregnant/Parenting	College Role Model	Break the Cycle
Generational Trauma	Spiritual Influence	Success in High School
School Non-Preparatory	Motivated to Finish	Enjoyed Reading
Identity	Governmental Assistance	Had to Finish
Bussing		Positive School Experience
Disciplined Out		

Note: These are the initial 21 categories for the first round of nine interviews

Second interview coding. The second round of the interview asked these nine African American women about the detailed lived experience of persisting to the educational level they currently possess. To analyze the second set of interviews, I used the preset areas, 1) Perceived challenges were highlighted in purple 2) Who and what support assisted were marked in pink and 3) Personal qualities, strengths and skills were noted in yellow. I then looked for commonalities and variation in their experience as well as another opportunity for possibly missing categories. During this process I added an

additional category during the analysis of this interview, number two. I also needed to readjust the original 21 categories. These 22 categories were then streamed into five themes in preparation for coding the third interview: inter-intrapersonal challenges, school challenges, supportive people/services, school support and motivation.

Table 5
Coded Categories for Theming after the Second Interview

Inter-Intra Personal Challenges	School Challenges	Supportive People and Service	School Support	Motivation
Multiple Trauma	School Non-Preparatory	Fictive Kin & Kinship	Significant Teacher/Counselor	Motivated to Finish
Parent Issues	Bussing	College Role Model	Have Potential	Expand Horizons
Pregnant/Parenting	Disciplined Out	Spiritual Influence	Success in High School	Break the Cycle
Generational Trauma		Governmental Assistance	Positive School Experience	Enjoyed Reading
Identity		*Housing		Had to Finish

Note: *Added a category to make 22, initial themes were reorganized and one renamed

Third interview coding. The third interview created the need for even more themes. Likened to the process in the second transcript, I began with the five themes previously shared: inter-intrapersonal challenges, school challenges, supportive people/services, school support and motivation. The analysis of interview number three yielded nine more categories and subsequently one more theme for a total of six. These are summarized in Table 4. By the end of my coding, there were six themes, consisting of 30 categories. These coded themes included: Inter-intrapersonal challenges marked in purple, school challenges also marked in purple, supportive people/services noted in pink, school support also noted in pink, motivation highlighted in orange, and finally personal persistence and success marked in yellow including reflective recommendations.

I looked to stream the transcribed data into meaning making categories and ultimately themes so that they could provide insightful opportunities toward the answering of the research questions. The final 30 categories and six themes are delineated in Table 6.

Table 6
Coded Categories for Theming after the Third and Final Interview

Inter-Intra Personal Challenges	School Challenges	Supportive People and Services	School Support	Motivation	Personal Persisitence and Success
Multiple Trauma	School as Non-Preparatory	Fictive Kin & Kinship Care	Significant Teacher/ Counselor	Motivated to Finish	Had to Finish
Generational Trauma	Bussing	College Role Model	Having Potential	Expand Horizons	*Want to be an educated AA Woman
Pregnant/ Parenting	Disciplined Out	Spiritual Influence	Success in High School	Break the Cycle	*Education Cannot be Taken
Identity		Government Assistance	Positive School Experience	Enjoyed Reading	*Want to Make a Difference in AA Community
		Housing			*Respect/Pride
					*Job Opportunities/ Career Options
					*Ask Questions
					*Talk to an Advisor/ Make a Plan
					*Mentoring
					*Stay Focused/ Work Hard

Note: Removed Parent Issues from Challenges and created a sixth theme
*Added nine categories resulting in 30 categories

Strengthening Validity

As with all qualitative research, we are at all times trying to ensure truth and every effort is made to strengthen validity. There were several measures used to strengthen the validity of this study. The questionnaire was created, based on information from the literature review and qualitative interviews were used to further understand the phenomena of college persistence. Specifically, I conducted phenomenological interviews. The three-interview structure strengthens validity in that the researcher returns to the participant three times over a one to three week span of time. The multiple iteration format of the interview schedule allows the researcher to place the participants' experiences in context; it can also allow for variation in mood for the participant. In addition, the three-interview structure allows both the researcher and the participant to make meaning of the responses and finally, it asks the participant to make meaning of the phenomena of baccalaureate persistence and then reflect on what that means for them. Seidman (2013) proposes that this format gives space for internal consistency. Also, the iterations of the interview were used for consistency and to ensure truth telling.

Triangulation. Triangulation occurs when a researcher uses multiple sources of data to study particular social phenomena (Bryman, 2012). The multiple sources in my study include information discovered in my literature review, coupled with creating the questionnaire and the interviews. That information, along with the results of the pilot study was then used to develop the semi-structured interview protocol, which added other areas of interest to explore as the participants shared their lived experiences. The process of interviewing nine participants three times each, also allowed for the participants' lives to reconstruct the experience with the phenomena in a meaningful way.

Analytic memos and respondent validation. As I conducted three interview series, I was able to use a form of analytic memos. Birks, Chapman & Francis (2008) state that memos help the researcher to dive in to the research in a way that they can get close to the data, or participants' story, and be able to interact with it at a deeper level. In addition, the type of analytic memo I used was to capture statements and ideas that might need further explanation or even examples to give the richness of the situation, in addition to areas that evoked strong emotion from the young women and sometime even from me. I was able to be reflective as the researcher, while ensuring the integrity of the lived-experiences being shared. Meaning, I was able to, as an African American woman researcher, continue to aim to capture the fullness of the lived experience, even while having deep feelings about the research and the experiences being shared. I truly believe that this helped me to discover a level of fullness of the experiences from the participants.

The final piece in the attempt toward strengthening validity was the use of respondent validation. Respondent validation, according to (Bryman, 2012) is the process where the researcher provides the participants a chance to validate their responses. This can be done in a variety of ways; however in this study, I had the participants to check each interview for an accurate representation of what they said and what they meant. This was done with the idea that each story was unique and valid and it was important that the participant felt this as each one reconstructed their life to date as it related to baccalaureate persistence and attainment. These attempts to strengthen validity were not with the intent to generalize, but to make sense of the various participants' meaning of their challenges, successes and lived experiences (Creswell, 2009).

Researcher's Position

Positionality in sociology is defined as "The occupation or adoption of a particular position in relation to others, usually with reference to issues of culture, ethnicity, or gender" (Oxford, 2017). Sikes and Potts (2008) suggest that researchers should state their positionality in their writings because they influence research. This influence is multifaceted: it is in the topics one chooses to research, in the methodologies one chooses to employ and in the way the findings and analysis are conducted and thus disseminated. Creswell (2009) reminds us as researchers, in an effort to strengthen, to clarify our bias; he posits that the interpretation of our findings is shaped by our gender, culture, history, and socioeconomic backgrounds (p.192). I have done all that I could to strengthen validity, however, no researchers is free from their own bias, hence the need to state my own positionality.

I am an African American woman and have been an educator for the last 20 years, my role has been to support juveniles that are wards of the court, wards of the state, and are having issues within comprehensive schools. This experience has included working with youth experiencing incarceration, foster care, homelessness, substance abuse and early parenting. Prior to my administrative role at the camp for incarcerated boys, my most recent assignment was at a school for pregnant, parenting and other young women and I saw the potential effects of the lack of options young mothers have without post-secondary education. These options included issues as complex as housing and emergency shelter in cases of abuse and as straightforward as the inability to prepare for college. These are challenges that young mothers and other young women face when pursuing their high school diploma and then their college degree, in addition to many

others. I have also witnessed the effects of attempting to provide a solely academic based preparatory education when dealing with youth of color who have experienced traumatic events, in addition to young mothers and girls; triggers and set backs often prove quite detrimental and even life changing, without proper guidance and support.

In contrast, I have also witnessed programs that have been beneficial to the said population and have given them a chance to increase the trajectory of their lives experiences toward a more productive future. I am clear and forthcoming about my feelings within this study as one who has worked with the at risk/ high potential population for over 25 years. My heart continues to go out to these students. However, I must admit that I am no longer shocked by the stories I hear; compassion and empathy are often the action employed in this work, instead of judgment and fear. To this end, I am deeply interested in this research and more studies like this to assist the same students I work with or have worked with in the past. Therefore, I enter this study from a space of sincerity to learn all that is possible in reaching this generation of young African American women and others who so desperately need informed leaders and educators as they pursue their educational aspirations.

Finally, I approach this study as an African American woman whose mother was incarcerated during my elementary years of schooling. She and my father fought for the civil rights many of us so freely enjoy, and then as a felon on parole, she raised a family of five in the early 1980s. This experience lasted through my high school years and was extremely difficult for me. I also come to this study as a mother of two African American girls, one 23 and the other 5 years of age. As a mother, I have first hand experience with preparing a daughter through high school and watching her matriculate into the

university. Despite the years of close and careful preparation, I continually saw struggle in the college graduation plans of my eldest. If she (who had a single parent, yet stable home, college-educated parents/grandparents and strong academic skills) experienced so many pitfalls and setbacks, I could only imagine what young mothers and others experiencing life challenges must face.

My positionality helped me to see things others wouldn't see and it also blinded me to other areas. As such, I was very careful not to interject my experience into the stories of these young women; the use of analytic memos assisted in this. Rather I listened with openness and careful consideration of each participant's story so that I could give it the respect and attention it deserved.

Significance

The ability to take care of one's family is the freedom many African American young women seek, especially young mothers (SmithBattle, 2007). To this end, "addressing the educational outcomes –and the many barriers that undermine them – is crucial to the economic security for African American women, their families and communities" (Smith- Evans et al., 2014, p. 37). African American young women are graduating college at rates higher than their peers of color and the reasons are possibly connected to the attainment of the high school diploma, the college degree and the amount of earnings one is able to command. "Forty-three percent of African American women ages 25 and older without a high school diploma were living in poverty, compared to 29 percent with a high school diploma and 9 percent with a bachelor's degree or higher" (Smith- Evans et al, 2014, p. 36). This leads one to surmise that attainment of a post-secondary education can assist this population in significant ways,

ensuring possible increased economic opportunities and possibly preventing future poverty as well (NCPTUP, 2012).

For African Americans, in particular, the future including opportunities for employment leading to improved life's circumstances is often resting on the coveted baccalaureate degree. While the numbers alone do not appear to be drastic, the baccalaureate degree offers an opportunity to earn almost $1 million more over a lifetime of working. Hence, the baccalaureate degree serves as the gateway to other degrees and thereby more opportunities and greater earning potential for employment options and income earned. The women in this study confirmed that the ability to take care of oneself and ones family is the greatest area of motivation for a college degree.

Limitations

In most all research, there are limitations to the study both initially and upon discovering the findings. My limitations in the area of the questionnaire included only being able to find 24 African American college educated women to take the questionnaire over a three-month period. The group I chose to study was literally like finding a needle in a haystack. I realized that sometime people who have dealt with great levels of trauma are not easily accessed through mainstream mediums; therefore, it was difficult to get in contact some initially. In addition, once contacted, time and multiple competing interests (school, work, children and family) made it extremely difficult to coordinate three interviews for each participant.

This chapter reviewed my research design and methods of analysis. It provided information on the initial Qualtrics© questionnaire (which yielded 24 women responses) and the subsequent interviews drawn from a subset of the women who took the

questionnaire. Finally, it concluded with some of the strategies I employed to strengthen the study's validity, and a brief discussion of study limitations. In the next chapter, I present findings from the questionnaire.

CHAPTER FOUR

QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

"I had awesome support from my family and friends. I also had a lot of support
come from a number of teachers and administrators that I had already formed
relationships with." ~ CM1

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of African American women

who have persisted toward their desired degree, in spite of the traumatic events they

faced. Data collection occurred in two phases for this study, 1) through a Qualtrics©

questionnaire with 24 respondents and 2) through three qualitative phenomenological

interviews with each of nine participants who also responded to the questionnaire. The

questions for the questionnaire were created from a review of the literature. This chapter

highlights the findings from questionnaire for all respondents and then compares and the

questionnaire results from the 24 participants to the nine who participated in the three

interviews series, to show similarities. This chapter concludes with profiles of five of the

interview participants in an effort to give the reader a more nuanced view of their lives.

Questionnaire Participants

Demographics. The 24 participants, who successfully completed the

questionnaire, ranged in age from 20-58 years with a mean age of 34.63 years old. The

full distribution of age is provided in Table 7. Eighteen of the participants were raised

and/or went to college in California; the other six young women were raised and/or went

to college outside of California as shown in Table 8. The range of years for participants'

college entrance was 1977 through 2014 with the mean year being 2003. In addition, the

range of years for participants' completion of their respective pursued degree was/is 1979

through 2018 with the mean year being 2009. A distribution of the actual years for all

participants is found on Table 7 as well.

Table 7
Questionnaire Participant Data

Pseudonym	Age in Years	Year Entered College	Year Completed Highest Degree	Highest Degree Attained or Persisting Toward	Number of Traumatic Experiences	Heat Map Skin Complexion
CB1	32	2003	2016	BA/BS	1	Chocolate
BM3	29	2006	2012	MA/MS	3	Brown
BB5	36	1998	2004♦	BA/BS	5	Brown
BPP2	20	2014	2018	Per BA/BS	2	Brown
BA4	32	2005	2014	AA/AS	4	Brown
BA7	48	2014	2016	AA/AS	7	Brown
CB3	26	2008	2016	BA/BS	3	Chocolate
EA2	58*	1977	1979♦	AA/AS	2	Ebony
EPA5	33	2010	2017	Per AA/AS	5	Ebony
BB0	57	1977	1981♦	BA/BS	0	Brown
BPM4	29	2005	2010	Per MA/MS	4	Brown
CB5	25	2010	2014	BA/BS	5	Coffee
CC5	24	2011	2012	Cosmetology License	5	Chocolate
CB2	50	1984	1990♦	BA/BS	2	Coffee
CA4	30	2004	2007	AA/AS	4	Chocolate
BB2	41	1993	2008	BA/BS	2	Brown
CPA4	23	2013	2018	Per AA/AS	4	Chocolate
CM1	36	1998	2004♦	MA/MS	1	Chocolate
B2	43	2011	2017	BA/BS	2	no response
CM5	29	2006	2015	MA/MS	5	Coffee
BB3	26	2009	2014	BA/BS	3	Brown*
CPM5	32	2002	2017	Per MA/MS	5	Chocolate
CPB6	43	2013	2017	Per BA/BS	6	Brown
BPM2	29	2006	2018	Per MA/MS	2	Brown

Note: *This participant's age is estimated based on the year their schooling began
** This participant mistakenly marked the (Cream) using her cell phone; I was asked to change her choice to Brown
♦Five of the participants graduated after the 10-year cutoff for the study. I made the decision to include these participants based on consultation with my advisor and the importance of obtaining knowledge from this unique population.

Table 8
State where participant was raised and attended college

Young Women	California	Other State
Raised	18	6
College	19	5

Note: One person went to college in both California and another state

The questionnaire asked the women to provide their highest level of education (See Table 9). It was important to know that all of the participants were in the senior year of their various programs; these included those pursing their Associates, Bachelor's and Master's degree. See Table 7 for the specifics of these participants persisting to the next degree.

