Introduction

According to an article in the Huffington Post, 40% of students expelled from U.S schools each year are black. Black students are twice as likely to not graduate high school as their white classmates. The national center for education statistics reports that in North Carolina alone 6,553 black students dropped out of high school in their 9th grade year and a significantly greater amount did not continue on to a post-secondary education.

The things that are portrayed through these statics are part of the everyday lives of many African American youth, but why is it that statistics like these have become the norm? What is it that perpetuates these events in black society? My suggestion is by taking a holistic approach in understanding the black identity, that much of this can be addressed. Through my research and gathered data I hope to illuminate the racial identity development of African American youth as I have observed in African American middle school students. My approach is to search for, not only the meanings of blackness within the black community, but how being black is interpreted by the rest of society at such an impressionable age. The combination of both internal blackness and how others perceive blackness plays an imperative role on how African American students, view themselves, their education, and the outlook of their future in a predominantly white society. These dynamics become evident through my research of various middle schools across Durham, North Carolina. By way in introduction, the following are four windows into each stage of developing a black identity in 21st century North Carolina.

> Amber once told me she was not allowed to play with
> white dolls growing up and her mother only ever bought
> her black dolls. Hearing this for the first time, it seamed
> like an out of place experience considering that most of
> the doll/action figure market is filled with white raced

dolls. "I was only allowed to play with Black dolls. I
guess 'cause they looked like me".

Further into the discussion she openly described her mother's constant reinforcement of

a black Santa Claus and Black Jesus in their home. Even though this was quite different from

what she may have seen on TV and in her friends' homes, this was the beginning of her

socialization process. Amber is learning about the importance of the blackness and strategies she

will need as her mother emerges her in black culture and a positive black image.

When asked what the difference between white people and black
people were Acasia had this to say, "Black people are kind of
ghetto and white people are rich".

As far as her experiences extend in the subject matter, this statement was not false.

Socioeconomic disadvantages in the African American community are not the only thing Acaja

was referring to. Behind her comment she vaguely addressed her socialized version of what

blackness meant to her. This is to say she recognizes that being black places her at a

disadvantage compared to her white classmates and has internalized, like many adolescents, the

derogative 'ghetto'. How will her beliefs about white and black people affect the way she sees

the rest of the world? Will she work to overcome these historically embedded disparities or will

she be deemed another statistic like so many black youth.

Marcus informed me that in his school most of the black kids hang
out together, and then the white kids hang out together. He
recognized this as a pattern seen throughout the school day. He
saw this, "..in the cafeteria, and like in the hallways and stuff,
sometimes afterschool."

What is it about this racial separation that is almost normal to him? In addition, he describes the consequences of being associated with the black group in school. He talks about the administration fearing that fights were bound to erupt and how talking together in class seems to get them in trouble a lot. At this stage he is beginning to see social difference among his pears and is participating in the formation of an oppositional identity, which is the differentiating himself from the majority white population. Now imagine the consequences of these interpretations by administrators, and what type of affect will this have on Marcus's future education?

It is through similar interactions among peers during the school day that require students to develop coping strategies for social relations, both through what they are taught in the home, as well as the techniques they develop themselves, that help them maintain a type of social authority as a minority group.

> Me: What do you notice about the black people in your school?
> Jaaven: I mean we gotta stick together…we talk the same, and act
> the same and stuff…and nobody is gonna look out for us except us.

Even at 10 years of age Jaaven is able to recognize some of the differences in attitude and perspectives among her classmates. She displays, through this conversation, that she organizes and associates different behaviors with certain races. Though at this stage of development she only calls it sounding 'white' she is actually referring to Standard English as opposed to speaking African American English, or Ebonics. What she means by 'looking out for us' refers to the racially unified group that she associates with having shared similar negative experiences from her peers. For her, this has become a way to further support her black identity.

Unfortunately, what she is not aware of is how this can affect the value of her education, by not conforming to the mainstream 'whiteness' of educational achievement and Standard English. Will her pride in her blackness be seen as disconnecting from a larger system that insists you have to embrace some level of whiteness to be successful?

These students whose stories I have shared are students of mine through a non-profit organization called Student U. This is a college-access organization in Durham that creates a pipeline of services as they enter middle school and through the end of high school. There is both a summer program and afterschool program to ensure that students develop the academic skills and personal well being to succeed in college. It is here that I came to know the story behind the voices that will be presented in my writing. The program is designed to target at risk minority youths and give them a stable place of development where the classroom sizes are not overwhelming, the teachers are relatable college students, and they are not faced with the constant threat of the capital punishment based school system. The experiences I describe are personal and real.

My sample population will include 15 middle school students for various Durham schools. I have interviewed each of these participants with questions relevant to the themes from each of my proposed experiences of black identity development and have interpreted their responses throughout this work. This sample remained small so that each response could be accurately integrated into their black experience. The claims that I make here are generalized ideas and concepts built from their stories.

Social scientists have developed various theories on the development of the black identity. One theory is that of William E. Cross. One of the first of its kind designed in 1971 was

the Nigresecence theory, which is a term, used to describe the process of becoming black (Cross 1972; 3). He proposed this processed occurred over the course of five stages. In the first stage, *pre-encounter,* the black persons point of view is dominated by the majority white population. It is in this stage that blackness is criminalized and whiteness treasured. The *encounter* stage involves a shocking realization that the person is black and does not fit in to the majority population. This is followed by an intense search for things that can further embed them in the black culture. The *Immersion-Emersion* is where a person "just discovered blackness" (Cross 1972; 4). This is when most of the psychological transformation takes place. In this stage blackness and whiteness can be accepted even if there is more of a preference for over the other eliminating the "either- or" choice, of solely embracing whiteness or solely embracing blackness, that was felt in the previous stage (Cross 1972; 5). Next to last is the *internalization* stage where a person may finally feel at peace with the 'old' and 'new' views of the black and white race. As they internalize this acceptance they move into the *internalization-commitment* stage where racial identity has become concrete.

In my study of Black Identity Development I purpose more of a continuum of these parts of development as they are all in constant interaction with each other, as the child moves through various social settings.

Another identity theory is that of Thomas and Thomas, which starts with "negromachy", a mental illness with features of lacking of self worth and a dependency on the majority white population for an identity. In this stage a black person defines himself or herself based on the standards of their white environment. Here they are searching for approval and acceptance in to the white society while displaying compliance and oversensitivity to conversations involving race. These ideals are only overcome when a person becomes interested in knowing about their

black identity (Korell 2007; 22). This is prefaced by a social withdrawal for reflective time to internalized racial boundaries. Emerging from this isolated state the person will identify and rebuke his oppressor as he continues to explore black activates and culture. Acceptance takes place when a person has gained more self-confidence in their blackness and more flexibility in stereotypical defense (Cross 1972; 6).

As opposed to theories, I hope to provide a more flexible model of identity development. Though my studies will reveal some similarities in observation, my work is less of a stage model and is more of engagement of different social environments that have an effect on the black identity development. I will also present this experience based less on negative self-images but more of a journey of exploration, adaption, and resilience. Based on my observations and the personal opinions and stories of my students, I am able to gather enough information to reinforce and enhance some of these already developed models. As Amber was only allowed to play with black dolls, her mother was using strategies to avoid both Cross' and Thomas's initial stages of reliance on the white culture. Next comes Marcus and his realization of differences among the different racial identities of his school, which is similar to Cross's encounter stage. Jaaven is involved in her isolation and distancing from the majority population to better form her black identity, and Acacia show signs of Cross's internalization stage. Again, I am offering a new perspective on these models of identity that takes on a more anthropological point of view focusing more on the social implications of these interactions more so than fitting it into a model.