Table 9
Questionnaire Participants Highest Degree Attained

High School Diploma	AA/AS	BA/BS	MA/MS	Vocational Cert.
4	4	12	3	1

Note: Those with MA/MS also have BA/BS; two with HS are persisting to BA/BS and two to AA/AS

Traumatic events. The number of traumatic events these African American women experienced was astounding. The traumatic events included: early parenting, experience with foster care, school disciplined out, death of loved one, parent incarceration, incarceration, exposed to domestic violence sexual trauma. While no one experienced incarceration as an adolescent, one participant experienced none of the events listed and one participant experienced one traumatic event. Among the 23 participants (excluding the one with none), the mean number of traumatic events experienced was 3.57. (See Figure 2 & 3) Figure 2 shows the actual number of events of all 23 participants, while Figure 3 shows them as a percentage meaning the number of times that traumatic event was experienced divided by 23.
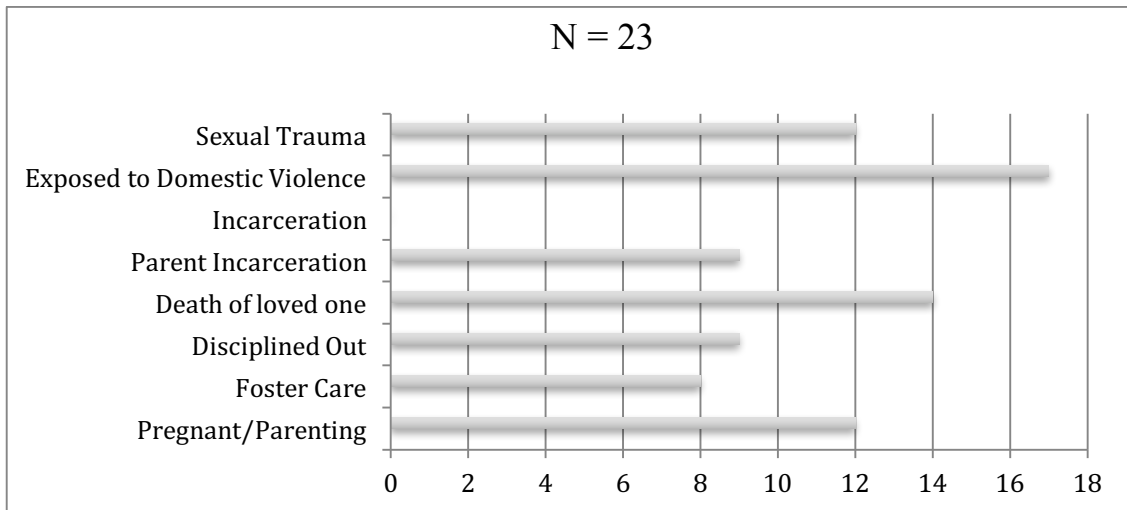
Figure 2 Number of traumatic events experienced by questionnaire participants.

The x-axis represents the number of women who experienced the traumatic event. None

of the participants experienced incarceration, hence no bar.
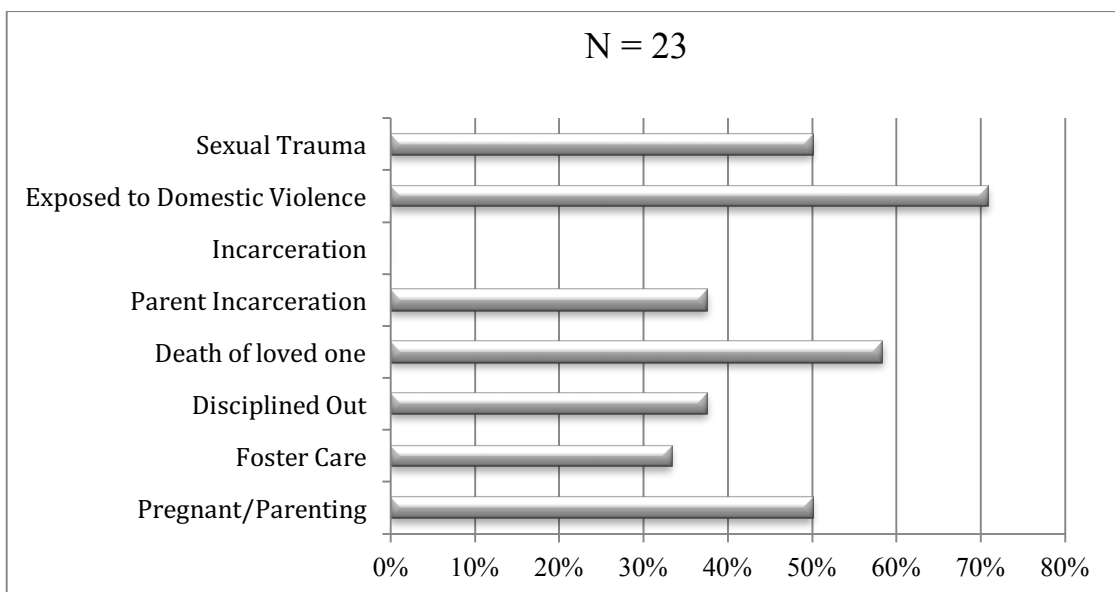
Figure 3 Percentage of traumatic events experienced by questionnaire participants.

The percentages represent the number of women who experienced the incident divided by

23. None of the participants experienced incarceration, hence no bar.

Complexion. The final demographic reported by questionnaire respondents were

related to their skin complexion; the question had a heat map image (See Appendix D)

and it asked them to touch a particular shade signifying their choice. With the help of a

professor, we realized that the data from the heat map was reported in x and y coordinates

(See Appendix D). So, I highlighted the x and y coordinates from the downloaded data

and inserted a chart, a scatterplot. Upon observing the scatter plot, I noticed that the data

was distributed based on the complexion chart into 5 sets, likened to the heat map, from

the bottom of the figure (lightest) to the top (darkest) labeled: Cream, Coffee, Brown,

Chocolate and Ebony. The x coordinate was insignificant in that it showed which part of

the rectangle the participant pressed going lengthwise. The y coordinate showed the

actual participants' choice of their complexion. The y-coordinates were between: 161-

200 for Ebony, for Chocolate 121-160, for Brown 81-120, for Coffee 41-80 and for

Cream 0-40. Of the respondents, one did not answer and no respondent marked cream.

Three respondents selected coffee (12.5%), 11 selected brown (29%), seven selected

chocolate (12.5%) and two selected ebony (8.33%). See Figure 4 for the actual scatterplot

results.
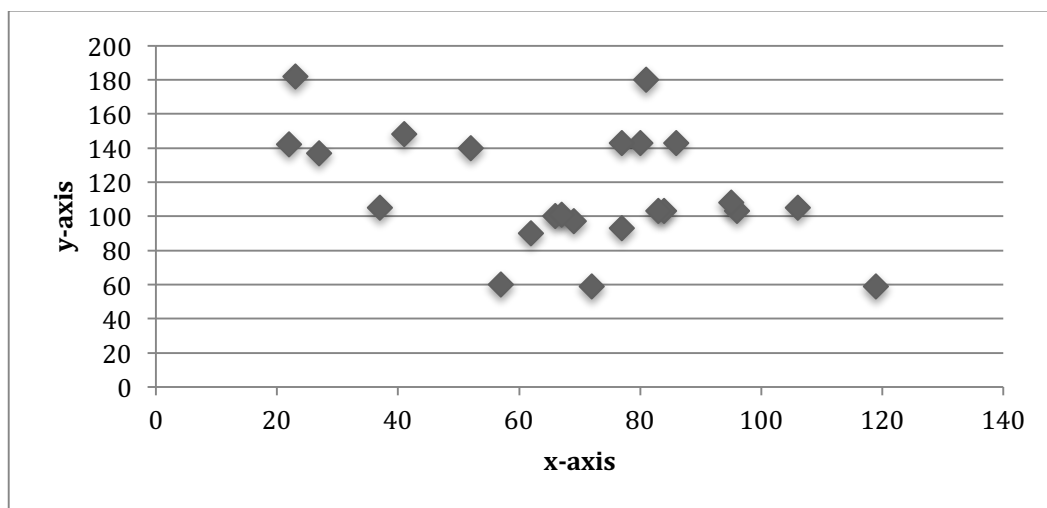
Figure 4 Results of the heat map for the question on complexion.
This displays the scatter gram created from the x and y coordinates given to show the
complexion of the participants; notice clear demarcation at the 40, 80, 120 and 160 and
200 signifying the break in rectangles from the heat map.

Open-ended responses. The last two questions of the questionnaire were open

ended. It asked respondents to share what support they received in their journey toward a

degree and to what they attributed their success thus far. For the question related to

support, their answers were primarily in two categories, family and school, with two

mentioning assistance from both. (See Table 10)

Ten respondents highlighted family support including: mother, aunt, grandmother,

godmother, siblings, fictive kin (play brother, a friend's mother) and one respondent

mentioned her father. Eight respondents stated specific school support including:

teachers, counselors, and administrators; of note, the teachers were primarily African

American women; two respondents credited school related programs and clubs. Another

three respondents credited organizations, i.e. Girl Scouts of America, the church, as well

as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program for foster youth. One

respondent stated she was offered housing assistance and one financial aid; two

respondents mentioned they had no support and one stated trial and error, while one

respondent did not answer the question.

Table 10
Questionnaire Participants Support for College

Family	School	Other Services	No Support	No Answer
10	8	3	2	1

Note. Two respondents mentioned family and school.

A sample of the responses to Question 14: What support during your high school years
did you receive that helped you to attend and succeed in college?

- *I went to a charter school my senior year of school. I
  had an African American female as a teacher. She
  made me want to obtain a higher level of education.*

- *I received support from my high school counselor,
  Director of our College Center on campus.*

- *I was a member of the Girl Scouts organization which pushed school aged girls to focus on college as a direct path from High School. I lived in a single parent household and was supported by my mother and grandmother to attend college.*

- *None*

- *My mother told me that I had to finish high school and college. My grandmother and family believed in me and supported me. My daughter's godmother helped me with childcare and getting a break. My church family also really assisted with my success.*

- *I was in a foster home that went to church. They showed me unconditional love and taught me that although I had endured such hardship at a very young; I did not have to allow what I went through to define who I will be. The church members, school staff, neighbors were all supportive of me and looked out for me.*

- *Financial aid. Learned everything about college through trial and error.*

The answer to the question of attributed success had a wide variety of responses. In retrospect, I would have asked the question differently, as my goal was to ascertain their view of their success thus far. Nevertheless, their answers highlighted areas of determination, discipline, motivation for their children, motivation from their children and others like their parents and friends, and a fear of ended up like others they knew. In addition, their answers mentioned the importance of self-sufficiency e.g. being able to care for themselves, financial freedom, scholarships, mentors and staying positive and motivated to succeed. Finally, their answers mentioned areas of spiritual encouragement like their faith and a relationship with God, both God and hard work, Jesus, prayer and the ability to be used as a willing vessel by God. A sample of the responses to Question 15: To what do you attribute your success thus far?

- *Determination! Although it took so long for me to finish school I knew that I had to show my children it could be done*

- *I attribute my success to God, Grandmother, family, friends, and mentors that poured into me during high school and college.*

- *I attribute my success to my CASA and my brother. Without them and their love and support I would not be as successful.*

- *Prayer!!!!*

- *Myself and asking for support (programs/agencies) when I needed it. Also, not worrying about the time it took to complete school--as long as I finished it*

- *Strong Will, Single Parent working Mom, My personal discipline and being Afraid to end up like other people in the community who were victims of drug abuse and homelessness. I was exposed to many cultures, lifestyles and realized that higher education was a better path to a stable economic financial portfolio.*

- *Having a child as a teenager I wanted to prove to myself that I could make it as a teen mom and any other challenges.*

Interview Participants' Questionnaire Findings

Of the nine women who participated in the three interview series, their ages ranged from 20 – 48 years old with an average age of 30 (see Table 6). All nine participants were raised and educated in California. Likened to the overall questionnaire participants, they earned more Bachelor Degrees than any other degree. In addition, the one vocational certificate was in Cosmetology; however, this participant would like to pursue a bachelor's degree in social work (see Table 7). One of the participants obtained her bachelor's degree more than ten years ago; again seeing the value in her story, I chose to include her as a participant.

Below, find the participants' data for those who participated in the three interview series for the study. Their pseudonyms were selected in an effort to give them their much-deserved respect for the women they are and to show my gratitude in having the privilege to share their stories. Each name means Empress in a language of which I could pronounce and refer to with a level of comfort.

Table 11
Interview Participant Data

Pseudonym	Age in Years	Year Entered College	Year Completed Highest Degree	Highest Degree Attained or Persisting Toward	Number of Traumatic Experiences	Heat Map Skin Complexion
Empress	29	2006	2012	MA/MS	3	Brown
Kuini	36	1998	2004*	BA/BS	5	Brown
Vasílissa	32	2003	2016	BA/BS	1	Chocolate
Ayaba	26	2008	2016	BA/BS	3	Chocolate
Reina	32	2005	2014	AA/AS	4	Brown
Kwin	48	2014	2016	AA/AS	7	Brown
Regina	24	2011	2012	Cosmetology License	5	Chocolate
Malkia	20	2014	2018	Per BA/BS	2	Brown
Larenn	23	2013	2018	Per AA/AS	4	Chocolate

Note: * This participant graduated after the 10-year cutoff for the study. I made the decision to include her based on consultation with my advisor and the importance of obtaining knowledge from this unique young lady.

Table 12
Interview Participants Highest Degree Attained

High School Diploma	AA/AS	BA/BS	MA/MS	Vocational Certificate
2	2	3	1	1

Note: One woman with a High School Diploma is in her senior year at the university; the other is in her senior year at the community college.

Of the nine women who were interviewed, one experienced one traumatic event; all of the others experienced multiple incidences of trauma for a mean of 3.78 (See Figure 5). The overall average number of traumatic events the interview participants experienced was greater than the average number of overall questionnaire respondents, which were 3.57. Figures 5 and 6 show the number of traumatic events experienced by all

participants in the interviews, as well as the percentage of each traumatic event

experienced as a with a divisor of 9.
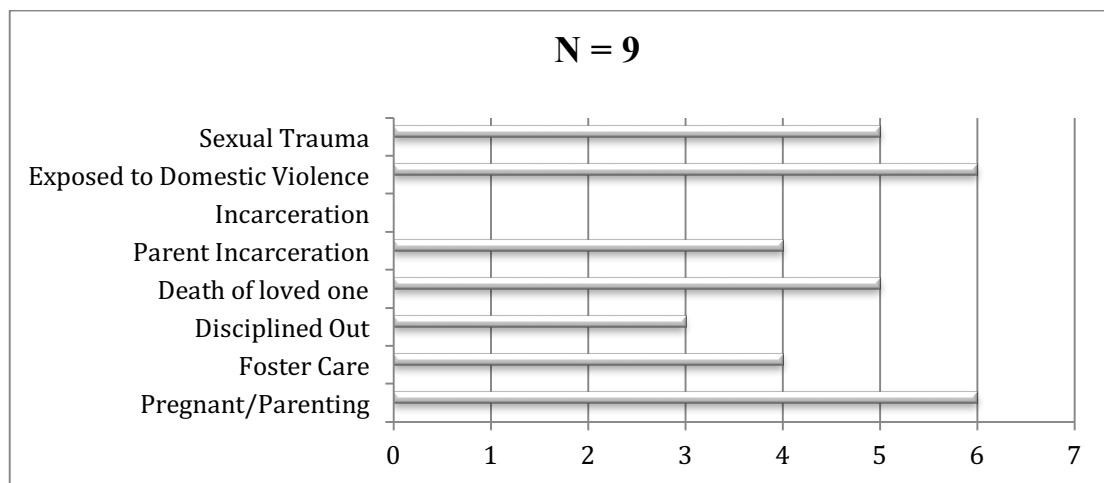
Figure 5 Number of traumatic events experienced by interview participants.

The x-axis represents the number of women who experienced the traumatic event. None

of the participants experienced incarceration, hence no bar.
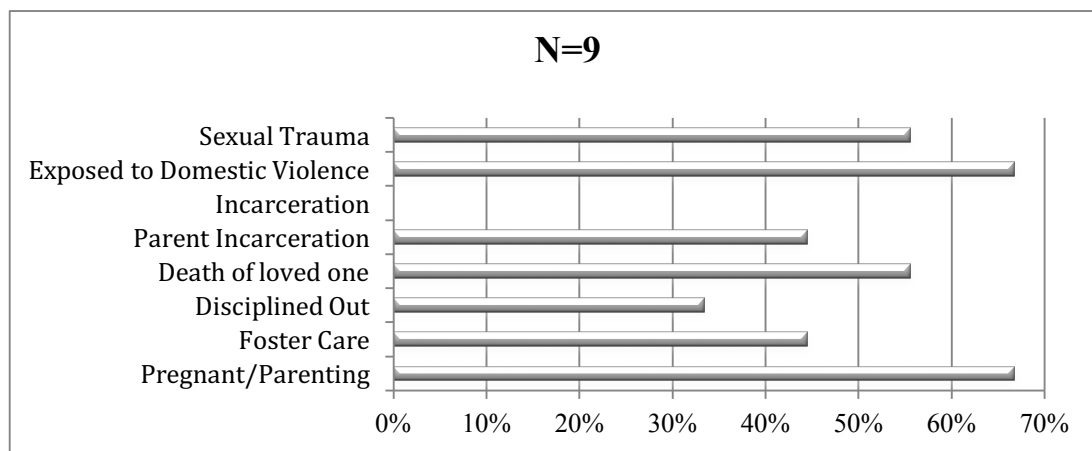
Figure 6 Percentage of traumatic events experienced by interview participants.

The percentages represent the number of women who experienced the incident divided by

9. None of the participants experienced incarceration, hence no bar.

The mean age of the interview participants is 30 years, which is four years

younger than the mean of the questionnaire respondents at 34.2 year. In addition, the

distribution of degree attainment is broader, however, similar to the interview

participants, bachelor degree attainment was greatest. In response to the question regarding skin complexion, five of the nine who chose brown (55.56%) and four selected chocolate (44.44%); this is also similar to the overall number of respondents who chose brown more than the other shades. Although not asked on the questionnaire, through the interviews I found that three of the women who self-report as African American, also state they are Hispanic or Latino as well.

The responses to the open ended questions of support and attributed success at the end of the questionnaire for study participants showed five of the nine reporting school support via a teacher or counselor; three participants highlighted family. Childcare and housing were the other areas for support during their persistence through college (community and university). In contrast to the questionnaire respondents, five of the study participants attributed their success overwhelmingly to support and motivation from family (mothers and children). The others attributed their success to prayer, determination, and themselves (not giving up) see Table 13.

Table 13

Interview Participants Support for College

Family	School	Other Services
3	5	2

Note: One participant stated family and teacher

As one can see, both the demographics and the responses to the questionnaire are varied, however, the nine participants interviewed appear to represent the overall respondents well. I believe the variation in the age, amount of time in school as well as the degree earned/persisting toward, in addition to the types of support the participants have obtained were similar. In addition, the skin complexions are a representative sample of the total questionnaire respondents with most claiming brown.

Interview Participant Profiles

In an attempt to further center the voices of the African American women who have successfully navigated through their traumatic events and achieved/are achieving their educational goal, I have provided profiles of five of the women. These women vary in their age, their skin complexion, degree attainment and in their lived experiences; nonetheless they have all persisted. The profiles are of the participants: with the greatest amount of education, who experienced the most trauma and also happened to be the oldest. Because one-third of my interviewees were African American with Latino heritage as well, I highlighted one of these young ladies with the highest education as well. The last two were randomly selected and ended up representing those who to give a more in-depth view of these women.

Empress. Empress is 29 years old and identifies as brown in complexion. She is from Southern California where her maternal grandmother raised her along with her four siblings. Her mother abused substances for most of her childhood and she met her father at his funeral. She admits that the schools she was bussed to, out of her neighborhood, were better for preparing her for college, but she also states that she didn't want to continue to commute in high school as it required her to leave home two hours earlier to pass the school down the street. While attending her neighborhood school for a trial summer, she made friends and decided to stay. During her sophomore year, she made friends with the college counselor by donating her time and asking questions. When her time came to apply for college, she was ready. Empress lettered in two sports and she was the ambassador for the school, in addition to participating in a host of other clubs and activities.

Although she states that her grandmother was her greatest hindrance, she also credits her grandmother's praise as a motivation for staying on the right path. She was emancipated, not to divorce her grandmother she says, but to be independent. Upon entering college she reconstructs that she was fine with the identity of a participant with the foster care system. She received thousands of dollars in assistance to attend school along with a hands-on scholarship program to monitor her progress. She also credits the fact that others invested in her as the reason she was able to bounce back and stay on track after a probationary first semester. Upon graduation with her Bachelor's Degree, she was accepted into a Master's program and recently completed all of the program requirements, while earning her hours of certification. Her motivation for completing her licensure is to be a role model and one of the few female African American Licensed Clinical Social Workers. In addition, her goal is to create a support system and therapeutic model for girls who have experienced sex trafficking.

Kuini. Kuini is 36 years old and describes herself as an African American woman with Hispanic roots. Her parents immigrated to the United Stated before her birth. She says that she is brown in complexion and the baby of three. Her siblings, born in an Afro-Latino country often made fun of her for not being from their homeland; however, her US citizenship proved valuable when she needed assistance. Her mother worked two jobs for 25 years and she credits the hard work of her mother as the reason she wanted to go to college and be successful. In her elementary years, she witnessed her stepfather molest her older sister and the stress led her to tell an African American woman-teacher at her school. Though they were removed from the home for a short while, the mother kept the stepfather around. Her father was a figure in her life, but with his new family in the next

city, she wasn't able to spend much time with him. She states that her desire for love and someone to pay attention to her led her to the man who fathered her first child at 15 years old, in the 10th grade. Because of her family support, she only missed two weeks of school; however, she states that her administrator was not supportive of her finishing high school and even told her the same. Nevertheless, a teacher offered her encouragement and reminded her that she was smart and could finish and even attended her baby shower.

Upon graduation, she attended a university that offered family housing. Proving too much for the father, they broke up and he moved home; she eventually returned as well. With the help of public assistance and a job as a student worker, she was able to complete her degree. As a science major, she wants to be a role model for other African American/Hispanic women who want to be scientist. She is now married with three children and works for the government and is continually pursuing her dreams.

Ayaba. Ayaba is 26 years old and identifies as chocolate in complexion. A couple, who at the time she thought were fictive-kin, raised her. She has a twin sister, two other siblings and three siblings from the couple who raised her, whom she would later refer to as her foster family. She states that she wasn't the brightest student in school; she even had an Individualized Education Program (IEP), meaning she received special education services for her entire educational career. She states that she did not like to stay after school, so she rarely participated in any sports or extra curricular activities and preferred to spend time in her room. She further explained that she was bussed to her high school because it was a "better school for people who wanted to go to college", according to her foster parents. She recalls that for her graduation program, the school counselors would constantly ask what college she was attending. She admits that she

never thought of it, however, she was a good and a faithful student—ensuring that she completed whatever task was before her. She also credits a teacher with telling her she could and should go to college. So, she mentioned the local community college to her counselor and followed up by enrolling. While enrolling she learned of her foster child status from her older sister.

By her second year in college, her foster mother lost her home. She was homeless and remembered her sister telling her that they were foster children. Armed with the information she found every resource she needed to stay enrolled in community college while working to gather assistance for shelter and books, as well as money to spend. Her strategy was to attend class, work on campus so she can be close to class, and not worry how long it would take to finish. She finished community college in four years and went on to the university to finish in another four years. Upon graduation, she was accepted into the MSW program; however, she realized she didn't want to continue in school because by this time she'd had twin children and realized that her own trauma was enough to bear; she couldn't handle anyone else's. She currently works for a non-profit organization focused on making changes in the community. In addition, she has a drive that is focused on a successful life, in contrast to her siblings, she says. She continues to remind herself and them, that they all have had similar opportunities – take advantage and make a choice to care for yourself and your children (her siblings don't have custody of their children). She states that having a degree means she can have a better life for her children and that she can take care of her family. To her, that is what is necessary. Though she continues to take medication to deal with some of the issues she's

experienced, the death of her parents and her foster father, to name a few, she feels like she is continuing to grow and achieve daily.

Reina. Reina is 32 years old and was raised in Southern California by her grandparents. Her parents both battled drug addiction and were in and out of prison for most of her childhood. Upon her father's release, he promised to take her and her siblings to raise them; however, that never materialized and she states she carried that anger for the next 20 plus years. Being raised by her grandparents was a challenge in that her grandfather was a functioning alcoholic and her grandmother a chronic diabetic. By middle school she was responsible for administering insulin to her grandmother, cooking and feeding for the family and getting her little sister to school. She describes herself as brown in complexion and with a fuller figure than the other children at school. This made her the subject of much ridicule in elementary school causing her to get into fights often. When her teacher reached out to her grandmother to inquire as to how to assist, the grandmother was forthcoming about her parents and this garnered her some sympathy and needed understanding and support.

By high school, she was molested by a family member who continues to come around; she never told anyone. She also began to hang with older girls which led her to older boys, she admits. She recalls that she lied about her age and in anger left the house one night, much to the disapproval of her grandmother. She had sex for the first time and became pregnant. Unfortunately, she did not know until she was almost five months along. Although she wanted to abort, her grandmother disagreed for religious reasons and the medical system informed her that she was too far along. By the time she delivered her baby, her grandmother had died of breast cancer and the father of the child moved out of

the county. She participated in a fight to protect her younger sister and was expelled from the district. She admits that she had fought several times before. Upon entering an alternative program, she was able to graduate from high school with the assistance of an African American female teacher that pushed her and offered great support. In addition, she went to college in several counties, and had one more child. As a victim of domestic violence, she assaulted her child's father in response to his abuse and was jailed. Upon completion of her sentence and probation, she completed her AA degree and was offered a promotion at the temporary job she worked for six years. The supervisor, a domestic violence victim herself congratulated her for finally getting out and promoted her in spite of her felony. She would now like to earn her Bachelors degree and be a role model to her kids while assisting other women who have experienced similar events. She credits much of her endurance to her grandmother who taught her to have faith and to talk to God just like he was sitting next to her.

Kwin. Kwin is 48 years old and reports her complexion as brown. She is from Southern California and her "aunt" who she says was fictive kin, raised her and her three siblings. She credits the aunt with teaching her to pray and to stick together as a family. Her mother abused drugs and alcohol and was involved in quite a few illegal activities for most of her life. Her father, or who she believed to be the father, was killed living 'the life'. The other gentleman who the mother says could be her father was away in the military for most of her childhood. She recalls, that her mother attempted to get away from the illegal lifestyle by marrying a man that took them to central California. The man, instead of getting her out, ended up being her mother's supplier and a child molester. After molesting her older sister, the sister left home for the streets and she says

unfortunately, 30 years later, is still out there. When he attempted to molest Kwin, she took her two younger siblings and returned to the home of the 'aunt' who raised her; unfortunately, the aunt was now deceased. She states that she still hurts for that loss and it has been over 30 years. Nonetheless, she and her siblings were able to stay with another fictive kin for as long as there was foster care money; this was a stable home until she was robbed at gunpoint, rescued by her brother and so scared that she told the foster mother. At this time, she also had to reveal that she was pregnant by a boy who lived on her block; she was 16 years old and he was 14 years old. She was then put out of her home and literally lived on the street. A friend of hers was pregnant as well and that friend's mother took her in with one condition, that she finish high school. She received public assistance and she attended an alternative program with an African American teacher who reminded her to break the cycle, meaning not to return with another child before finishing high school. Upon finishing with her high school diploma, her school hosted the graduation off-site and Kwin says she remembers that being motivation for her to want to live and 'do life' differently. She says that experience and The Cosby Show, provided her with motivation to earn her own money and live in her own home.

In an attempt to get herself together, she left the baby with the father of the child and the paternal grandmother until she got on her feet. Kwin began working at a credit union and she met a gentleman with whom she is still married 25 years later. It took her 18 months to go back and get her child, and she says the strain of that time apart affects them even today. The child is now over 30 years old and still close with the father's family. By the time she was serious about school, she attempted to attend, but had three children and a husband. He told her he couldn't take care of them while she was out; she

had tried one class previously. After the children grew to adults, she returned to school and completed her AA degree in 18 months with the support of her husband, and also alongside her son. She says she wanted to be a role model for her children. She is now waiting to attend UCSD to major in history.

This chapter provided the initial study findings by giving the results and an analysis of the responses from the questionnaire. In addition, it provided the necessary data to reveal that the young women who eventually participated in the interviews were a representative sample of the young women in the questionnaire. The next chapter will give an analysis of the findings from the interviews and answers to the research questions.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW FINDINGS

"And by reading the bible you'll find that one person plants, another waters, and God gives the increase." Kwin

As a reminder, nine women were interviewed three times each to ascertain a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of African American women attaining a college degree despite trauma. I employed a phenomenological interviewing process, which consisted of three semi-structured interviews of each of the nine participants. The questions asked in the interviews reflected themes that surfaced from my review of the literature on this topic. Likewise, results from the questionnaire (discussed above) informed the questions asked during the three interview series of each participant. In these interviews, I attempted to find how the 9-12 grade years fostered baccalaureate persistence and achievement. Likewise, I wanted to know about the challenges the women faced—specifically those linked to their schooling experience. The previous chapter covered the findings of the questionnaire for all participants, which is inclusive of the data obtained from the interview participants. However, in this chapter, I will delve into the analysis of the interviews.

In Chapter 4, I presented the initial findings to the study questionnaire and interviews. As explained in Chapter 3, I coded each of the 27 interviews (9 participants had 3 interviews each). This analysis yielded 30 categories that were ultimately collapsed into six themes. These themes were pertinent in describing the successful pursuit to and through the baccalaureate degree. They included: Inter-intrapersonal Challenges, School

Challenges, Supportive People and Services, School Support, Motivation and Personal

Persistence and Success (see Figure 7).

Figure 7 The six themes found in the study.