Within a black family, there are various tactics used to create a positive black image in young minds. McAdoo describes this socialization process as, "The task Black parents share with all parents…not only are performed within the mundane extreme environmental stress of racism but included the responsibility of raising physically and emotionally healthy children who

are black in a society in which being black has negative connotations."(McAdoo 2002; 58). Even with advances in socioeconomic status, Black American families still face some amount of oppression from the majority population. Black American families deal with discrimination in the workforce, the education system, and medical care system. It is an important role of the parent to prepare the child for the world of discrimination they are bound to face. Parents do this by emphasizing the importance of self-respect and pride. They also try to make them understand that fair play may not be reciprocated and how to react accordingly to these situations. These are strategies parents instill in their child that they may not realize until they have more experiences outside of the home. By removing her white dolls Amber's mother was setting the tone for a standard of beauty within the black culture. This is to show that the 'ideal' woman is not the same skin completion, height, eye color, and hair type as Barbie and the characters she is most likely to watch on TV. It's very important that the racial socialization, "'special things' parents…[do]… to prepare their children for being Black in this society" (McAdoo 2002; 70), are initiated and maintained in the home atmosphere. In my research I will explore what my participants were taught as a child about what it means to be black and how their parents enforced this idea. The black family home environment is where a child's black identity begins to form. As this socialization is taught at home, it is then applied when the child enters new social realms, one of the first being in school.

In a similar effort in defining African American adolescent identity, author of "Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?", Beverly Tatum conducted study of the identity development that usually takes place in the education system. In their early education, a black child will absorb much of the white culture as the superior and desired culture. Some children will even shy away from the black culture that was taught at home, which is what makes

the racial socialization process so essential. "…if Black parents are…actively seeking to encourage positive racial identity by providing their children with positive cultural images and messages about what it means to be Black- the impact of the dominant society's messages are reduced." (Tatum 1997; 55). What Marcus noted in his interview was how it seamed that black and white students were divided at his school. His observation is also what poses the question and title of Tatum's book. When black students are given new awareness of racial significance they begin to form what Tatum calls an oppositional identity. Through experiences in school, such as seen differences of interactions of white students with white teachers compared to black students with white teachers, they begin to realize there are significant differences among race in society's viewpoint. This causes "The Black students [to turn] to each other for the much needed support they are not likely to find anywhere else."(Tatum 1997; 60). With more personal and social experiences, black children will learn more about the stereotypes behind these racial identities and choose to take an "…oppositional stance [that] both protects one's identity from the psychological assault of racism and keeps the dominate group at a distance." (Tatum 1997; 60). These tactics are used to elevate blackness to a higher social status as an exclusive group with specific social characteristics.

Unfortunately the consequences of this new sense of group identity are that school officials often see it as dangerous. When students are seen as a threat and then in larger groups, they are often criminalized; thus, creating a negative impact on black students' academic interest. When Marcus referred to getting in trouble for hanging out with his group of black friends, it reflects on some of the racial disparities found within the school system. High minority schools already have less resources and a lower quality of education. According to an article by Johanna Wald, "Nationally, black students are 2.6 times as likely to be suspended as white students" and

as the suspensions increase so do the racial disparities (Wald & Lusen 2003;10). As the black

student feels unwanted or unsuccessful in school he is likely to strive as hard as his white peers

to succeed. One school system strategy is to use preventive detention which dismisses students

from school because of a 'no tolerance' policy for misbehaving. "This policy may function as a

form of racial profiling in schools, whereby students of color are disproportionately selected

among those singled out for this type of punishment." (Wald & Lusen 2003; 13). When black

students are able to define a group identity as an oppressed group social survival, over academic

achievements, becomes their objective.

As many black children maneuver through their middle school years they build this

oppositional identity in a sense of Black pride. This is the embracing of black culture including

things such as traditions, speech, attire, and behavior. Jaaven uses Black English in the previous

pages to place emphasis on her sense of pride in her culture. She does this to defy her white

teachers and displaying the disconnect she feels in the classroom. She also speaks of having less

respect for those around her that don't speak 'her language'. This is also important in

establishing that she dose not 'act white'. In a study done by Signithia Fordham she found that

students need for a black group identity and loyalty means they continue to stray away from

'white' behaviors such as listening to certain music, speaking in standard English, getting good

grades in school, reading and writing (Fordham & Ogbu 1985; 186). Straying from these

standards of blackness will lead to the possibility of losing credibility within the black

community. Simultaneously, being a part of the black community can lead to a group

understanding and a safe place to disclose relevant experiences.

Growing up as an African American youth myself and having to deal with comparable

situations I have also been in similar position. Having had experiences in both black and white

environments, I have personally faced discrimination from my white peers, as well as criticism for not solely identifying with my black peers, which further contributes to this research. Defining the identity of black youth today, as you will read, has evolved to contain even more social implications, than simply skin tone. I offer a four-part construction of the African American identity that demonstrates similar circumstances through their stories. The things they discuss in these interviews, both shocking disappointing to hear, is important for everyone to understand. More discourse on this topic, will lead to a better understanding of the population so often deemed as 'bad' or 'a lost cause'. More communication and effective strategizing can also lead to a lower dropout rate, and closing of the achievement gap.

Chapter 1: Racial Socialization in the Home

Amber's experience of solely being allowed to play with black dolls is not one of coincidence. This is a strategy employed by black parents to teach their developing children about their racial identification. Often the projection of dolls and action figures is the ideal concept of an adult for a child. With a doll, a child has complete control. She can fix their hair, coordinate outfits into the style of their choosing, and create a whole new world through their doll; a world that perhaps would be reality were it not for her status as a dependent. The dolls become a powerful image of what a woman or young lady should look like and serve as a source of emulation for young girls, who may not be the same race of the dolls with which they play. As I have noticed through these interviews, black parents have taught their children the importance of finding the beauty and self worth in their racial identity. One of these methods has been by encouraging their children to play with dolls of the same race. One 11-year old female student spoke of her experience with her mom's parental involvement in her choice in dolls.

> P: You know the American girl dolls?
>
> I: Yeah, I used to read some of them while I was growing up.
>
> P: And I like Addy, she's African American and I only read Addie
>
> I: Did you read any of the other American Girl books?
>
> P: I only read Addy

She later expressed that this was the only option of reading that was presented to her in the 4th grade by her mother because Addy was the only doll she could physically relate to. For this reason, she did not explore the rest of the American Girl series.

The American Girl Dolls are a line of dolls, each with its own series of stores, that featured a young girls situated in different periods of American history. The only Black doll represented, until recently, was Addy Walker, who was presented in the time frame of the 1860s. Her story is one of courage and hope as her family plans on a dangerous escape from slavery, but first have to avoid being sold off by their master. The series chronicles her successful escape to freedom in Philadelphia and her survival through the civil war and her new life of freedom.