Challenges African American Women Face

It may seem counterproductive to address the challenges faced by these women,

particularly given that a goal of this study is to understand the success of African

American women. However, the level of endurance and persistence these women exhibit

in the context of many challenges is important to understand and they were eager to share

them. As one of the participants Larenn stated, these experiences reveal how the

participants were able to "make a negative into a positive." Therefore, the purpose is to

honor the voices of the women in identifying, dealing with and overcoming their

struggles. The challenges are heavily documented in order to understand their persistence

and achievement.

| Inter-Intra Personal Challenges | *Pride in succeeding despite early parenting* | *Multiple and generational trauma* | *Identity* |
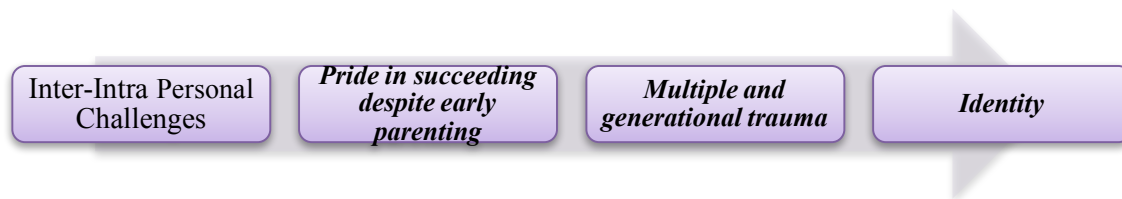
The women in the interviews faced numerous challenges. I coded two types of challenges in the data: inter/intrapersonal and school-based. The categories leading to the inter-intrapersonal challenge theme were: early parenting, multiple traumatic experiences, generational trauma, parental challenges, and issues of accepting or denying their identity. The categories leading to the school challenges theme were: schools that did not prepare students for college, bussing students, students being disciplined harshly and students kicked out/ expelled from their home (community) school.

Inter-intrapersonal challenges. Inter-Intrapersonal challenges refer to the types of challenges between individuals and within themselves. This theme encompassed the effects parents and their struggles had on the young women; these were covered under the category of multiple and generational trauma. In addition, this theme also included the pride experienced by those young women impacted by early parenting and finally, their identity and how it affected the young women in multiple areas. It is important to note that the interview revealed traumatic events that went beyond those on the questionnaire; as there was no way for it to be all-inclusive. The other types of traumatic events revealed, for example, were the level of trauma faced by young women who experienced homelessness as well as abuse at the hands of their caretakers. In addition, there were those who witnessed substance abuse by parents and family members with addictions that spanned many years that also proved challenging through their schooling.

Pride in succeeding despite early parenting. Early parenting can be defined as giving birth to a child prior to the age of 19 years old and 67% of the women in this study were early parents. While early (teen) pregnancy is often frowned upon in US society, many of the women in the study found that early parenting helped to propel them forward in their educational goals.

Kuini, Vasílissa, Reina, Kwin, Regina and Larenn, proudly carry the badge of college educated teen parent. They speak of how they were more motivated to achieve their educational goals, after the baby. Larenn recalls her motivation to move forward after the rape, *"once I got pregnant it was kind of different. I had something else to focus on…now you had somebody else to be focused on and[I felt] more encouraged."*Kuini speaks of the pride of being a teen mom with a bachelors' degree, *"It* [a degree] *just represented the positivity as an African American, Hispanic female…I'm very proud of myself."* In addition, they admit that being a teen mother brought them more resources, especially for college, than they would have ever imagined without them. These resources included financial aid, housing resources and other material and academic support. So while they admit that it was difficult, they are grateful for the experience that helped them be a role model for their kids and for some, a role model for their siblings as well.

Multiple and generational trauma. Generational trauma is a term I created to define trauma that has affected multiple generations of a family. This issue of systemic or generational challenges was a factor for six of the nine young women. No questions related to generational trauma were included in my initial questionnaire. However, if I were to do a follow-up to this study, I would definitely include a question related to this

phenomenon, as it was prominent amongst participant responses. Kuini, Reina, Larenn

and Kwin were third generation teen parents. For Kwin, her fictive aunt first raised

Kwin's grandmother and siblings, then also raised Kwin's mother and siblings and finally

raised Kwin and two of her siblings. For Empress, her maternal grandmother raised *all* of

her grandchildren. *"My grandma… came [from the South] with six children. And so she*

raised all of her kid's kids. And so my mom's five is like the last batch of kids she

raised." This means that her maternal grandmother raised her own six children and

subsequently all of the children born to those six children. Each sibling, including her

mother, had a drug or criminal issue that deemed them unfit to care for their own

children. For Malkia, the mental health of the mother caused her to leave her children

unattended; they were eventually placed into foster care, but not before living on the

streets for many years.

  Identity. Many of the young women had challenges that revolved around their

identity, six of the nine to be specific. For some, their identity issue was related to their

ethnicity, others to their disability, and for others it was the label of being a foster child.

Being a foster child made Malkia feel like she was less than her peers or like something

was wrong with her and therefore she renounced it as soon as she could. She stated, *"I'm*

not like you guys [referring to the other foster children]…I was never disrespectful, I was

like 'I'm smart, I don't belong here.'" Upon leaving the foster care facility she accepted

the college financial aid provided to all youth in foster care, but she separated herself

from the foster care services upon entering college in northern California. She missed the

opportunity for constant monitoring and updates. In addition, she was unwilling to join in

programs that were designed for foster youth because she wanted to say she made it on

her own. However, for Empress and Ayaba, they welcomed the label of 'foster youth' and the resources that were attached to being wards of the State. This designation afforded them great support in college and beyond. In addition, Ayaba felt like the label of special education helped her receive more attention, which she craved, and didn't feel any stigma associated with it. For Kuini, Larenn, and Regina, their label as Hispanic/ Latino along with African American sometimes caused them to feel as though they didn't fit in. However, in their adult years, it motivates them toward success as role models for their families, as they have graduated or almost graduated from college (community college or the university).

School challenges. My study participants faced numerous challenges related to their schooling. In some instances, these challenges resulted from cultural clashes between their home communities and the schools that many of them were bused to. It seemed clear in interviewing these women that there was a cultural connection to their home schools that was not present at the schools they were bussed to. In other instances, challenges were a result of school practices that punished African American women more harshly than other students. In many cases, these challenges had long reaching effects on the young women in this study.

School Challenges	Lack of college preparation	Bussing	Harsh/Unfair discipline

Lack of college preparation. Five of the nine participants stated that the schools they attended did not prepare them for college. Both those who attended their home school as well as those educated in alternative programs discussed this lack of

preparation. In all it seems that despite the type of school they attended, they expressed that there was a lack of college preparation was expressed. Empress attended her home high school (i.e. the high school in her neighborhood) and was considered an excellent student. Despite her high grades, she recalls her experience as an entering first year student at San Diego State University, *"I tested remedial for reading and math…I was like 'what did I learn in high school?' The graduation speaker, prom princess 4.0 student was drowning…"* Kwin also attended her home high school. However, differently than Empress, she recalled that she felt like no one cared whether she succeeded or not. *"I think they just assumed that whoever lived in that neighborhood was going to live and die…and not be very successful."* Upon entering the alternative program for pregnant and parenting girls, Kwin says the emphasis was on getting out of high school. She recalls that in the early 80s the high school diploma was seen as sufficient, *"The late 80s …I would say that was the goal…you will go to college if you wanted to be a doctor...she [her teacher] just wanted to make sure you at least had some tools to survive."* Malkia also went to an alternative school for foster youth. She spoke of the alternative school program being so concerned about the social emotional welfare of kids that the expectations were lacking when it came to specific college preparatory skills. Referring to her junior year taking the SAT she recalls, "*out of 50 kids only 3 of us showed up…they're not forcing you to do anything you don't want to do…yeah, lack of expectation*."

    Bussing. Many of the women were bussed to schools outside of their immediate communities. In most cases, the young women stated that their families encouraged them to attend the schools outside of their communities, believing that they would provide

better educational opportunity for them. Five of the nine participants were bussed at some point of their educational career, however, only one participant actually finished at the high school to which she was bussed. Many participants stated they lived at least one hour away from their school. This meant that if they were late for their school bus, they would miss school for the entire day because no one would be available to take them. In addition, there were few after school busses; this meant that the participants were limited in the extracurricular activities that they could chose. Empress recalls, *" I was tired of being bussed...you missed the bus and so we had no one to drive us to [school]...I played sports and they didn't have a late bus to bring me back."*

Bussing to new neighborhoods proved challenging for both the students and the schools themselves. Most bussing opportunities were for integration purposes. These experiences proved difficult for some of the young women in that the school was not experienced with African American children, and especially African American youth who had experienced trauma. The young women spoke of the expectations at other schools being much different than their home schools. Vasílissa says as she recalled her bussing experience this way, *"They said I was gifted, but my school didn't have the classes for that...when I was [bussed] at that school, it was had for me...I struggled."* Finally, for many who were bussed, it was with the same students in their neighborhood and so the social issues followed them. *"So she figured if she bussed me out with the white people then that maybe I had a better chance of going to school and behaving basically...when I end up there all the kids from our area are there."* This, for some, led to the harsh discipline that Crenshaw (2015) speaks of in her study on girls. She speaks of African American girls being disciplined because they don't act and behave in the ways

that the dominant culture does. For example, they may talk and laugh loudly. Their conversations may be more intense and perceived as aggressive, similar to the way they handle conflict.

Harsh discipline. When Crenshaw et al. (2015) speaks of harsh discipline, she states, "Black girls face a statistically greater chance of suspension and expulsion compared to other students of the same gender" (p. 23). In addition, girls who are suspended face a significantly greater likelihood of dropping out of school and are more likely to have contact with the juvenile justice system. The long-term consequences of dropping out are particularly troubling for Black as well as Latina girls, including a greater likelihood of low-wage work and unemployment (Crenshaw et al., 2015, Smith-Evans et al., 2014). There is evidence from the interviews that the young ladies were harshly disciplined, much in line with Crenshaw's findings. This harsh discipline occurred across school settings; in their home school, alternative schools, although less so, and also at the schools they were bussed to.

Five of the nine participants felt they were disciplined harshly or unfairly. Reina is an example of a girl who had several challenges which she felt were not handled well by the school. These included: dealing with parents who were incarcerated and not around and a grandmother who was chronically ill. She was being bussed to a "better school" according to her grandmother, initially. Reina admits she was an angry young woman. Several life events led to her anger and pain, including: her parents on drugs and her grandmother dying from breast cancer; in addition, she cared for her little sister full time. These experiences led her to act out. Instead of the schools supporting her through these traumatic life events, they resorted to suspending and eventually expelling her. She

recalls the anger at her grandmother's death and felt like the administration never cared. She states, *"I didn't have no one talking to me asking me, 'oh is there something I can help you with? Are you upset about something?'"* She also remembers that it was a girl from her neighborhood who teased her about her aunt being on drugs that led to one of her many fights. Finally, when Reina fought the boy who was calling her sister names she was threatened with expulsion and sent to an alternative school.

Kuini, Larenn, Kwin and Regina all shared examples of school principals and teachers who did not support them once they became pregnant. This practice was more often experienced in the home school and less often in the alternative schools. Regina recalls being kicked out of her mother's house because she was pregnant and her subsequent experience of trying to enroll in her home school, *"When I got pregnant…I thought I could go to this school, but they said you're pregnant. We can't have you here you are a nuisance to the girls."* A few of the girls recall their schools administration being unsupportive of them while they were pregnant and the lack of support they felt with an unplanned pregnancy. Larenn was raped by her friend's brother and after a bout with depression went to an alternative school program. She says the smaller school helped with the trauma. However, she says, *"Mrs. D was really positive and really nice until I got pregnant. After I got pregnant she didn't want me in her class anymore."* Finally, Kuini was enrolled in her home school and was an honor student. When her principal learned of her pregnancy, she told Kuini to go to a school for pregnant girls and gang bangers, Kuini recalls. She told her principal, *"It won't look good on my college application. I'm not going there because I plan to go to college...you can't make me go*

there." She only missed two weeks of school and went on to successfully attain her

bachelor's degree.

Supportive People and Services

In the previous section, I shared some of the ways in which the participants were

challenged in their pursuit of their high school and college education. In contrast, the data

also revealed two types of support these African American young women received as

they pursued education: 1) supportive people and services, and 2) school support. The

codes leading to the supportive people and services theme were: fictive kin and kinship

care, spiritual practices, assistance with housing, and government assistance in a variety

of forms including childcare and finally, having access to college role models. The codes

leading to the school support theme were: participants being told they had potential,

having a significant teacher/counselor who significantly influenced them, having a degree

of success (not necessarily doing extremely well) in high school and having positive

experiences (specifically being encouraged or building connections toward college) in

high school.

Supportive Services & People	Fictive kin/kinship care	Spiritual practice	Housing	Governmental assistance	Childcare	College role models

The women in the study identified the people who supported them, and it was

nearly impossible to separate the people from the supports they provided. For example, a

social worker made use of her connections to ensure girls were able to attend and

graduate from high school and college. The young women had to navigate very traumatic

experiences at a time when they were young and vulnerable; it is clear from their interviews that they made use of their support and services.

Fictive kin/formal kinship care. Chatters, Taylor and Jayakody (1994) described fictive kin as "persons who are treated like a relative, but who are not related by blood or marriage" (p. 297). Someone other than their parents raised six of the nine participants. In some instances, fictive kin raised the girls without receiving any funding from the state or other government sources. In other instances, a family member other than their parents cared for the young women. This care was formalized via a state arrangement. The children were placed in the legal custody of the State by a judge who then placed the children with kin—including grandparents, aunts and uncles, other relatives, and family friends (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). With this arrangement, someone received financial support for the young women from the state on their behalf, as was the case with Empress and Reina who were raised by their grandmothers and Kwin who was raised by her 'aunt'.

Malkia speaks of a woman who used to give her biological mother money while they lived on the streets of southern California. Her mother finally 'gave' both she and her brother to the woman because her mental health issues precluded her from keeping them. That woman abused her and her brother. They were taken from that home and then adopted by another foster mother who abused her because of her dark skin for over 10 years. "*My adoptive mother… let me know that I was dark-skinned…when I asked why she didn't hit my foster sister who was light skinned she said the bruises won't show up on you now will they?*" When she could no longer stand for her brother nor herself to be hurt, Malkia told a school counselor and she was placed in a long-term foster facility.

Ayaba spoke of living with who she thought was fictive kin, but later realized she was a foster mother, who happened to know her parents. *"She raised us like we were hers…she wanted to protect us from reality…the whole ward of the court letter…that's how I found out I was a foster youth."* So she and her twin and other siblings were raised with the foster's mother's own children as their biological children. In another example, Regina's grandmother took care of her once she got pregnant in 10th grade because her mother and stepfather refused to; it was an informal kinship arrangement.

Fictive kin raised several generations of Kwin's family. She remembers, *"She [her mother] herself was a teen mother, it was passed down through the generations…it's almost as if my 'great aunt' took care of all three generations."* Because there was no legal arrangement, her mother took them when she returned from the streets. When that was no longer an option, Kwin took her and her siblings back to the 'aunt's' house. With the death of that 'aunt', she was able to live with the aunt's brother and his wife only through legal foster care, and the 'aunt' was able to receive financial compensation for such an arrangement. These fictive kin and kinship arrangements provided the much needed stability and care that many young women credit with assisting them greatly.

Spiritual practices. All of the nine participants spoke of some spiritual connections that provided them a level of support toward their goals. Six of the nine spoke explicitly of the support they received through God or prayer. Empress' grandmother ensured she went to church and she especially remembers Vacation Bible School. It was one of her outlets because her grandmother was very strict with her and didn't allow her to do anything outside of the home and school. She was adamant when

she declared, *"Oh my God, the grace of God, God alone, because to this day I can't tell you how I finished in four years!..So it's definitely God and His purpose."*

Kwin speaks of her 'aunt' teaching them to pray every night for one another (she and her siblings) and for her mother who was on the streets. She credits this experience with the faith and strength she has even to this day, at 48 years old. She states, *" I will not leave out prayer because I prayed a lot through all those classes…"* Reina recollects her grandmother's advice, *"Talk to God. You talk to him like how you talk to me…you don't have to sugarcoat anything… he'll answer your prayers and talk back in different ways."* Malkia's foster mother took her to church every Sunday and still abused she and her brother. The experience took a toll on her faith for a while, she says, but she still believes. Vasílissa's step-dad and mother were pastors. While she didn't appreciate the strict rules at the time, she does credit her experience in church with the strength to continue, as times got hard. All of the young women spoke of some person or thing watching over them.

Housing. Housing was a major factor in the experiences of the women. In some instances the women had stable homes and in others there was more transience. Yet in each instance, without some sort of housing assistance, they would not have been able to be successful. It also gave them the motivation that at least these three young women needed to persist toward a high school diploma and through college. Kwin and her infant daughter were homeless when her friend's mother offered her a place to stay as long as she pursued and received her high school diploma. With a huge smile, she recalls, *" Her mother says, you can come stay with me under the condition that you finish high school…that was the best thing she could have done for me. "* Regina moved into a place

for teens with her child. The requirement, of the house, was that she did something productive, meaning worked or went to school; she would then pay 30% of what she earned for rent. Her case manager was significant in serving as motivation. Regina credits her caseworker for motivation to complete her high school diploma and earn a certificate in cosmetology. *"She's like, don't let this become a pattern for you when you start stuff and don't finish it. It's easy to get sucked into that life style. And you don't wanna be a person who doesn't complete anything."*

Malkia and Empress, as foster youth, participated in the Transitional Housing Program (THP) through their entire college tenure. This was greatly beneficial as the participants 'paid rent' in the form of a percentage of their income. Upon their desire to move, the money was returned to them to use for future housing. Empress shares, *"By the time the program was finished, I had almost $3000.00 saved from just paying rent. I took the whole check…and paid rent for the next school year."* Ayaba had a similar experience; her case manager provided her much needed support to persist through school. When she aged out of THP, she was eligible for Section 8[2], which she utilizes to this day. As she begins her career with her twins, these forms of support have made the difference between homelessness and having a home for them all.

Governmental assistance. Every one of the nine participants utilized a type of governmental program as support for their successful matriculation through high school and into/through college. The amount of time spent with the government programs varied greatly. For some, their goal was to exit the system as soon as they could; for others, they felt that it was a necessary resource to get them on their feet. Kuini told her

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[2] Section 8 The Housing Choice Vouchers Program that provides low income, elderly, veteran and disabled affordable housing with subsidized rent. (GoSection8.com, 2017)

family and her social worker,*" Well I'm going to get on welfare and get off when I graduate and go to college."* She said that it was one of the best calls she ever made when she told her social worker to remove her from the welfare roster. Even after she no longer received state living expenses she continued to get Medi-Cal (a form of state-based health insurance) for her and her son. However, she worked her way through college with the assistance of a mid-income housing complex[3].

Like Kuini, the assistance most received included Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) often called welfare, Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) and Medi-Cal. Regina remembers her time with government assistance, *"No I wasn't working… Yes, cash aid, food stamps and Medi-Cal, all of it…"* She was only 16 and in need of great assistance for her and her son. Her idea was to use all of it until she could afford to do better. With her Cosmetology License, she is now doing better.

For teen parents who were receiving AFDC also known as cash aid, they were placed in a program for adolescent parents. This program forced them to be in school and they were assigned a social worker to assist in this effort. Three of the young women cited their experience with their social worker as a great motivator to stay focused and complete their educational goals. Those three included Larenn, Regina and Kuini. Kuini expressed that her relationship with her social worker was often negative and unproductive. *" When I first walked in her office she said to me, 'How could I be a child having a child?'…you know what [Kuini says], you can be a supportive social worker."* Kuini used the negativity of her social worker as motivation to graduate from high school

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[3] Mid level income housing is for people who make Moderate income~ households earn between 80% and 120% of Area Median Income (AMI) (HUD, 2017).

and entered college with lots of scholarships. She exited the welfare program successfully as she stated she would.

Childcare. Subsidized childcare proved beneficial for four of the six mothers, while the others had family support for childcare. Larenn and Regina utilized the assistance of an on-site childcare facility while they attended high school. Regina recalls that after high school, her stable childcare was enough to encourage her to complete her cosmetology program. She says, *"You know my son's childcare, her daycare was closing so I had to find another one…so I finally got situated… then I just kept going back [to school]."* Larenn and Vasílissa credit their family with being their greatest support with childcare. Larenn shares, "*They [five aunts] all took turns watching her [her daughter]…their thing is, as long as you're going to school they'll help with anything."* They made a point to state that as long as they were being productive, their families would support them by caring for their children. They also said that this calmed them from the stress of being away from their children.

College role models. The final code that emerged from the theme of supportive services and people is the access to a college role model. All participants, with the exception of Empress spoke of specific college role models. She says she didn't know anyone that attended college, but she knew there had to be more to life than what she was experiencing. Upon entering college she found great models to emulate. Vasílissa and Larenn had mothers who were their role models. Both of their mothers started college well after they were in their teens and they used their mothers as a push to say if she can, I can too. Vasílissa says, *"I'm ashamed to say she [her mother] got two associates a bachelor's and a master's and I was still continuing on my bachelor's...I was finally like,*

you need to complete this." Larenn recalls her mother being proud of her diploma. She also remembers at her high school graduation, her late grandmother told her to bring home a degree. Regina was motivated by the bachelor's degree her mother recently received; she reviewed the brochure while at graduation and has decided to return for her bachelor's degree as well. The role model for Malkia was her Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). She states that her CASA took her on college tours and paid to ensure she was ready for her college entrance exams. Kwin stated she didn't have anyone to be a college role model, however, she says her aunt was a "quiet example." She recalls, *"my fictive kin aunt was a registered nurse and her daughter was following in her footsteps…I saw two women in the household who were educated and they weren't drug users."* As she reflected on this, she believes it was meaningful. The others had college role models in the community and at school. I will expound upon this code in the next theme.

School Support

The theme of school support was made up of codes that included words of encouragement and school personnel that helped to influence support toward the young women's educational goals. In addition, school support was sometime shared as experiences that assisted the student in feeling supported to pursue their college dreams. Larenn, Kuini, Ayaba, Reina and Kwin all received their much needed support and encouragement from school personnel through words and actions such as telling them they had potential. In addition they were encouraged to use their success in high school to attend college. Finally, having positive experiences with resources and opportunities, the school provided, were also able to assist these young women in the transition from high school to the persistence through college.

| School Support | Having potential | Significant teacher/counselor | High school success | Positive school experience |

Having potential. In their pursuit of education, many young women mentioned that words of encouragement and affirmations were important and lasting. Words like potential and smart were used to describe six of the nine participants. Three of them were offered an opportunity to skip a grade in elementary school, but the parents did not want them to. Vasílissa and Malkia were in gifted classes. Empress says she remembered teachers using the word "potential" a lot when she was younger. She admits she had no idea what that word potential meant in relation to her life, but when classes were difficult, she remembered it and it served as encouragement. Kuini says though she did well in school, no one ever mentioned honors courses. She continued to excel in the courses offered to her and her counselor made certain she was in college-prep coursework.

Significant teacher/counselor. Every participant made mention of a teacher or counselor that influenced their educational journey; some in the role of educator and others in the role of confidant. Larenn, Regina, Vasílissa, and Reina all attribute their successful completion of high school and their enrollment into college to their high school teachers. They also admit that although they attended high school because they were directed to, it took longer to finish because 'life' happened. Five of the motivating teachers were African American and four of those were women. Kwin shared about her African American teacher at an alternative program for pregnant and parenting teens, " *I remember her asking us to not repeat the cycle…she celebrated when we were done* [with high school]*.* " Kuini spoke of a non-African American teacher who was supportive about

her pregnancy, much to the dismay of her principal. Her recollection of this teacher's actions were explained this way, *"I remember her buying me something for my baby shower…her making me feel as though I was still a student and I was still going to be able to achieve."* Kuini went on to state that this teacher made her feel like a student even though she had a baby and that was enough to assist her in persisting with her education.

High-school success. For seven of the nine young women, their success in high school pushed them to have the confidence and the desire to succeed in college. Empress recalls being active in student government and clubs; she was also in the top 10% of her class. Malkia talks about utilizing the resources at her school and working hard to get the recognition she craved. Reina recalls the moment in time where she realized she could be successful. She states, "*it was all the attention that I needed when I came to school… we're talking about colleges and being better people…community service…going to college to see what it was like*." Reina states that her environment made her believe she could go to college and be successful.

Larenn said that her high school helped her to be successful in college and she returns to get assistance when she needs it. For Regina, she simply says that finishing high school was a success for her; getting used to waking up and showing up in class, she admits, was difficult, but helped her to be successful in her post secondary schooling. Ayaba states that she was used to showing up and going to school. Even though she wasn't the best student, she was persistent and went to school everyday. When it was time to attend college, she used the same thought pattern as direction and she was able to achieve her high school diploma, an associates and a bachelor's degree.

Positive school experience. Seven of the nine participants could attribute their continuing in education with an experience in high school that left a good feeling and made them ready to continue in school. Malkia recalls getting everything she needed at her high school. In addition, she remembers attending graduation as a sophomore and seeing all of the scholarships awarded to other students. She made up her mind to be that person two years later when she graduated. She says, " *I can get a degree…four more years of school…I'm going to be that success story…I'm going to do this for my brother and I'm not going to be a statistic.* " Empress shares how she was so engulfed in the school program that she was a school ambassador and that helped her to get to know staff and other college programs that would be beneficial later. In addition, the time spent in the college center assisted her with being prepared when the time came to apply for college. Kuini credits her opportunity to do a job shadow and continuously winning awards in high school as experiences that helped support her decision to purse college with a major in science. All of these positive school experiences were what was needed for them women to push past the traumatic events of their lives toward the degree they desired.

Motivation

Findings in the last two areas were able to shed light on the intangible areas of support the young women need to be successful in their persistence to college. The codes that led to this theme, Motivation, included: enjoying reading, expanding one's horizons, a desire to break the cycle, and the last code was motivation to finish what was started in terms of their educational pursuits. This theme was critical in that it served as almost a catalyst for many to see another way of being in the world, for the first time.

| Motivation | Enjoying reading | Expanding horizons | Break the cycle | Motivated to finish |

Enjoying reading. Five of the nine participants mentioned how much they loved to read. Even Vasílissa, who didn't like school and never wanted to go, liked to read and instead of doing her work in school, she would read her book. Reading is often linked to a greater vocabulary and a greater ability to write. It was as though the participants were increasing their skills unknowingly and informally. Kwin remembers, *"I spent a lot of time in the library reading magazines and looking at the pictures…I took a lot of time to strategize."* She referred to how she and her husband (with another child on the way) were trying to create a life for themselves. As Malkia endured abuse at the hands of her foster mom, books were her solace. The foster-mom would take her books away as punishment, but her teachers would send her home with more. Empress would use reading in a similar was as Malkia and Kwin. It proved to be her get away when she couldn't leave from her grandmother's home. Finally, Ayaba utilized books as her secret place as well. She recalls that there were always children in the house; it was a day care by day. She used books to get away and relax at the end of the day.

Expanding the horizons. The study found that for many, college was not familiar or even perceived as attainable. For others, the trauma they experienced was a constant reminder of the need to do something to avoid being like those they were around. The expanding of horizons included reading books and magazines. It also included watching an African American family on television, specifically The Cosby Show. The portrayal of the Huxtables was motivation enough for Kwin to strategize how to exit public assistance

because Claire (the lead female on the show) made her own money. In addition to the modeling provided by the television show, she shared how education exposed her to things she wouldn't otherwise ever know about. She shares, "*I wouldn't know about museums and photography…even French. When they ask you to take a foreign language, I didn't go to France. I have a desire to go now.*" It appears that receiving some education ultimately prompted the young women to receive even more education.

Malkia took a road trip up and down the state of California before settling on the college of her choice. It was encouraging for her in that she could be on her own and away from the world of the foster system. She recalls, *"Wow, life outside of this city. Dang! It's huge…then when I came back from the college road trip I got super excited…how am I going to do that?"* That trip, she credits as her motivation to turn her grades around and get ready for college. For Empress, getting a chance to tour a southern California "Freshman for a Day" program was all the impetus she needed to make college her goal. Kuini's counselor recommended her to a scholarship program. She says it exposed her to different parts of town and different professions as well opportunities for scholarships. She too was encouraged to attend college after touring a university she was interested in. These women's lives were forever touched by the experiences and their ability to get out of their known space into somewhere new, if only for a day.

Break the cycle. The idea of "breaking the cycle", referring to early parenting, or foster care and even living in poverty resonated with four of the nine young women. Kwin was told, to break the cycle by her teacher in the school for teen parents. Larenn felt she wanted to break the cycle of teen parenting that existed in the families for three generations, along with Reina and Larenn. Larenn states emphatically, *"that's my*

ultimate goal, to have her break the cycle… you know my mom had me at 18, my mom's mom had her at 18 and I had her at 18." Larenn also spoke of breaking the cycle of difficult relationships with her mother. Today, in contrast to her relationship with her own mother, Larenn is very involved in her own child's life. Malkia felt like she and her brother would be the last she knew to be in foster care and Empress as well. She felt that she would stop the cycle of having children and not raising them and she believes she has.

Motivated to finish. The study found that motivation worked in two ways to propel these women along the path to college: motivation from those who were encouraging of the lived experiences of the participants and motivation from those that said it couldn't be done, meaning to graduate from high school and college

Kuini says she pushed and finished college for her mom because her mom always said, "you are going to graduate with a degree and a child." In addition, she states that she also wanted to prove to the principal that she could go to college because the principal and her father told her she would not finish school. Vasílissa thought she would only finish high school to go to the military. However, learning she was pregnant the evening before she was to depart for military duty, she felt redirected to enter community college instead. She was motivated by the child she was going to have. However, after many years, her mother was the catalyst to her finally completing her degree even after her financial aid had been maxed out and she could not borrow further funds.