The fact that this young girl was presented with a story about an African American girl facing slavery was not one that is typically presented in textbooks in the public school system. This was her mothers attempt at expanding her child's black experience beyond the small efforts of racial diversity found in other doll collections such as Barbie. These small efforts are the beginning of a socialization process that many parents use to teach their children about the implications of their racial background; both how they will be viewed by society and instructions on how they should view themselves.

In my household, I was constantly reminded that being black was something to be proud of and that this was something that many would try to convince me of otherwise. I was taught to stay strong through the adversity I was sure to face while growing up in the society my mother described as a 'white world'. Though I wasn't completely aware at the time what role these messages and stories were supposed to play in my life, I later learned the importance of this preparation. Although the participants in my research may not have felt prompted by their parents to respond to negative encounters dealing with race, it became evident through their interviews that some parental preparation had taken place.

        I: What else did you learn about being black while growing up

        P: That lots of people are not going to like you for who you are, cause we different colors, we do different things, we see different, we're not as capable as other people in the world

        I: Did anyone teach you how to deal with this unfair treatment

        P: Like I learn a lot of stuff from my mom, about how she act, and how she be around certain people.

        I: What do you think about what your mom taught you?

        P: Its interesting to learn about your culture and stuff cause you obviously want to know what's going on.

As described by Harriett Pipes McAdoo, author of *Black Children,* "Racial socialization is the process by which the parents shape their children's attitudes about race and show the children how they fit into the context of race in their society." (McAdoo 2002; 50). Racial socialization in a child's household is the foundation of this learning to prepare children for the larger social world that is typically dominated by other races.

In this process, the goal of the parent is to best prepare the child for obstacles and situations they will face as an African American in larger social context as they grow up. This is similar to how most parents teach their children the ethics of hard work or how to succeed in school, all with the goal of creating a healthy prosperous life. Within a black household, similar methods are used, but race becomes more of a salient feature in how a child is taught to develop. In a study by the Society for Research in Child Development, socialization adresses; cultural experiences such as unique styles and patterns of behavior and main stream experiences which involve their interactions with their white counterparts especially in school. (Thorton et al. 1990; 403)

In the following chapters it will be evident how these three themes of socialization become a major factor in the participants' life experiences. Teachings of cultural experiences can be seen through their recollection of stories of slavery and happenings in the civil right era. Minority experiences are shaped by these learned ideas of 'ghetto' based on socioeconomic statuses of their peers, and how their parents advise them to respond. Mainstream experiences were mentioned while discussing their experiences in school and interactions with their white peers.

Before interviewing many of my participants, a few parents expressed with pride that their child knew a lot about their race and were prepared for anything, regardless of the precautions that were mentioned in the consent form. I found their attempts to convince me to be interesting, and was even more intrigued by the responses of the child. It seemed that some of my students were almost prompted to answer theses questions in the manner that their parent would be most proud, and have obviously had conversations on the topic before. Because of these shared moments with their parents, participants showed no hesitation talking about what they were taught at home about the expectations of their racial identity.

> I: What did you learn growing up about what it meant to be black?
>
> P: My dad taught me and my mom taught my half. My dad taught me that his name meant a black worrier so that kind of help me understand what black was in his name and stuff. And my mom taught me about how white people treated black people back then and how they hung them, and wouldn't let them eat at a counter and stuff like that.
>
> I: What did you think about the stuff when they were telling you that?

P: I mean, I didn't believe it at first but then when other people
kept telling me stuff like camps and school, well not really school,
but camps and outside of school. They taught me, like I mean oh
my gosh, I didn't know that Caucasian people really did that and
stuff and hope that…and then believe that MLK tried to help us
and then he got shot and killed.

Most children learn their first connotations of a black identity through what they are told at home. Many black parents are active in educating their children, with both historical information on the African American experience and useful coping strategies. Children carry these ideas with them in the next social realm of school, where these learned ideals are truly put to the test.

Parents internalize a sense of responsibility to prepare their children for a world of racial discrimination and inequality. In doing so they use the strategy of educating their children on the history of slavery and civil rights, and how the concept of discrimination based on skin is still a relevant factor in today's society. The African American history seems to be used because it has a bigger impact in conceptualizing discrimination. Parents could have easily told their children about the socioeconomic disadvantages, or about the difficulties of being a minority and getting a job, or even about the lessened political power that comes with the minority status; all relevant parts of our society's definition of black. Yet, instead, they use the stomach turning stories of slavery, reinforced by the small amount of black history written into history textbooks. Due to the brutal nature of black history, tales of slavery have proven themselves be an effective measure, as many participants reference slavery as an important part of black identity .

The historical content of African American history, in particular, varies greatly from many other immigrant group experiences. "The enslavement experience within the American brought loss of control, violent uprooting, and great suffering to Black people. Those brutal experiences have shaped the ideological forces that lead to modern day families with their strengths and weaknesses." (McAdoo 2002; 49). Racial discrimination has systematically placed African Americans at a disadvantage for social advancement through jobs, education, and the accumulation of wealth. Though middle school students only eventually realize this, parents are well aware of these occurrences and do what they can to share what they have learned with their children. In this interview an 11-year-old Female discussed some of the experiences her mother shared with her.

> I: Who taught you about what it means to be black?
>
> P: It comes from like where we live. Like you know the projects, my mamma used to live over there, so that's how she learned all this stuff, and she told us that like, sometimes it be fun in the projects cause you got all these kids to meet, that's how they like grew closer together cause like everyone from one project went to one school,…

These socialization processes have also been used to help children develop coping mechanisms in order to deal with signs of racism: by instructing children to respond certain ways to the symbols of historical racism.

> P: Like we was coming from church the other day, and we saw a flag that means they don't like black people on the truck
> I: The Confederate flag?
>
> P: yeah I didn't known what it meant and my momma said they didn't like black people
>
> I: How do you feel about that

P: I don't care (in a defensive manner)

When responding to this symbol of the confederacy of the south, this child became very defensive about it not affecting her attitude about her race. Though the entire history of the confederacy has a much broader story than just racism, she was only presented with the information that was most important to her mother. This was an approach to warn her of certain symbols that signify potential dangers of discrimination. Throughout each interview, it still held that the advice of a parental figure continued to be an authority on the subject of race. Comments, like the one to follow, show that children respect their parent's guidance as genuine, creating a greater trust between the child and parent.

> I: So if you want to talk about being black to someone, whether good or bad, who would you be most likely to talk to?
>
> P: Mom.
>
> I: Why?
>
> P: Because she's like wise, she has these good thoughts like how you should handle things, and I do them, and it turns out just right, like it turns out just how she plans it and everything, and everything's just fine, I just love it.

As this student recollects her mom's advice, it is a sign of maturity and understanding of her mom's intentions for sharing these messages with her.

During the interview, participants were also asked to predict some of their own socialization strategies they would use as parents. They were asked: "If you had kids of your own, what would you tell them about being black? These were a few of their responses:

"Just because of the color of their skin, that they are not limited to

what they can do"

"Be nice to everybody even if they are a different color, like I
don't want them to be like oh I don't like Caucasian people"

"I would teach them to be proud of your skin color, because first of
all, you can't take it off, and if they don't like it, who cares?
You're the one wearing it so you the one that should like, don't
care about what they think, if they gonna pay for the surgery, they
should. "

"That…ummm…about being black…ummm…like when other
people come and pick on you, you just walk away. And its nothing
wrong with being a black person. God made you that way so you
don't need to go back and try and change your skin color and
stuff"

I found it interesting no one attributed what he or she learned about their cultural history

to their school. I have often heard African American teachers complain about the lack of black

history presented to black children in school, and black students supported this idea when

discussing their acquired knowledge of black history. In the history/ social studies curriculum,

there are detailed descriptions of American wars, but only ever small sections of African

American History. Some argue that we learn about African American history during black

history month, so students are educated on the topic, but a few days out of one month out of 12

years of schooling is simply not enough. This also places an even higher emphasis on the racial

awareness lessons that take place in the home.

I: What did you learn growing up about what it meant to be black

P: About slavery, somebody taught me.

I: Who taught you?

P: My parents mainly… And then teachers taught me some things here and there, but mainly my parents taught me everything I know about slavery

The following is an excerpt from an interview with a 12 year old male who was responding to the question: "Do you pay anymore attention to your black identity more at home or in school?

M: What are your thought processes when you come home about being black? What are those thoughts? You said you think about there is not enough when you're in a group at school, when you come home, what are those thoughts? What are you thinking about as far as your race is?

P: How there are not as many African American people in certain places than there are white people or Asian people.

I: ok, and how do you feel about that?

P: ummm, confused, in a way. Because there's so many people here, it seams like most the people are White, Asian, or Mexican

Movement into new social environments present many children with some of their first encounter with the non-white population leading to brand new perceptions of black, not only as the black community view it, but also how the white population view it. In Cross's model of black identity development, the encounter stage is described as when "some experiences manage to slip by or even shatter the person's current feelings about himself and his interpretation of the Negro" (Cross 1972; 6). This stage tests the validation of the black identity, as a demanding social world wants to claim a 'post racial society' and create the façade that racism is no longer an issue. It is through this new realm of societal interaction that the teaching of the parent

becomes a secondary resource for confirming black identity. The 'new black' is the one that is

built and supported by other black peers in ones environment.

Chapter 2: What *Does* it Mean to be Black

The first chapter was an overview of how blackness is cultivated within the adolescent household. What I report next is evidence of how racial socialization is used outside of this environment. At home, steps are taken to ensure that black children know about African American history, and understand the adversity they are bound to face in todays society. Through the reiterating of their experiences it became apparent that many parental lessons accompanied by a child's individual experience has certainly molded this very distinct sense of Black.

> I: An alien from space, who had never seen earth before, lands on Earth, and it wants to know what it means to be black. What would you tell him?

> P: I would have said black is a skin… well see this is not black this is caramel [points to arm], however… Light skinned black is like this color black, I don't know why they call us this color black but we call ourselves black, I don't know how to explain it...

Another participant confirmed this conception of Black with her comment:

> P: My skin color is black, and you're green. [laughs]

For these participants, the initial idea of black from their initial thought was no more than the physical color of their skin. Each answered with haste and certainty as if defensive of the answer that I may have been searching for. Having previously been told that I wanted them to express their racial experiences, both good and bad, this quick reaction said to me; regardless of what you may want to hear, black is simply a skin color first that was later associated with negative stereotypes. Though various times throughout the interviews participants mentioned negative images and typecasts of black people, these concepts became irrelevant when creating a general idea of blackness. This also validates the racial socialization they learned at home that

being black is a good thing and to be proud who they are. The following interview displays a

participant 's learned black origins through socialization of adults around her.

> P: I came from dirt
>
> I: You came from dirt
>
> P: Uh huh
>
> I: What does that mean?
>
> P: Black people come from dirt. Their color comes from dirt.
>
> I: Really? Where did you learn that?
>
> P: In the bible
>
> I: Did it say specifically black people came from dirt
>
> P: I think it did

According to Independent Fundamental Baptist missionary and pastor, Dr. Cooper P.

Abrams III, some of the biblical references that supports some of the things she mentions. The

geographical location of the creation of Adam and Eve was the Tigris and Euphrates River, now

located in the Middle East.. It says in the bible that Adam, being the first human on earth,

according to creationist theories, was made from the soil. (Abrams 1979). There is a chance that

she made this connection on her own, or was possibly taught this by a member of her church.

This idea was a bit more abstract from than some of the other definitions of black, but others also

felt there was more to the race than skin color.

> P: Well…I would give him a history book so they can see what
> they do, what they been through
>
> I: What have they been through
>
> P: Black people have been through a lot. We got issues.
>
> I: What kind of issues?
>
> P: Ok so All black people got anger issues first….Everybody

I: Why do you think all black people have anger issues?

P: Ok so you know slavery right? So all that stuff we been
through, we gon' be mean…

This was a striking comment coming from someone that was only 11 years of age. I have

always heard that black people looked 'mean', but never considered black people to be

intrinsically angry. It has been reported that African Americans experience more negative

emotions throughout their daily life than Caucasians. It is expected for Blacks to feel more

stressors that whites due to the fact we remain, as a group, at a socioeconomic disadvantage and

endure discrimination. Much of this anger derives from a lack of confirmation in identity,

violations of cultural norms, or being treated unfairly or with disrespect (Mabry & Kiecolt 2005;

86). Another participant shared similar feelings on the matter.

"I Feel angry sometimes, cause people ya konw talk about…
back then and I'm angry at how Caucasian people treated us.
But sometimes I feel happy cause it does exist, but it's not as
hard as a long time ago."

These emotions are also developed from a historical mistrust between black and white

people. It was evident through some of their commentary that not all of the participants had yet

to distinguished the difference between slavery and the civil rights era, possibly due to the lack

of black history in their teachings in school. Even so, they still felt the need to be defensive about

the historical conflict between Black and White people.

The source of this anger might have been from defense mechanisms taught by their parents, or a learned coping strategy for dealing with negative racial encounters multiple students confirmed this inherent anger. To both an 11-year-old and 12-year-old African American female, being an angry black woman was a part of their everyday reality. As they describe it, it was perceived as such by others, therefor it was internalized as component of their identity. Another constituent of the black identity can be found in speech patterns, already demonstrated in a number of previously mentioned interviews.

Do Black People Speak differently?

According to my participants, another feature of blackness can be found in certain speech patterns. African American English, also called Black English or Ebonics, became a distinguishing factor between races for students. These conversations were also plagued with the negative stereotypes associated with speaking this way.

The creation of the language lies within its history. Black English was developed as a brutal necessity. During the time of the North Atlantic Slave Trade, African people from different countries and tribes were forces to develop a common form of communication. Through the mixing of dialects in the struggle for a common way of communication, Black English was derived. (Bladwin 1997; 1).

Though we are taught in Standard English, the arbitrary definition of 'standard' has given Black English a negative connotation. Sadly this ill defined 'standard' has become elite and the preferred way of speaking for the majority, white society. There is much confusion about the language to non-native speakers that interprets it as vulgar and lacking intelligence, which

unfortunately leaves it with an unconstructive implication. Participants even mention the

language as something that shouldn't be spoken in every social context and how Standard

English is still being reinforced:

> I: How do you feel when people correct your speech?
>
> P: I be laughing and I be trying to do it but I can't 'cause its like a habit

Another student responded negatively to the pressure to change the way she spoke;

> I: How do you feel about people correcting you speech?
>
> P: I don't like it when people do that, It's like when I try to say something people be trying to change up my words, and I be like no this is what I said. But that's like people trying to change your personality like I wouldn't' let nobody change my personality

McAdoo mentions, that to speak, dress, or act like white society is a sign of disrespect to

everything they are taught at home. Parents understand that some adjustments are necessary in

order for a black child to succeed in a white world. (MacAdoo 2002; 66). Black Adolescents

must also maintain their ties with the black community that gave them their initial sense of Black

self. Therefore it is important for participants to hold fast to this part of their identity.