Empress was the family member that everyone expected to go to college and finish. Her family ensured that no one and nothing got in her way. Empress recalls her cousins and her sisters telling her when things happened at school, they would remind her

"You're going places. I'm going to take care of that [referring to other negativity]." This meant that although there was trouble around in her school and neighborhoods, because people knew she was going to go further, they protected her. She recalls that family and friends motivated her and that even though they were not doing so well or making good decisions, she was encouraged to. Kwin was motivated by the friend's mother who offered she and her daughter a place to live while she worked to complete her diploma. However, the birth of her next children and their enrollment in the community college (son) and university (daughter) were the push she needed to finish the Associate's degree 30 yeas later. She did so with excellence and an opportunity to transfer to the university as well.

For some, motivation comes in unexpected places. In Reina's case, she talks about her uncle being a motivator for her. He was incarcerated for fourteen years, but when he returned he encouraged her and thanked her for caring for his sick mother while he was gone. In addition, he encouraged her to finish school and do something more. She remembers him telling her, *"You are a good person, and a good mom…you need to finish school…you don't need to go and steal."* She had resorted to stealing because she and her sister did not have enough to live on. She says that was the motivation she needed to continue her pursuit for a better way of living and she has yet to look back.

Personal Persistence and Success

The codes that led to this theme, Personal Persistence and Success, included: wanting to be an educated African American woman, wanting to have a sense of accomplishment, and believing in the idea that education, unlike other things in their lives, could not be taken away. The feeling of being proud along with having options for

job opportunities, careers, and houses was also a common idea. In addition, the desire to want to make a difference in the African American community drove many of them. The final codes that help us to understand the experiences of African American young women is the idea of giving back to other young women recommendations which helped them to succeed. These included a reminder to always ask questions and seek out resources to assist. The final word of advice from the young women for persistence and success was to find a mentor. This was described as someone who can assist, motivate and serve as a guide through the road of successful endeavors for higher education.

Personal Persistence & Success	Educated African American woman	Accom-plishment	Education is forever	Feeling proud	Opportunity for jobs and careers	Making a difference in the community	Experience as teacher

Desire to be an educated African American woman. Six of the nine women spoke specifically of their desire to be an educated African American woman. Their reasons ranged from feelings of pride and respect that one gets when they are educated and also a sense of belonging. Vasílissa says it this way, *"In general, I feel like people with education are looked at a higher degree…I look at her with more respect, you know like, you did that girl!"* Empress speaks of being a licensed social worker because she knows there not many and they hold positions of powers. She states, *"I would go to all of these African American social work events, but none of them were licensed. I don't meet any that look like me."* She feels this is problematic because African Americans are in need of social work services and often time prefer to receive them from African American therapist. Other women spoke of being role models in their own families, for

their children and for their communities. Finally, the women spoke of having to be educated because they were in spaces where they would always be challenged if they were not. For example, as teen mothers, they felt that others treated them with less respect or confidence in their abilities. They shared that a degree strengthens their level of confidence as an African American woman.

Accomplishment. Six of the nine women spoke of the feeling of accomplishment when they finished their degree. They also spoke of the need to finish what they started. For many, the time between their starting and their finishing the degree may have spanned 10 years or more. In this vein, many shared that they had to finish, if not for themselves, for the people who pushed them including teachers, parents, grandparents and their children. Kuini recalls, *"Well it's a great accomplishment for me. I'm very proud of myself because it wasn't easy by far."* This is a sentiment that was held by all of the participants. Ayaba says it this way, *"Starting something I wanted to finish. I was just spending so much time doing it…yeah that was my goal, you know to not waste time."* She and two other women spoke about the importance of not worrying how long it will take; they said to persist anyway.

Education is forever. Of the participants, five alluded to the permanency of education and the impact it has on their lives as well as their families. For young women who have experienced foster care, homelessness and other traumatic events, the ability to have something that cannot be taken is important, the women revealed. Larenn was speaking of sharing the importance of having education with her daughter. She said *"a person that has degrees…that's the thing at the end of the day that can never be taken from you, versus you have a car, [it can] get taken.*

Empress shared her relationship with education as a legacy for her children. She put it this way, *"I was filling out an application…and I checked Master's degree. Wow. My kids are not gonna' be first generation…that meant something to me."* Finally, Kwin spoke of education as that one thing she could do for herself that no one could take away. She stated, *"Feeling like maybe just knowing that it will be something that I could do that wouldn't be taken away…proving that all those years of struggle…I felt like I amounted to something."* Others spoke of the legacy of leaving their children with the degree that they might surpass, as almost an expectation for the next generation.

Feeling proud. The idea that these women are proud is an understatement. They were proud of themselves, of their families for making sacrifices with them, and of their children who have supported their journeys. Reina said about graduating, *"I had to make somebody proud…I wanted to do better… be able to be proud because I feel like so many people…didn't think I was going to be anything."* She used her pride to both prove to others and to herself that she could finish and graduate. For Malkia, who separated herself from the foster system on purpose, graduating would mean she defied all stereotypes and statistics, which was her goal. She admits she feels, *"a little bit proud of my accomplishments because I did make it as far as I did… it's okay to say that you did it on your own."* Although the women were proud, I must say they were humble as well. They were honest about their struggles and their strengths and that led them to a space of pride for all they have done.

Opportunities for jobs and careers. Seven of the nine participants mentioned greater opportunities for jobs and autonomy by earning a degree. Others specifically mentioned independence that is associated with one who can take care of her household.

Although Kuini admits that she thought by earning a degree she would make great sums of money upon graduation; she has honestly given up that dream. However, she also admits her degree is that one thing that separates her from the rest of the applicants for positions at her job/career.

Regina says regarding what the degree means for her, *"it's hard work, it's a process. It'll add to you getting better job opportunities, career opportunities, people."* Reina and Kwin told of how their 'price' for salary had increased commensurate with their level of education. Vasílissa says that although she is not the breadwinner right now, she has confidence in knowing that with her degree she could take care of her and her children in her husband's absence. Finally, Ayaba reflects on what makes her life different from those of her family, now that she has a degree. She says it this way, *"a degree from school gives me options…today it might look a certain way… even though it might look like issues…it gives me better choices maybe than what I have."* She continues by sharing about the options her children have, options in job choice and even options in where she lives.

Making a difference in the community. Five of the nine participants specifically mentioned building companies, facilities, and services specifically for the communities in which they live or were raised. In addition, their choices for service were heavily depended on experiences in their families or community. Reina spoke of her choice to major in Behavior Sciences, *"I'll be able to help somebody that may have been going through something very similar that I have went through… that's most important to me, to share my story."* Malkia speaks of her discovery of the passion she will pursue as one where she, *"found her niche… I was like…I can't stop this, I'm good with children."* Her

passion for children comes from her childhood experience and her desire to ensure that children are listened to, unlike what transpired for her.

In addition, Ayaba mentions that she wans to start a non-profit program that pays attention to the community it serves. She shares her experience and is hyper-aware of the need for her community to realize that trauma affects people in different ways and that just showing up to work can be difficult if the people at work don't understand what one is going through. She states, *"I dream that I could bring non-profits…those more trauma informed jobs so that people working, maybe three hours a week, because maybe they can't take it for whatever reason."* She wants to recognize and honor that need by providing opportunities for those who are dealing with issues. Vasílissa speaks of her desire to start an organization in her neighborhood that handles family reunification because she feels like in her community brokenness occurs and there are few advocates for the families themselves. Larenn shares her desire to be a Child Protective social worker because of the experiences her family members have had. She endeavors to be more attentive and vigilant in securing stable and healthy homes for children in her community. This goal of helping others seemed to push the women out of their space of self into the broader space of us.

| *Experience as teacher* | *Mentors* | *Ask questions* | *Seek direction* | *Stay focused on the goal* |

Experience as teacher. The final code is consistent with the West African tradition of Sankofa. The bird literally means, "return and get it." It is a symbol of importance of learning from the past" (MacDonald, 2007). Each of the young women had sound information they wanted to pass on to the next generation of women who have

experienced trauma. This information motivated them to want to pursue a post secondary degree. The women discussed the importance of mentorship, the ability to ask questions and the importance of seeking direction to help stay focused on the goal at hand.

Mentors. Four of the nine women mentioned having a mentor as being necessary for future success. Two of the participants saved valuable time and money gleaning information from their mentor about pursing licensure in the field rather than more education. This was highly beneficial information possible only shared through the avenue of mentor/mentee. Regina, when asked what else she would share to encourage other women, she began to discuss the need for mentoring as well. She stated, *"Mentoring, Mentoring, Mentoring young black women. In my eyes…Black women are strong and sometimes they don't see it so I think mentoring is a big thing."* Finally Empress recalls the importance of the mentors she had, as she had no college-educated role models. She says, *"Having a mentor is so important. I know we get nervous and sometime we don't know how to approach people…you could have someone within your family or someone outside."* She goes on to say how important mentors are in various areas of your life and states she has several. Empress goes on to say that she believes that mentors are important persons to assist in achieving your life's goals, and as she revealed in her quote, they can be found in a number of places (school, work, home, family).

Ask questions. Every woman said this same phrase, some more emphatically than others, "ask questions". Regina shared a common phrase in the African American community when speaking of asking questions for assistance, "A closed mouth don't get fed." Meaning, you cannot possible get what you need if you do not ask for it. Vasílissa goes even further and recounts all of the resources that were available to her as a

parenting teen, including financial aid, childcare assistance, money for books, etc. because she asked. In addition she states, *"Don't ask just one person…they'll tell you one story. You'll call the same exact office and somebody else they'll tell you a different story…ask two or three people."* She says they will not hunt you down, but they are waiting to give you what you need.

Reina says to just ask for help; recognize if there is a problem and go get the assistance you need to be successful. She says you cannot be scared or shy, ask for what you want or need in tutoring, financial aid, or anything. Kwin recalls the program she completed which offered both 8-week and 16-week courses. She says this is how she was able to complete the college transfer program in 18 stressful months. In addition, she says the 8-week courses may not be for everyone, but ask questions and see if they may.

Seek direction. The idea of being the first person in the family to attend college is both exciting and frightening because often times the individual does not know how to maneuver a college system. Each of the participants also suggested that one should enlist the assistance of a counselor or advisor. While it is true that some successfully made it on their own, they also recognize that seeking assistance would have avoided pitfalls. Vasílissa shares that even though her mother was her motivation and directed her to the college, there were many things she did not know. Reina says she did it on her own and by the time she went to see her counselor, she had enough units for two associate degrees. She says her counselor told her, *"I could be a counselor and if I was looking to work with all girls, I could still use my Women's Studies."* Had she not sought out the counselor, she may still be taking courses rather than graduated.

Stay focused on the goal. Staying focused is always much easier said than done, however, it is possible, according to Larenn who says when giving advice to the next generation of girls, *"stay focused…on what's ahead of them or what they want…not to fall too short of faith in yourself."* She recalls that she should have even let her abuela's (grandmother's) passing inspire her to go forward rather than getting depressed and stopping. Another example of how to stay focused is to not allow anything to get in your way. Malkia shares the time where she needed a particular math course to be offered in the summer in order for her to stay on course to graduate. She says she and her friend used their "Black Girl Magic". When asked what she meant, she shared this:

> *To me, it's all about just being fearless, and being daring, and not really… not caring about people's opposing opinions…how they're gonna' view you, you know? You do what you feel that you need to do in your heart…And a part of being a black girl is people are little bit on edge about it. When me and my friend, we first went in there in the math department, we were like "Okay, who do we need to speak to"… we're not just black girls in college. We're here to get our degrees, we want to be teachers, how can you help us? And they took us more seriously.* (2nd Interview, page 6).

This example is helpful in that it highlights all the areas of the recommendations made to these women: seek assistance, ask for what you need and stay focused. In addition, this quote and the others that inform this chapter, show signs of the fortitude and tenacity necessary to overcome challenges to get to the goal of a degree.

Concluding Ideas

The study questionnaire as well as the phenomenological interviews helped to gather evidence from the lived experiences of these young women on issues related to the challenges, support, motivation and persistence that assisted these African American women in persisting toward and/or obtaining a baccalaureate degree. Specifically, the women shared their experience amidst the traumatic events they endured. In addition, they shared ways in which their schooling in the grades 9-12 provided support and sometime hindrances as they attempted to reach their educational goals. The study also found the support systems these young women used to navigate the college experiences. Finally, we are able to better understand their reasoning for obtaining their degree and even their ideas about how to help those that follow them in this same pursuit.

In the next chapter, I provide a discussion of the data obtained from these African American college-educated young women. This discussion is provided through the use of the study to answer the research questions. The discussion is an opportunity to think across the themes revealed in the questionnaire and interviews and to consider how the data might inform educators working to support young people in succeeding and persisting academically.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

"I suppose that what I have different from them would be a degree from school that gives you more options…I could give my children better options…expose them to better things that will hopefully give them better options in their lives." Ayaba

The purpose of my study, utilizing a questionnaire and the three phenomenological interview series was to explore how the high school years of African American young women, who suffered trauma, served as support toward baccalaureate attainment. This study was conducted with Critical Race Theory as the lens to 1) center the often marginalized voice of the African American woman who has experienced trauma and 2) to ensure that we as an educational community gather tangible evidence of both the assets these women bring and also those they obtain along the way to achieving their educational goals. As mentioned before, Stepto (1991) posited that the pursuit of education sustained African Americans for generations. This literacy for freedom, I contend, is still being pursued today through the attainment of college degrees and the young women confirmed this in their shared experiences.

The research questions were:

1. What challenges (academic, social and/or personal) do African American young women face in pursuit of their educational goals?

2. How do high schools support or challenge African American young women in attaining their educational goals?

3. How do African American young women, who have experienced trauma, successfully navigate the college experience?

4. In what way does African American culture shape/support the educational success and persistence of African American young women?

First I used a questionnaire to find the women who might be eligible and willing to participate in the phenomenological style three-interview series of the study. I then conducted 27 interviews (9 participants completed the three-interview series). The lived experiences of these nine women answered my research questions and gave insight into how more African American young women, who have experienced traumatic events, can get to and through the baccalaureate degree.

The analysis of interviews discovered the following pattern of these six themes: Inter-Intrapersonal Challenges, School Challenges, Supportive People and Services, School Support, Motivation and Personal Persistence. Chapter 5 extensively covered the themes that emerged with evidence from the voice of the young ladies. This chapter will discuss the findings as they pertain to the research questions.

1. What challenges (academic, social and/or personal) do African American young women face in pursuit of their educational goals?

It is evident from the study that there were a number of challenges these women experienced and three stand out as most pressing. These challenges included: being raised in difficult environments, attending schools that were non-preparatory and experience with a number of traumatic events. These three areas seem to permeate the study as areas that affected the women in the pursuit of a higher level of education.

The findings from the questionnaire and interviews were complimentary in attempting to shine a light on the varied challenges that these women faced. For some, the home proved a great challenge and for others, challenges came from their life

experiences away from home. Of note, these challenges presented themselves in ways much more multifaceted than I imagined as a researcher. For example, the same African American young woman who experienced early parenting, also experienced homelessness and harsh discipline at school. In addition, for some this was the second or third generation in their family to experience this life pattern. What also seemed to be clear is that much of what was perceived to be challenges in high school were actually challenges caused by situations that occurred prior to the secondary years. These included: issues of physical abuse, domestic violence, molestation, parental drug use and neighborhood violence. These problems led the participants in this study to a variety of other problematic situations including foster care, homelessness, etc. The women confirmed there were a number of challenges that African American women face both in society and in school (Crenshaw, et al. 2015, Smith-Evans et al., 2014).

For many of the women, their schools were not culturally consistent with their lives and expectations nor did they sufficiently ready them for college. This provided even more challenge. As the young women were dealing with their living situations, it was clear that the schools were not assisting them. It is counterproductive to attempt to deal with the educational needs without first being more responsive to their social and emotional concerns. If the home is a challenge and the school does not recognize or assist in mitigating against these situations, (in some cases even adding to them) then the school is clearly more hindrance than help. The school is often seen as the "great equalizer," meaning that society has an expectation that education will prepare all youth for their future. For some young women, when these issues were not appropriately handled, many other challenges ensued, including disciplinary issues, early parenting, and issues of low

self-esteem. These multi-layered problems led to behaviors and dispositions that caused the women to act out in a variety of areas, threatening their own success.

Finally, these young women were expected to handle a great deal of trauma without consistent support to deal with their social and emotional issues. For some of these young women, there was an undue expectation that they would act as adults long before they had reached this age or maturity. The traumatic events shared by interviewees fell into two categories: emotional and physical, although in many cases there was a mixture of both. As these women faced these challenges, they expressed a need for both psychological and material help, which they rarely received.

From this study, it is not clear what circumstances are and are not challenges in the lives of the young women. In some ways, what was a challenge to one person propelled another to greater heights. In most cases, traumatic events like early parenting were just the impetus some women needed to return to school after dropping out. For others who were facing expulsion, the alternative school provided the small environment that gave them the attention they needed to finish high school and persist through college. Finally, although the foster care system is not an ideal place for any child some of these women found support and monetary assistance, as participants in the system, which allowed them to successfully pursue and complete college.

2. How do high schools support or challenge African American young women in attaining their educational goals?

The data reveal a complicated relationship between the high school and these African American young women. These women experienced trauma and needed support from both outside and inside of the school walls. Though the participants shared many

experiences of support, very few were through the high school itself. Many of the supports and arguably the challenges that they recalled were those that began long before high school and continued through the high school years into college, (i.e. kinship care and housing opportunities.) However, interviewees did mention times when the school was a catalyst to social service and financial aid programs previously mentioned.

Both the survey and the interviews also revealed the importance of school personnel as major catalysts to the success of this population of African American women. What the interviews were able to reveal in much more detail were the specific ways that success was achieved and what we as educators can continue to do. The African American young women spoke of tangible issues that could work to improve the rates of entrance into college and degrees conferred. The suggestions from the women were likened to Gay's (2002), where she highlights explicit strategies of Culturally Responsive Teaching: know the students' diverse communities, seek diverse curriculum content that is culturally appropriate, create a positive atmosphere through care and community building, communicate effectively with diverse students and deliver instruction in a manner that is diverse and appropriate for the students being served.

The African American young women also included suggestions of how educators could be supportive of their persistence to and through college such as: being affirming and encouraging to all students as well as attempting to address the whole child by finding out what is happening that may cause changes in their behavior or academics. It is obvious that children trust the words of educators and in the instances where they were supportive, they had positive affects for each of these African American young ladies.

3. How do African American young women, who have experienced trauma, successfully navigate the college experience?

Navigating the college experience entails both getting to college and succeeding once there. Getting to college, for many of the young women was assisted by the expansion of their surroundings, meaning they were introduced to opportunities that caused them to think about their life's goals differently. Field trips, college tours and the ability to get outside of their neighborhood stimulated a vision for new possibilities. Both the survey and the interviews revealed persons and programs that assisted in this effort. The interviews captured the nuance of how navigation through college was able to happen in a more detailed manner in a number of creative ways. These included: the use of academic counselors, tutors, and financial aid as well as supportive scholarships that included mentors to monitor successful matriculation.

These women were able to succeed in college because they were motivated by a desire to succeed, both for themselves, for their families and even for some, their communities. Ultimately, these women needed resources and assistance to navigate the multitude of programs available to them. No one felt there was a lack of programming, however, they also acknowledged that people would not come to them to give them services; they realized they had to develop a sense of advocacy and seek out the resources. The young women were adamant about the need to ask questions and truly thought that others wanted to assist them. For example, they stated on several occasions *"everyone wanted them to succeed."* They also spoke of the need to ask about tutoring, especially if they recognized the need to polish some of their academic and study skills. Others mentioned that they developed the skill of telling people who they were and what

their challenges were. They were bold and asked support providers what their programs had to offer them.

The responsibility of being proactive, having a good attitude, and seeking out resources was in their hands. However, these dispositional attributes alone were not sufficient. These young women needed the support and resources that came through targeted government and school-based programs. Much of the support for these young women was through governmental provisions and they needed to know those policies and procedures because they proved life changing for many. For foster youth, there were Chaffee Grants that paid for all college tuition, the Transitional Housing Program, and the Guardian Scholars which paid for tuition, books and mentors to monitor progress. For teen mothers who attended college (university, community or vocational) there was financial aid in the form of Board of Governor Grants (BOG) that paid for tuition as well as Pell and Cal Grants (for those with a Grade Point Average over 2.0). In addition these students had access to work-study (participants work at the college as a part of their financial aid) and also student loans. Finally, many of the women accessed community-based scholarships.

Learning of the youth emancipation process proved critical to many of these young ladies as well. As Kuini and Regina shared, being emancipated from their parents afforded them access to all of the government assistance, without placing the liability on their parents. Some sought and received emancipation because their parents were not caring for them. Others sought emancipation to avoid burdening their parents to reimburse the state for the welfare payments the young woman received. For whichever

reason they sought emancipation, it proved helpful for the financial status of the young women and allowed them the freedom to pursue their educational goals.

Finally, the young women all stated that asking questions and pursuing answers was the number one thing they did. They were confident that advisors and counselors would help them get to their goal; they were also adamant that if they wanted it, they would have to go after it. It is important to take these things into account in an effort to ensure we are able to meet their needs by providing accurate and up-to-date information on the tools they need for graduation. This population was not lazy, nor did they give in easily. It was necessary to remain humble and await direction as necessary and that appears to be what was done.

4. In what way does African American culture shape/support the educational success and persistence of African American young women?

It is clear that African American culture shaped the success of these women. As mentioned before, the notion of "freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship and leadership" (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003 p. 6) was one that has been utilized by African Americans since the days of Reconstruction and before. Learning to read, and in this context, extending the learning to a college degree was a way of providing the freedom these women need to be become financially independent, educationally uplifted, and to give back to their communities. Each of the women shared their reasoning for wanting to pursue a degree as a means to assist their families and ultimately their community. They were honest about the fact that a degree does not necessarily equal riches right now; for many of them, they had not seen the fruit of their

labor yet. However, they each spoke of the future as brighter and more stable and more encouraging than their past.

African American cultural practices proved to be protective for the young women. For example, fictive kinship enlarged the village needed to care for many of these young women and assisted in filling the gaps left by absent parents and voids resulting from traumatic experiences. As well, African American spirituality and the Black Church shaped the success of these young women. Likewise, it is important to note that each of them mentioned the pride of being an educated Black/African American woman. The notion of being an "educated Black woman" and looking to African American role models (Black teachers and Claire Huxtable of the Cosby Show for example) were clearly a part of their success story.

For the young women who were parents, this degree was also a way to be a role model for their children. Some mentioned modeling a standard of education for their children to meet or surpass. In addition, their love for community as evidenced by their desire to stay in and/or return to their community to make it better, through things like family reunification was overflowing.

Finally, along with the pride, these young women oftentimes carried the weight of African American womanhood and its responsibilities. They cared for grandparents and siblings, cooked, changed diapers and took leadership roles running their households. It is clear, that as with young Latina and Asian American women, and many young women overall, there are cultural implications for being female. It appeared from the study, that empathy is rarely extended to African American girls who, like their Asian and Latina counterparts, bear great family responsibilities. This should be taken into account when

helping African American young women navigate adolescence. On the one hand, it seems like added responsibilities forced the young women to be more directed and perhaps more successful—unlike their African American male peers, who are often time not expected to carry those same roles and responsibilities. On the other hand, these are added stressors that African American young women have to deal with, and we must recognize this dichotomy as educators as well. The heritage left by African Americans is a strong one which values education, and educators must realize and honor this.

Implications

The African American young women in this study have given us, as educators, great strategies and difficult reminders of the job we have before us to educate all children. There are significant takeaways from this study. Schools in our society must deal with the impact that historical racism, and societal challenges have imposed on the lives of the students we serve. A multitude of issues arise in the lives of all students that educators must be aware of. This study has allowed us a closer look at the issues that have traumatized the African American women in this study- making clear the challenges they face and the supports that they need. However, this means that schools must invest more time and effort into confronting issues outside of curriculum, instruction and assessment. We must also commit to acknowledging the impactful role that educators can have in the experiences of young African American young women and others that we serve.

Because this population of African American girls has such significant experience with trauma, we need to pay particular attention to the stories that these 24 young women have told. They have given a name and a voice to the situations that they faced. Schools

must anticipate that students will face traumas, and then prepare themselves to address the needs of these students. This would require the school personnel to invest in professional development and build a culture of care and concern for students in difficult situations. Discipline has to be seen as a teaching tool to build and develop our students rather than one that punishes them. Punishment rarely leads to growth or change.

What these findings also confirmed for me is the importance of talking with young people and asking them what support they need. We cannot simply make judgments about lived experiences that would seem overwhelming to us. Living with their challenges is all some of them know and they navigate their issues quite well. In fairness, I would say that I don't believe any child should have to endure the traumatic experiences that were revealed in this study. I am also realistic enough to know that everyone has something to endure; the question is how to find the assistance needed when these types of issues arise so that success can be achieved. The school must become a place where students can access 'wrap-around'[4] services in order to continue to prepare young women for the world we encourage them to navigate.

These findings have also confirmed a need to share this information with educators, policy makers and community leaders. The hope is to share the voices of these young women to those who can make a difference in the lives of others who have experienced similar traumatic events. This information could be shared through professional development for teachers and administrators as well as conferences. It can also be shared with churches and other faith-based and/or community organizations that

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[4] "Wraparound services help schools address social and non-academic barriers to student learning. Examples of wraparound services are broad and include: health, dental, and vision care; mental health services; behavioral health, nutrition, and wellness; parent and family targeted services…"(Jones, 2014).

assist youth in college preparatory services. The information would be helpful for community college and university outreach as well as the National Pan-Hellenic Council that is committed to community service dedicated to under-served African American youth. Finally, it could be disseminated in peer-reviewed journals.

Future Research

It was extremely difficult to locate members of the population to participate in this study. Very few people who have survived this level of trauma succeed in the ways of these participants. Furthermore, even for those individuals who have overcome such challenges, they may be reticent to come forward and speak about their lives. However, doing the work to uncover these stories is crucial to our success with this student population. The insights that these young women have shared will benefit both themselves and many students and educators to come.

Future research could include young women from other parts of the country which could increase the number of participants and provide a wider variety of perspectives. Additional participants may even generate other ideas and help provide more insights about why and how greater African American women who have suffered trauma are still able to achieve educational success.

Another area for future research could include more analysis with the issues of race and skin complexion. As with most qualitative research, there is often more information gathered than could be analyzed in this study. Research points to the salient issues that affect women of varied complexion and skin tones of all races. It is possible that the design of this study and its purpose may not have brought these issues to the forefront; however, it is a definite area for future study. To this end, the relationship

between skin tone and the type and/or number of traumatic events could be an area for future study as well.

The lessons this population could share with us, as educated adults, would be beneficial for a greater number of African American women and potentially offer other youth of color motivation to achieve baccalaureate success amidst trauma.

Conclusion

This study was conducted with the goal of bringing to light the voices of a marginalized population. These are African American young women, who despite their trauma are quite successful in their pursuit of baccalaureate degrees. Some of the lessons learned are in making more clear their challenges, the support they receive or do not receive, their motivation and their ability to persist in society and in our schools. Three areas mattered in the preparation of these African Americans young women who have, pursued baccalaureate success, in the midst of handling trauma: material, academic and culture support. I found that these African American young women have all the drive and grit they need. The issues they faced were in matters outside of themselves.

The types of support that really mattered in their lives were the material resources they had access to, the academic preparation they were afforded and the culture practices that were able to provide a sense of protection and encouragement. Material support they received were those tangible items the young women spoke of, i.e. housing, AFDC, financial aid, transportation assistance, etc. Without the material support, these young women felt it would have been difficult to persist in attaining their academic goals. The second area of support was academic preparation. These include the educational expectations and preparedness of the school systems i.e. college preparatory curriculums,

test preparedness, awareness of dates and deadlines for college admission, etc. While we must teach them to advocate for themselves (as many of these young women did), we as educators must also continue to be advocates for our students. If the young women were able to access the material support, but came to college without the proper preparation, then it proved an arduous task to actually persist through college. In the midst of our dealing with the challenges of these and other young people, we must still hold high expectations for their learning. We must also ensure that with those assets, they will have the proper academic tools to achieve their academic goals.

Finally, culture matters greatly. Young women spoke of being part of an African American culture that is affirming and encouraging of education. These legacies of the African American culture motivated them to succeed. In addition, school cultures matter as well. Those school cultures that provided assistance, counseling, and extra curricular activities were seen as cultures of support. In addition, each woman expressed pride in being African American and for some Hispanic as well. Their identity appeared to be a very strong motivator in helping to form their decisions for the life they each led.

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APPENDIX A

Qualtrics© Questionnaire

Purpose and Consent

I. Purpose of the research study

Research Participant Consent Form
You are invited to participate in a questionnaire for a research study being conducted by Leilah Kirkendoll, a doctoral candidate at the University of San Diego. The purpose of this study is to 1) better understand what, academic and social supports help toward successful transition to and persistence through college 2) gain an opportunity to understand possible areas that could be more helpful in assisting African American young women succeed in college.

II. What you will be asked to do

Complete the questionnaire that takes about 5-10 minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life.

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this questionnaire, it will assist the researcher in better identifying African American women who have had diverse experiences as it relates to their college entrance educational experiences and opportunities.

V. Confidentiality

Your name and information will not be identifiable unless you reveal it in the survey.

VI. Compensation

You will not receive compensation for this questionnaire.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research   Participation in this questionnaire is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can **refuse to answer any question or quit at any time without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information   If you have any questions about this research, you may contact: Leilah Kirkendoll, PhD Candidate
Email: leilahk@sandiego.edu   **Phone**: 619-630-8119
Joi A. Spencer, PhD   Email: joi.spencer@sandiego.edu **Phone:** 619-260-7819

I have read and understand this form. If I prefer, I will print a copy for my records.

Yes, I consent to participate in this research questionnaire.

I do not consent to participate in this research questionnaire.

Educational Background

In which state did you attend college?

What year did you enter college?

If you are currently attending college, what is your current standing (e.g. Freshman, Sophomore, Junior or Senior?

In what year did you/or do you expect to complete your degree?

Educational High School Challenges

Yes   No

Were you a pregnant/parenting teen?

Were you in foster care?

Were you disciplined "pushed out"?

Did someone close to you pass away?