The use of Black English in the following participant's case became a source of effective

communication among his peers. Though she considers it to merely be a language of habit, based

on its history, it is also a language of opposition to black oppression. This also brought to my

attention that the use of black English was also something reserved for certain social contexts.

> I: Do you think you speak differently?
>
> P: Yea. It depends on what skin color (of the person she
> speaks to). Not to be mean or anything, but you know if
> white people live in the country they'll talk country like,
> and if they live in the ghetto, they'll speak ghetto-ness and
> if your black and you live in like a nice neighborhood like
> this, you'll talk regular…

For this Adolescent, the racial composition of their environment determined the way they

would speak. Though they admit to being fluent in various types of speech, 'ghetto', 'country',

and 'regular' he only finds the use of each in the appropriate setting. The use of Black English

around whites or speakers of Standard English can result in a dismissal of the language leaving

the speaker feeling alienated and angered. Sociolinguist John Baugh's call to action is that "We

must emphasize as our main point that black speech is highly diversified and is not inferior- on-

linguistic grounds- to any other language or dialect. Pressures to conform to the standard will, of

course, continue." (Baugh 1983; 129).

Among the pressure to conform to Standard English is also the pressure to maintain

Black English communication skills. For the speakers of Standard English, speaking out against

the use of this language means they are speaking out against a long history of black identity

development, and saying that this way of life is not good enough for their social world

(Thompson 135). The idea of having black students conform to a certain way of speech is also

considered a racist act. As a way of coping with this mix of expectations, participants adapted the use of code switching.

> I: Is it ok to speak like that all of the time?
> P: Like say if you go to a job interview then you'll talk….like
> instead of sayin' 'dat' I would say 'that'

Code switching is the use of both Standard English and Black English in the same interaction. Because of the social perspectives associated with it use, many Black English speakers find it to be a social tactic to be versatile in this switch. Regardless of its negative connotations, the linguistic elements of Black English are representations of solidarity and group identity.

Moving into the next chapter, school and other social experiences again shape blackness. All that was confirmed in this chapter about the black identity is either reinforced or altered by their experiences with others. This is when feeling of self worth and dedication to education are often challenged.

Chapter 3: Being Black in Education

Within this report so far, we have worked through parental teachings on the black identity, and how this was used to create students own social definition of what it meant to be black. Entering an even larger social world of middle school present an entirely new concept to blackness as it is defined by more interactions of white peers, other black people, and teachers.

In the identity theory of "negromachy", by Thomas and Thomas students are said to redefine themselves after being exposed to the way Black people are perceived by others (Korell 2007; 22). It is this experience that leads the black adolescent to search for a sense of understanding among his or her own racial group. It is within this new context that the oppressive nature of a white environment is criticized as something to be avoided.

Oppositional Identity

By posing a question as the title of her book, author and clinical psychologist, Beverly Tatum, presented an idea that has always been of interest; *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?"* She presents this idea of walking into a mixed raced school cafeteria at lunchtime and noticing that most of the African American students are sitting together. In elementary school there seems to mixed race groups on the playground but by the time students reach middle school and interact with children from different neighborhoods, a new degree of clustering by race begins to form. As children begin to enter this stage of adolescence they begin exploring their social identity, asking questions like: 'Who am I?' and 'What does it mean to be Black?' (Tatum 1997; 52).

This search for their identity intensifies as their social world expands to include more students like themselves as well as students and teachers that share varying identities. Due to the subordinate status of African Americans their search for a racial identity becomes a very important goal. One of the most salient things to note about their racial grouping is that they group themselves based on how they are viewed by the rest of the world. If they are judged and categorized by their racial connotations, why not at least create and identity among your own group?

In some of their first encounters with racism, black adolescents begin to realize that they can find the most support and comfort amongst each other and therefore tend to socialize more so within their own group. Though this grouping is seen as a strategy of maintaining social interactions with their racial group, others may see it as a threat, creating an even larger divide among the school. One 12-year-old describes his experiences during recess where a group of white students tried to dismiss him and his friends from a certain area (Tatum 1997; 59).

> "…we [black students] can go wherever we want it just that they [white students] have this little area, where they be all the time and there was more people, so they had extra area they needed, so we were in that extra area.'

This oppositional social identity is reinforced by the exclusion of African Americans by their white peers. Settings, such as school, that are racially mixed become an environment of racial stressors and bonding with other black students for support becomes a positive social strategy. Unfortunately, while still developing this sense of black identity in the group, stereotypes can form outside of this social circle.

P: They be scared of us.

I: Who is they?

P: Everybody. Like our school is a African American school.
Like Caucasian people, they really don't talk to us.

I: You mean the students?

P: Yeah they don't talk to us!

I: At all?

P: No,

I: Why not?

P: Well I like talkin' to some of them cause they cool they
shareable and all that stuff… but they don't talk to us, we talk to
them…. but they won't talk to us

I: Do you care they don't talk to you?

P: Not really cause there's no point. Like they call us ghetto…
like the way we talk, cause we talk like… you know how we talk.

The continued development of a Black oppositional identity can also lead to the

lessening of emphasis on academic achievement at the risk of accomplishing the

aspirations of a white student. Historically, the quality of black education has always

been less that white students. As blacks move into a neighborhood, whites, feeling

threatened by lowering their social status by association, would move out of the area.

Leaving behind diminished quality of education for the black people that continued to

attend the school. This is the genesis of disproportional value in school and education for

African Americans.

In order to maintain their definitive concept of self academic success becomes

associated with being white, while academic success is viewed as unpopular.

"Acting white theory"

I did have one participant that expressed dissatisfaction with being outside of her racial group. By speaking Standard English, and attaining high academic achievements, she denied the social implications of her peers about what it means to be black.

> I: Do you ever talk about being black around your friends?
>
> P: Yeah, me and Dee are like always getting annoyed with these groups of [black] kids picking at us. And they were always saying like, "why are you two friends?". And I was like, "because we have a lot in common, is that a problem?"
>
> I: What race is Dee?
> P: She's white
> I: And we sort of get annoyed by that [picking] because like they always expect me to be the dumb one, but technically its sort of the other way around.

We can see how this 7th grader defied the expectation of her black peers and his now faced with some ridicule. Though it remains priority to maintain this identity, this coupled by a few other environmental factors has lead to an achievement gap between Whites and African Americans.

Achievement Gap

The achievement gap refers to the noticeable disparity of educational quality and opportunity defined by race or ethnicity. This describes the deficit between a child's potential and their actual achievement, which leads to low expectations and values of the disadvantaged group. Jaekyung Lee, a graduate student at the School of Education at State University of New

York at Buffalo, presented various explanations for this gap in achievement. He points out that teachers in predominantly black schools are less likely to teach in their field of study, reducing the chance of being children being taught by a qualified teacher (Lee 1997; 58). When student do not feel like their teacher has a stake in the subject they are teaching they are far more likely to disengage during class.

Within the massive amount of literature working to decipher the cause of the achievement gap, there are a few suggested theories as to why the lower standard of education has become an actuality for many African American Students.

Deficit-Deprivation Theory starts with the idea that there is an intelligence hierarchy based on race, beginning from whites at the top, moving to blacks at the bottom. It has been historically determined that whites are superior to blacks and that European domination has become a part of our culture. This theory is similar to that of Darwin's genetic drift method in that achievement was based on heredity. Though a primitive theory, it is still being reinforced through the results of standardized testing and it is by way of these biased assessments that add to educational inequality (Thompson 2004; 85).

Theory of Structural inequality denotes that schools have been used to perpetuate social differences. This is evident through redistricting of school systems that is still occurring today. Blacks are disproportionality represented among the lower socioeconomic status and schools work to keep them at this level as the focus is directed to higher achieving white students (Thompson 2004; 85).

Tracking is the concept of having students on a certain trajectory for their education goals. It is thought that because of the socioeconomic disadvantage blacks face that are generally

placed on the track for lower less prestigious jobs as opposed to white students who would receive a track for college preparation (Thompson 2004; 85). Practices like this, again say to the students that they are not receiving the same amount of attention when it comes to their education, giving them even more of a reason to care less about academic achievements.

The theory of Cultural Discontinuity says that there is a miss-match between the household culture of African Americans and their school culture. Instructional practices vary from the cultural norm as teachers place labels on non-standard patterns of speech and new discipline patterns (Thompson 2004; 85). The experience of encountering a new authoritative figure with different expectations than what they experience at home, black students may not immediately respond in a positive manner. Working through this discontinuity is something that must be initiated by both teachers and students. Many participants explained their disconnect from their teachers was due to a lack of cultural understanding. When students are used to responding to certain methods of communication at home, they are left with a feeling confusion and helplessness, as their teachers continue to misunderstand their intentions and students are not given a voice to explain themselves.

Teacher-Student Disconnect

Through this research, I have designed a similar reason to black children's lower standard of education leading to the achievement gap. This issues are caused by a lack of connection with teachers. Teachers often do not completely understand the needs of the populations of children they are serving and create a detachment that can impact the view of education in a child's life for years to come.

Gail L Thompson, Ph.D., wrote an entire book dedicated to informing educators on how to teach their black students. She wrote this because too many teachers are not aware of how to work with students of color, which is why the achievement gap continues to exist. She brings to attention, the need for culturally relevant learning material as well as a dismissal of stereotypes that many teachers hold when knowingly entering a school made of the minority population (Thompson 2004; 11).

While working at Student U, which consists mostly of black and Hispanic students I saw many white teachers perfecting the art of connection. In reflections, some experienced difficulty with learning how to appropriately respond to a different culture than their own, but were able to adapt to the learning styles of their students. With determination and at least a wiliness to try, each teacher can reach their classroom of minorities.

As a future educator I have been told that the success of the students relies on the success of the teaching. Many students, especially among those of the African American race, experience negative interactions in the classroom. These experiences can affect the way students then feel about school and their future education. Discouraging educational success at such a young age has left many students jaded and apathetic towards academics.

When working with students of color or in low-income areas, there are significantly lower expectations for the student's achievement. These lower expectations affect the quality of learning opportunities, and students' hopefulness for a successful academic future. Teachers also feel that their white or Asian students are smarter than African American students, causing an even further disconnect between the student-teacher common goals.

I: Have you felt like you have ever experienced some unfair treatment?

P: How the teachers be having favorites

I: Are these white teachers, black teachers, Hispanic teachers, or just all teachers?

P: All teachers, but most Caucasian teachers

Lack of cultural understanding and boundaries also becomes an issue. When there is both a low expectation of African American students and expected judgments from the teacher, students tend to further disengage as teachers make less of an effort to pinpoint the cause of this withdrawal. Part of the following interview shows first hand how black students can be jaded by their experiences with white teachers and will only become trusting of adults they feel will understand what their situation.

I: Do you see white teachers talking to black students?

P: Oh no, they don't talk to me 'cause I will fuss them out. Our teachers, like when they like get mad, when we get mad at them, they be mumbling under our breath like we know what we be saying, and they probably be thinking about like racism…

I: Who would you talk to about being black?

P: Councilor

I: Why

P: Because she's black too, and she helps other people, I mean you don't just want to go to a white councilor and then they'll probably feel intimidated or something, probably mad, and then they'll be mad at you, so you try to talk to an older adult and then a councilor because they help you, and they talk to their own skin color.

I: So, Do you think having a black teacher is easier?

P: Yes, way easier!...Wait, well Caucasian teachers, if you tell them something about another Caucasian person then they'll just be like 'oh ok'…

You know how teachers be like, if you have a problem, come tell us, but if you have a problem and its certain people, [white students] it like that's not fair, if kids have a problem then you take care of the problem…

These students are very aware of their teacher's sentiments as their prejudices come through their attitudes and behaviors in the classroom. This perpetuated student-teacher disconnection continues to be a problem as black students find other sources to express this discontent.

"Like I asked, I asked my Caucasian teacher to go to the councilors office an she be like, 'Why do you want to go to a councilor? Why don't you just talk to me?', and I said cause I don't wanna talk to you obviously [eye role]

Participants also shared inappropriate comments that teachers made about students without understanding completely the insinuations of what was said, and how it specifically became a targeted to this special population.

"So there was a substitute, and like I'm in AIG math, and this girl, she was in there and she asked, could she borrow a pencil and the substitutes said 'why don't you start buying pencils and stop buying Wendy's to this girl. And the girl, she called the girl mamma, and the girl busted out cryin' when she said that and she was like' why you cryin' for, everybody eat Wendy's'. She was trying to make it up."

Participants were given the following scenario to respond to dealing with a teacher being biased toward certain students, and some responded with personal experiences of this actually happening.

"Imagine that a girl was in math class and she didn't understand the math problem. She raised her hand to ask a question and when the teacher came over, the teacher said, the answer is obvious you need to try harder. Then the teacher went over to another student who was white and helped them figure out the problem. I have the same questions for this scenario, why do you think the teacher did that?"

P: That's what happen to me in my class one time, but when that happened I'm like, I mean, there Is nothing wrong with the color of my skin, so I don't understand why you would go to another person. And if the answer is obvious then you should help me, I mean…

I: Did you confront the teacher?

P: I told her that's not right, and you shouldn't do that if I ask a question. I mean, not in a mean version, but if I ask a question, you should come to me and help me step by step instead of just saying the answers obvious and just go to someone else

I: Do you think the teacher understood?

P: No. I mean that was only once and that was at the beginning of the school year…

I found it absolutely emboldening that this participant was willing to stand up for what she believed to be a racist act. Unfortunately, I was left with a sense of dissatisfaction that she dismissed her teacher's inconsistencies so quickly. I find this to be a strategy of minimalizing conflict in an attempt to maintain the social order of the classroom. Students have the least

amount of authority in the school so their concerns are often left unaddressed until other parties

such as parents and councilors get involved. Is discussing the racist act of a teacher worth the

negative attention that is associated with topics of race? Especially when students are seen as

having less influence in the dialogue.