Was a parent incarcerated?

Were you incarcerated?

Were you exposed to domestic violence?

Did you experience any sexual trauma (rape, incest, molestation)?

Educational Support and Success

What support during your high school years did you receive that helped you to attend and succeed in college?

To what do you attribute your success thus far?

Demographic Information

In which city and state were you raised?

What is your age (years)?

How would you describe your skin complexion? Please click on the rectangle that best describes your skin tone.

Research Study Participation

Would you be willing to participate in a 3-part interview series to delve further into the many reasons for your success in high school and college?

Yes   No

Please provide your contact information:

Name (first and last) Email address Phone Number

Please click on the right arrow to submit your responses.

APPENDIX B

Phenomenological Interview Protocol

Interview #1 - Focused Life History ~ Context/Background

A. Please describe your educational experience up to now. Include your most early memories and please include all of the education up to the present. Try to be as detailed as possible.

    a. Looking for life experiences up and through high school.

    b. Looking for challenges faced in high school.

B. Please share about any challenges you faced during your high school or earlier years?

C. Please share about your successes during your high school years or earlier?

    Looking especially for entrance to college experiences & challenges to their goal

Interview #2 - Detailed Life Experiences in College Transition/Degree Attainment

A. Please describe in detail, your experience of persisting toward graduation and college

    a. Looking for specifics of who/what assisted them most in this effort

    b. Looking for challenges and specifics to overcome them

B. Please describe in detail, your college experience. If you have your AA or BA, please share your ideas about what helped you to persist through college.

    a. Looking for specifics of who/what assisted them most in this effort

    b. Looking for challenges and specifics to overcome them

Interview #3 - Reflection on what it means to have attained/be attaining a degree

A. Given what you have told me about your life and your experiences with education,

what does it mean to you to have achieved this? Looking for purpose in persistence

      a. Looking for the meaning of a degree in their lives, the lives of their families,

          communities, etc.

      b. Looking for issues of freedom and stability

B. How do you believe your degree attainment has/will affect your life?

C. How do you believe you have sustained and persisted and continue to do so? So many

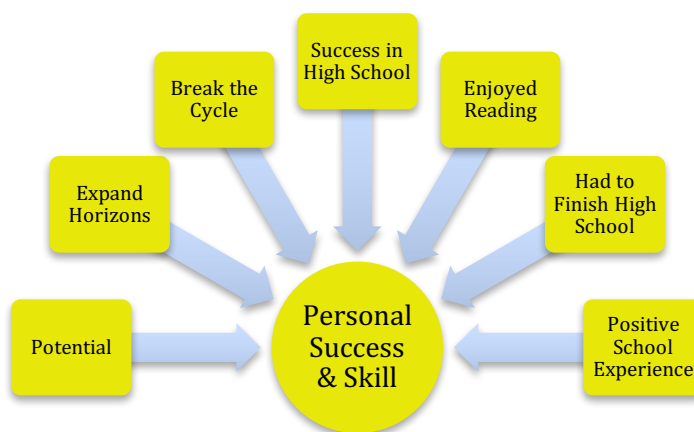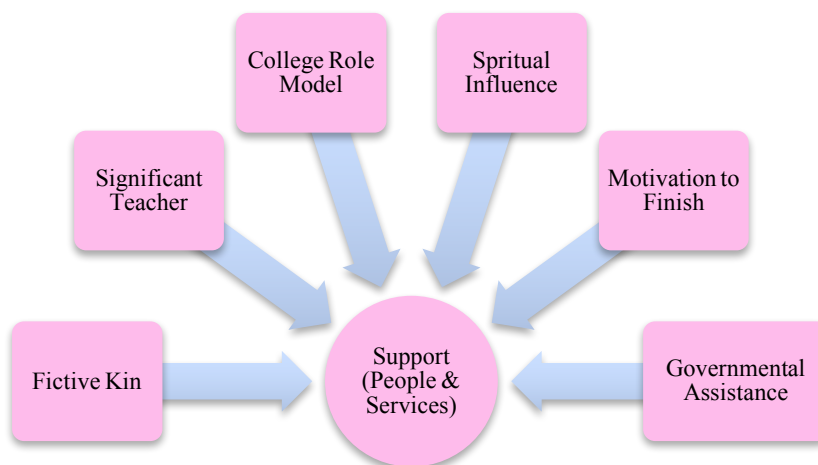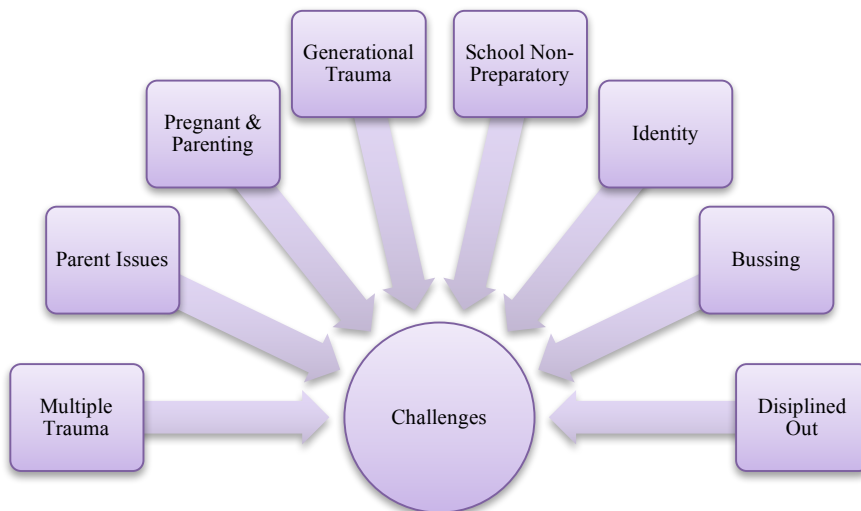people do not persist. Why do you think you were able to persist?

      a. Looking for reference to culture, family support, etc.

      b. Looking for reflections of what it means today to have endured

D. What advice would you give to other young women who are thinking about pursuing

their Bachelor's degree?
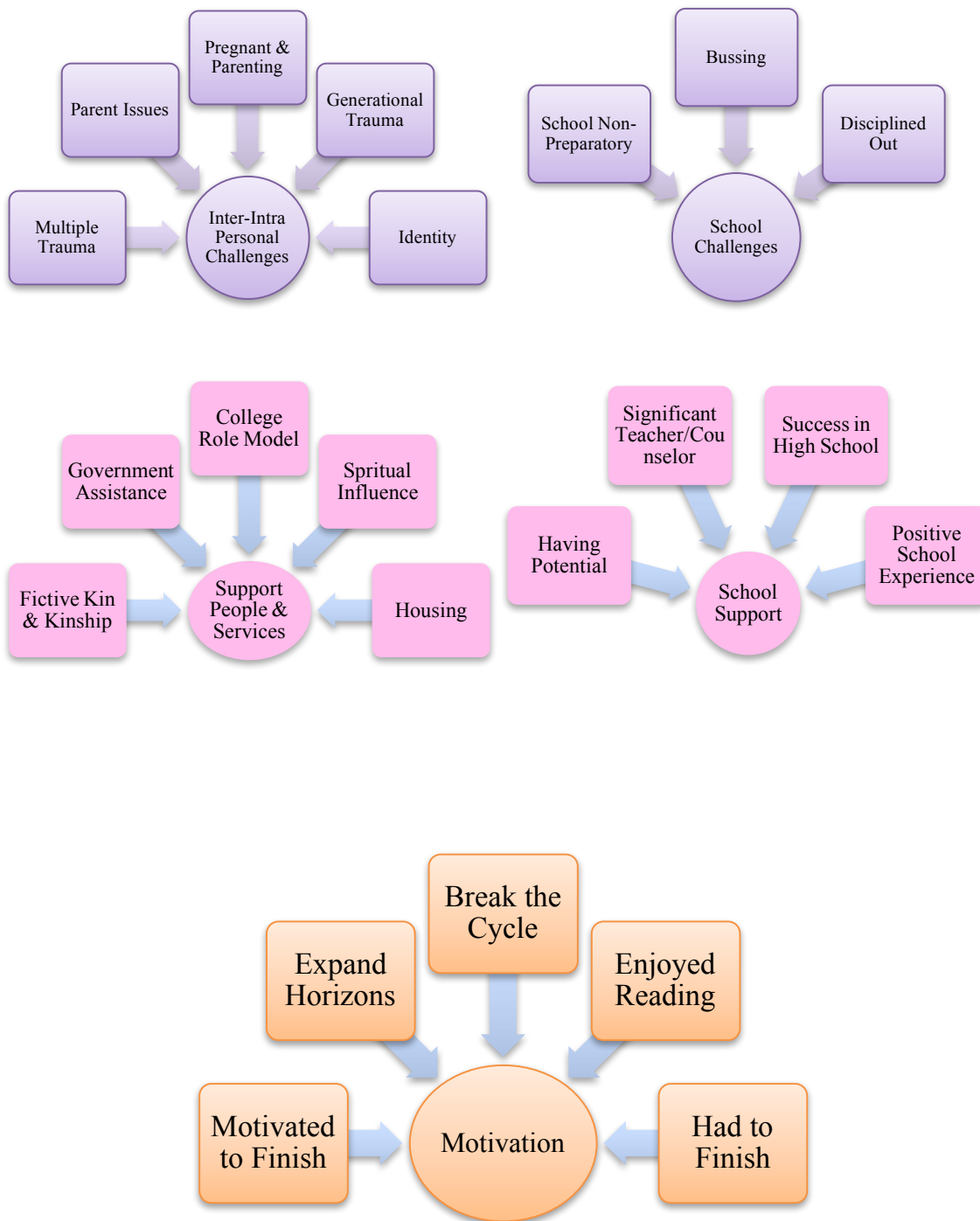
E. If you could go back in time, what would you differently? Why?
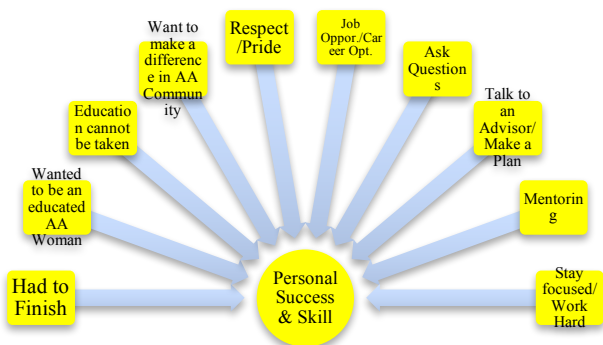
APPENDIX C

Theming Categories First Interviews

Generational Trauma
School Non-Preparatory
Pregnant & Parenting
Identity
Parent Issues
Bussing
Multiple Trauma
Challenges
Disiplined Out

College Role Model
Spritual Influence
Significant Teacher
Motivation to Finish
Fictive Kin
Support (People & Services)
Governmental Assistance

Break the Cycle
Success in High School
Enjoyed Reading
Expand Horizons
Had to Finish High School
Potential
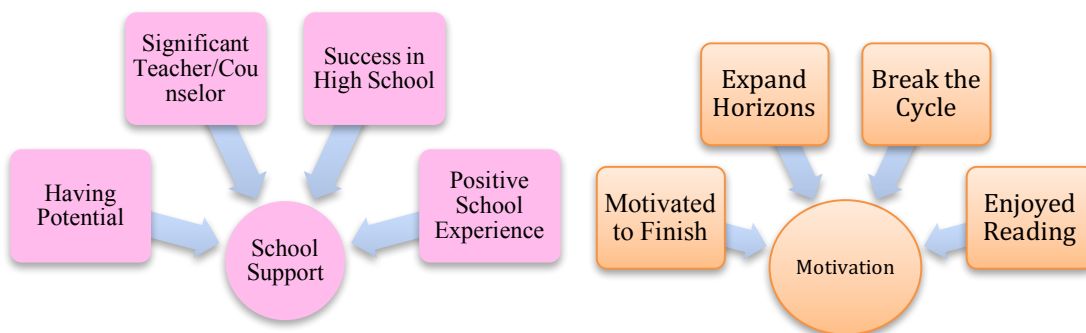Personal Success & Skill
Positive School Experience

Theming Categories -Second Interview

Theming Categories Third Interviews

Inter-Intra Personal Challenges: Multiple Trauma, Identity, Pregnant & Parenting, Generational Trauma

School Challenges: Bussing, Disciplined Out, School Non-Preparatory

Support People & Services: Government Assistance, College Role Model, Spritual Influence, Fictive Kin & Kinship Care, Housing

School Support: Significant Teacher/Counselor, Success in High School, Having Potential, Positive School Experience

Motivation: Expand Horizons, Break the Cycle, Motivated to Finish, Enjoyed Reading

Personal Success & Skill: Want to make a difference in AA Community, Respect/Pride, Job Oppor./Career Opt., Ask Questions, Talk to an Advisor/Make a Plan, Education cannot be taken, Wanted to be an educated AA Woman, Had to Finish, Mentoring, Stay focused/Work Hard
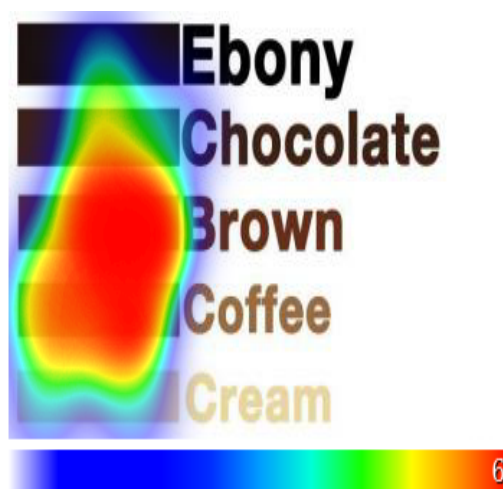
APPENDIX D

Heat Map for Complexion and Coordinates

Q22 - How would you describe your skin complexion? Please click on the rectangle that best describes your skin tone.

X	Y
52	140
96	103
66	100
37	105
77	93
106	105
27	137
81	180
23	182
95	108
84	103
57	60
41	148
72	59
22	142
69	97
80	143
77	143
119	59
62	90
86	143
83	103
67	101

Institutional Review Board
Project Action Summary

Action Date: February 28, 2017   *Note: Approval expires one year after this date.*

Type: __New Full Review   _X__New_ Expedited Review ___Continuation Review ___New Exempt Review
   ___Modification

Action: _X__Approved_   ___Approved Pending Modification   ___Not Approved

Project Number: 2017-02-150
Researcher(s): Leilah Kirkendoll, M.A. Doc SOLES
                 Dr. Joi Spencer Fac SOLES
Project Title: African American Women Baccalaureate Success: A Reflective Look at Pre-Collegiate Years Influencing Transition, Persistence and Degree Attainment

> *Note: We send IRB correspondence regarding student research to the faculty advisor, who bears the ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the research. We request that the faculty advisor share this correspondence with the student researcher.*

Modifications Required or Reasons for Non-Approval

None

The next deadline for submitting project proposals to the Provost's Office for full review is N/A. You may submit a project proposal for expedited review at any time.

_____
Dr. Thomas R. Herrinton
Administrator, Institutional Review Board
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