> P: I raise my hand again, I would do it again, cause its not right
> and teachers aren't supposed to do that neither, they get fired or get
> their pay off or something like that cause their obligated to help
> kids, that's what they got their degree on.
>
> I: How would you feel about it?
>
> P: I wouldn't feel no different, I mean she entitled to her own
> opinion, don't have nothing to do with me, unless she ain't gon'
> help me at all with that, imma keep raisin my hand, over and over
> till she come and help me.
>
> I: Would you tell anybody else?
>
> P: I mean it's not a big deal, its not something major like she said
> 'o, you black, I ain't helpin' you'. Shoot…

By taking the less responsive approach to dealing with injustices in regards to race, I see

these students finding their resilience in maintaining a calm understanding demeanor. Though

some teachers make an effort to understand their black students, this interest is often

unreciprocated. If students do not feel a sense of mutual understanding or acceptance from their

teachers they continue to focus on the already established solidarity they can find in teachers

they favor and their peer groups.

Chapter 4: Racism is real, what to do, what to do?

Prior to interviewing these participants, I had to have each parent sign a waiver of consent. Most were pretty uninterested in the details of the project but were appalled to hear that middle-school aged children experience racism. Just as a procedural precaution, I had to let each parent know that their child was at risk for potentially retrieving unpleasant memories regarding their racial experience. One mother looked me straight into my eyes and told me that this was completely untrue.

I gather that black parents take pride in their racial socialization at home and feel that they have prepared their children for the worst, but would, of course, hope for better. The fact that parents are not aware of so many racial experience of their children also supports the idea that these experiences have been internalized as something that 'just happens'. In interviews most students alleged that if they went through the proposed scenarios, they would typically tell a parent. Parental disbelief to the their experiences proved otherwise.

The following is an experience of a 12-year-old girl that we faced with a negative comment from a white male. Note that during this experience she lacks the same amount of confidence in her social identity and response to this doubt with deflection and laughter.

> I: So what do you like least about being black?
>
> P: You know what I really hate about it? That I mean I wish it was a different color, cause I like to stand out though, but this dude was like, you 'got doo doo rubbed on your skin'
>
> I: What did you say to that?
>
> P: I was like 'well I don't rub doo doo against my skin and you look like you rub doo doo against your teeth!' [laughs]

I: Wow! And how do you feel about this?

P: He's racists and I really don't care because I don't like him anyways.

Unfortunately this experience was not unusual for many of the participants. The next interview doesn't reveal a questioning of identity, but does express the amount of blatant disrespect one can experience from others simply based off of her ethnic identity. What is important to note here is again a reflexive response to this interaction, as she chooses to 'just walk away' instead of engaging in the dialogue.

I: Do you think anyone has ever treated you unfair because you were black?

P: Yes, my friend, she ummm… I was talking to her and she was like 'you wanna know something about me and stuff?' and I'm like 'yeah' and she like 'you know I don't like black people right?' and I'm like ' Oh my gosh, I know you didn't just say that' …and so that's all

I: What did you say back to her?

P: I just said 'Oh my gosh' and walked away.

I: Are you still friends with her?

P: No?

I: You just stopped talking to her after that day?

P: Yeah we just stopped talking.

I: Did anyone ever teach you how to deal with that?

P: Just walk away. Don't wanna carry on, yanno, an argument conversation.

I: How do you feel about that advice?

P: Yeah I do because if I keep going, that could get me in trouble.

This student felt that the best course of action was to remove her-self from the situation. In psychology, coping is an effort to solve interpersonal problems in order to alleviate stress and avoid conflict. The coping strategies mentioned in interviews were usually passed down from their parents or significant adult figures in their lives. Here especially we see another important need for socialization at home. Parents share the coping strategies the developed, based off of their own experiences, as a way of preparing their children.

Coping

The Journal of Black Psychology published an article about a year ago on how African American adolescents have created four strategies of coping. They discuss the interactions of black youth and their peers as an optimal setting for observing social behaviors. Their investigation was particularly relevant to African American adolescents because of the social risks they face such as discrimination and oppression. Faced with such adversity, adaptive peer relation tactics are employed to reinforce confidence in ones identity.

Adolescence is a salient period of identity development, as children are expected to gain more independence, manage more responsibilities, and face some of the stressors with becoming a young adult. "Coping behaviors and strategies typically have been viewed as the specific voluntary actions that an individual takes to successfully adapt and mobilize personal resources when faced with demands of a stressful encounter" (Joyce 2012; 434).

One of the first strategies mentioned was the active coping strategy, which dealt with problem solving and decision-making. This concept carries the idea that coping with a situation involves working through the adversity and making the best decision for the circumstance (Joyce

2012; 434). This is one of the methods I have seen my participants take advantage of, as she

reflects on what she was taught to do in response to racism.

> I: Did anyone ever teach you how to deal with that [unfair
> treatment based on race]?
> P: Mmhmm, my church members, they told me to just accept it,
> because there's gonna be a lot more of that, and you can't always
> defend yourself just 'cause of that, cause that can, that can elevate
> to something more crazy, and then you gonna end up getting in to a
> fight, and then you might hurt yourself and all that. And it would
> be like that's not really worth it, one name call, that's not really
> worth it
>
> I: How do you feel about that advice
> P: At first I was just, I just, didn't like it, but then I started
> realizing why, that they didn't want me to get hurt cause that can
> happen, and then they can re-recall the Klu Klux Klan over here
> (laughs) and imma scream and imma run…

She was able to recognize that her church members were also trying to socialize her to

protect herself and her racial identity, by providing her with this information.

It is here, in the last parts of discussing their black experience, that a few participants

were able to reflect on a few of the things that their parents taught them before they reevaluated

their identity entering middle school.

The second coping strategy mentioned was the distraction strategy, as one would

continue to ignore that anything is wrong. The third strategy was the social support seeking.

From beginning of this project to the end, every single student involved a message about race

taught to him or her by his or her parents (Joyce 2012; 435).

The next strategy purposed was the one of the most interest to me. In avoidant

strategizing, students will not want to share there experiences, and avoid situations that might

end with a similar outcome (Joyce 2012; 435). Though it may not have been avoidant in a since

that the article suggest. There was still a few students that hesitated to seek support:

> I: Do you talk about issues of race with other friends
>
> P: Well my mamma said if you got some business, you know
> how people share they business to the wrong people, they tell yo'
> business and when they get mad at you, they gon' spread it around,
> so you choose your friends wisely and you don't tell all your
> business.

In another interview when asked how she reacted to a white boy out of

school making another African American student being 'ghetto', this is how she

responded:

  P: Really, I would be like 'ok, because that really rude of him like
  You don't know them, you can't just automatically assume they act
  that way
 I: Did you go talk to a teacher or councilor about this?
  P: Well, I like to keep things to myself because I don't really like
  teachers to worry about me, it makes me feel bad.

She is reluctant to tell the teacher for similar reasons that some of her fellow classmates also mentioned. Sometimes telling the teacher simply doesn't result in the consequences that are deserved. Therefore, instead of trying to seek justice and be ignored, she found it easier to just avoid the situation entirely.

In various places around the world, where they have claimed to be a post-racial society, the mentioning of race and racism becomes a racist act in itself. Baker reports an article from *Newsweek* saying "…race does not matter and the best way to understand the meaning and origin of humankind's diversity is to use a greater number of smaller grouping, like ethnicities." (Baker 2001; 114). It is purposed that if we ignore race, that it will no longer be an issue of conflict in our society. Of course, at this point, race is so embedded in the founding of our country and our mentalities it honestly can't be ignored. As conversations on the topic are stifled as racial discrimination continues various coping strategies must be employed to ensure some form of social solidarity.

Keep Calm, and Carry on

I propose a mix of these ideas as a way of dealing with racism, especially at such a young age, where your voice is not always heard and you are still developing both your racial and social life.

This strategy resembles the popular slogan "Keep calm and Carry on". By avoiding conflict and racial tensions, these participants have learned the art of picking and choosing their battles defending their racial identity.

Each of these students proved themselves to be very aware of the racism and discrimination they face, both as an individual and a people. What I found interesting is the lack of action as a response to these instances of racial comments.

As a part of my own socialization my mother taught me, that a quick witty response is all you need to handle conflicts with other students. She also reminded me that violence never solved anything, yet I saw numerous physical fights between Black students when off-handed comments were made. Why were racial slurs able to pass as being something to dismiss?

Black students are angered by inaccurate judgments of their white peers and have proved discontent through these experiences. When a situation actually arises their reactions are very calm and are rationalized to be the best decision.

When given this scenario, students were highly offended and even angered at the thought of being approached in this manner. I wanted to know why they did not react similarly when they talked about similar personal experiences.

> P: Lord no, I would be like; you need to shut up cracker. But I would come up with more though… I would be throwing [words] at her, if she got a problem with it… oooo if it get a little handy imma pick up a table and throw it at her. [laughs]
>
> I: Well lets think about this, so you said you were taught to walk away form the situation, but if somebody says that, then its just done?

P: Yea

I: So would you tell anyone about that?

P: I would tell my mom and my dad, and my friends.

I: Would you tell a principal or counselor?

P: Nope, cause I know Imma get in trouble if I do.

I: Why would you get in trouble?

P: Throwing words at her.

Again, this student has measured the possible consequences to her actions, and decided that to keeping this experience to herself, would be the most effective reaction.

This theory of strategically handling racial conflict for the sake of a social solidarity that I propose is strictly based off of the messages I was able to interpret from the interviews. This is something requiring further research. Even as a college student, I feel the need to maintain a calming manner in the face of discrimination. As an adult, I realize that if I follow my initial reaction, I could easily be arrested, or charged a fine. I find it interesting that at the ages of 10 to 13 that these students feel that same sense of responsibility for their actions. I would love to act by pure instinct, but I, like my students have learn to adapt and manage our stressors to make sure they have less of an impact in our lives. It is impressive how maturely the adolescents I interviewed handle the things that we would hope their generation would not have to.

Conclusion

What you have been able to witness by reading this is the journey of African American Middle School students from Durham, North Carolina. Like the other studies that I referenced, I recognize the social, political, and socioeconomic disadvantage that these students face as black adolescents. Unlike previously done studies that were discussed in the introduction, I have presented the experience of adolescent black identity development as one of critical learning, adaption, and bravery as opposed to things like low-self esteem measured in other studies . Each one of these participants are amazingly resilient for living through these situations and being brave enough to share them.

This entire project was quite an emotional experience for me. The students represented in my study are the same students I watched work so hard to succeed academically and then have to go through incidents that most people don't discuss and analyze until adulthood. Having to confront both of what is expected of them from their parents and their peers; these children face a constant struggle to maintain their identity in both environments. Their black identity continues to have an effect on what they do in both their social, and in turn, their academic lives leading to the dropout rate statistics presented at the beginning of this project.

Parent socialization taught them what race meant, and how something they should be proud of could easily be used against them negatively. What their parents taught them was a message of genuine concern for their strongly fostered black identity. Children leave their homes armed with defenses for dealing with racism and tools to further support their black identity in new environments.

Once this process has taken place, the concept of blackness still faces some challenges. Attitudes and speech start to define what it means to be black by others outside of their race in a negative light. Judgments about being uneducated can affect the view of their own education leading to achievement gaps in education.

While in school, students experience encounters of racism by both their peers and their teachers. Student-teacher relationships are interrupted by previous connotations about their race and stereotypes that plague their black identity. Negative interactions with white students also cause black social groups as a means of protection, and cultivating blackness in defiance of white students and administration that misunderstand them.

Most important to note is how they are able to confront these issues head on, and still be proud of who they are and where they came from. None of these students spoke of violent acts in response to negative connotations about their racial identity, but only reacted in a quick wit of self-defense. Keeping clam, at first seemed to be a submissive response to these situations, but I have realized through their stories how brilliant and self-sufficient they are, by maintaining their composure and dignity.

Being black is a unique and truly amazing experience. I hope that writings like this will encourage more people to understand these occurrences and work better to understand what they go through at such a young age, and how it affects their identity as they continue to develop.

Works Cited

Abrams, Cooper P.
    1980 The Origin of Race. Electronic document, http://bible-truth.org/race.htm, accessed
    March 3rd, 2014.

Baker, Lee D.
    2001 The Color Blind Bind. Cultural Diversity in the United States:102-19.

Bladwin, James
    1979 If Black English Isn't a Language, Then tell me what is? Electronic document,
    http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-english.html, accessed 3/23,
    2014.

Cross, William E., Roy Freedle, and William S. Hall
    1972 Stages in the Development of Black Identity. The Research and Development Divison
    of the American College Testing Program 50:1.

Fordham, Signithia, and John U. Ogbu
    1986 Black Students' School Sucess: Coping with the "Burden of Acting White". The Urban
    Review 18(3):176.

Joyce, Jeneka A., Maya E. Oneil, Elizabeth A. Stormshak, and Ellen H. McWhirter
    2012 Peer Associations and Coping: The Mediating Role of Ethnic Identity for Urban,
    African Adolescents. Journal of Black Psychology 39(5):431.

Korell, Shanon
    2007 A Cluster Analysis of Cross Racial Identity Scale Scores and their Usefulness in
    Predicting Levels Acculturation and Social Distance in the Lives of Black College
    Students Ph.D. dissertation, Pennsylvania State University.

Lee, Jackyung
    1997 Sate Activism in Education Reform: Applying the Rasch Model to Measure Trends
    and Examine Policy Coherence. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 19:29.

Mabry, J. Beth, and K. Jill Kiecolt
    2005 Anger in Black and White: Race, Alienation, and Anger. Jouranal of Health and Social
    Behavior 46:85.

McAdoo, Harriette Pipes
    2002 Black Children: Social, Educational, and Parental Environments. Jim Brace
    Thompson, ed. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel
    1997 Why are all the Black Kinds Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? 1st ed. New York, NY:
    BasicBooks.

Thompson, Gail L.,
    2004 Through Ebony Eyes: What Teachers Need to Know but are Afraid to Ask about
    African American Students. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Thorton, Michael C., Linda M. Chatters, Joseph Robert Taylor, and Walter R. Allen
    1990 Sociodemographic and Environemtnal Correlates of Racail Socialization by Black
    Parents. Child Development 61(2):401.

Wald, Johanna, and Daniel F. Losen
    2003 Defining and Redirecting a School-to-Prison Pipeline. New Directions for Youth
    Development 2003(99):9.

William E., Cross, Jr.
    1994 Nigrescence Theory: Historical and Explanatory Notes. Journal of Vocational
    Behavior 44(2):119-123.