

# The Burden of Acting White: *Implications for Transition*

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This study used a phenomenological qualitative approach that engaged Black students in discussions about the burden of acting White and its impact on their in-school and postschool outcomes and postschool transition visions. Six seventh- and eighth-grade Black students identified as at risk for school failure, a principal, and five teachers participated in this study. The authors identified and addressed the following themes: (a) the existence of the burden of acting White; (b) students' definitions of acting Black or White; (c) teachers' inability to intervene and counteract the impacts of acting White; (d) the significance of postschool visions; and (e) academic orientation. The authors conclude by discussing the need for transition programs focused on self-determination.

Black students have been disproportionately represented in special education for decades (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002), and they face a greater likelihood of being placed into special education programs in the United States than Whites, Hispanics, American Indians, Pacific Islanders, Asian Americans, and Alaskan Natives (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Black students are placed into the mental retardation (MR) disability category, where they are most disproportionately represented, at twice the rate of White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Black students also constitute the highest proportion of students placed into the emotionally disturbed (ED) disability category. They also spend more of their school day outside general education classrooms, which segregates them from the academic and social skills needed for in-school and postschool success (Patton, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Students with ED, including Black students, face the greatest likelihood of all students in special education of dropping out of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Compounding matters, Black students are most likely to be suspended or expelled (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, 2004). Segregation in restrictive settings, the stigma of labeling, and increased suspensions and expulsions appear to contribute to the fact that Black students in special education are least likely to

graduate with a standard diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

Black students in special education who exit school without a diploma face the increased likelihood of (a) limited enrollment in postsecondary education, (b) an unskilled labor job, (c) unemployment, (d) incarceration, and (e) poverty (Kunjufu, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Wagner et al., 2005). These postschool transition outcomes increase the probability that the children of these Black students will be placed into special education due to poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), because children living in poverty are one and a half times more likely to be placed in special education. This cycle may perpetuate the disproportional representation of Blacks in special education. Black students themselves may also contribute to their poor postschool transition outcomes by falling prey to Ogbu's (1978, 2004) burden of "acting White."

Fordham and Ogbu (1986), leading proponents in discussions about the burden of acting White, defined the burden as a Black student's "struggle to achieve success while retaining [Black community] support and approval" (p. 198). In addition, they stated,

copied with the burden of acting White suggests the various strategies that Black students

at Capital High use to resolve, successfully or unsuccessfully, the tension between students' desiring to do well academically and meet the expectations of school authorities on the one hand and the demand of peers for conformity to group-sanctioned attitudes and behaviors that validate Black identity. (p. 186)

Ogbu (2004) said that the burden of acting White has evolved from the United States' historical misperception that Africans were inferior to their White "masters." Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argued that at the present most Black students experience the Black community's fictive kinship, which they defined from an anthropological perspective as "a kinshiplike relationship between persons not related by blood or marriage in a society, but who have some reciprocal social or economic relationship" (p. 183). Fordham and Ogbu further indicated that the Black community does not identify members and membership qualities based solely on African features or blood, and can give and revoke membership at any time. They believe that the Black community deems academic success to be counter to its collective identity and identified academic success as a means for having one's membership revoked, which perpetuates today's Black students' burden of acting White.

Ogbu (1978, 2004) theorized that many Black students perceive academic success as acting White. This belief evolved from slaves, who developed their Black identity to oppose the White society that deemed African slaves to be intellectually inferior. The U.S. educational system advanced the concept of the burden of acting White by excluding Black students from formal educational opportunities. This segregation led many Blacks to distrust formal education, because they believed it resulted in Black students' becoming "un-Black," and many Blacks believed this oppressed and diminished their Black identity (Fordham, 1988). Fordham added that the burden of acting White results in some Black students' equating academic success with "selling out."

When experiencing the burden of acting White, Black students face a survival conflict that forces them to choose between academic success and community acceptance (Bonner, 2000; Comer, 1988; Fryer & Torelli, 2006; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004). Experiencing this survival conflict may cause Black students to devalue education and mask their academic abilities by underachieving or dropping out of school due to guilt, ambivalence, anxiety, depression, and a fear of surpassing the educational accomplishments of Black commu-

nity members (Bonner, 2000; Comer, 1988; Kauffman, 2001). In summary, the burden of acting White appears to negatively influence Black students' academic orientation and depresses their academic achievement (Ford, 1993; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The National Research Council (2002) believed the burden of acting White to be controversial and a possible perpetuator of special education's disproportional representation of Black students.

This study examined whether Black adolescents at risk for school failure and attending an alternative school experienced the burden of acting White and, if so, whether this affected their academic success and their postschool transition visions.

## METHOD

### *Setting*

This 10-day study occurred at a full-day alternative school located in a southwestern U.S. suburban city. The alternative school, which was designed for middle school students identified as at risk for school failure or who had already dropped out, received students from five predominantly White local junior high schools. The student body of this alternative school, which has a maximum capacity of 120 students, closely reflected the suburban city's demographics of 85% White and 3% Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Thirty-two percent of the city's residents had earned a high school diploma, 12.6% had earned a bachelor's degree, 55% of the city's grandparents provided the primary care for youth age 18 and under, female-headed households composed 22% of all households, and 10% of all families with youth under the age of 18 lived in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

### *Recruitment Procedures*

We used purposeful sampling to choose participants and a unique site to recruit Black students identified as at risk and who (a) identified themselves as Black, (b) attended an alternative school at the time of the study, and (c) provided student assent and parental or guardian consent. Teachers who had at least one participating student in at least one class were also recruited. Unexpectedly, the alternative school's principal agreed to participate. We purposefully chose this sample because the purpose of the study required Black students identified as at risk for school failure and Black students attending schools where they occupy less than 20% of the student

body are most likely to experience the burden of acting White (Fryer & Torelli, 2006).

### *Participants*

The school's principal, six Black students who attended the school, and five teachers, each of whom had at least one of the students in his or her classroom, participated in the study. Three male and two female White teachers participated. One female teacher taught science and the other taught language arts. The male teachers taught math, social studies, and computer science. The school's principal had recently received a special education doctoral degree and had led the school since its inception. She provided time for us to discuss this project with the five teachers.

The six students took home consent and assent forms for their parents or guardians to sign. The school's principal contacted each parent or guardian to ensure that each had received the forms. Parents, grandparents, and an aunt of the participating students provided permission for their children to participate in this study. The students also gave their written assent.

Seventh- and eighth-grade students participated in this study. Each had come to the alternative school due to unsatisfactory academic and social progress. No student had previously received special education services, although many of them exhibited the academic and social criteria necessary for special education referral and placement.

Adam, a 14-year-old eighth grader in his first year at the alternative school, was placed in the school by his parents because of their concerns about his academic progress. These concerns resulted from Adam's relocation from one of the largest predominantly Black school districts in the United States. His parents believed that the alternative school would help ease his transition to the new, predominantly White, suburban school. Adam lived with his biological parents, who had both earned advanced college degrees. Adam's mother frequently visited the alternative school as a parent volunteer.

Brenda, a 16-year-old eighth grader in her second year at the alternative school, was repeating the eighth grade. She reported academic failure as the primary reason for her placement. She also purposefully academically underachieved. Brenda lived with both her biological parents in an affluent, predominantly White neighborhood.

James, a 13-year-old seventh grader in his first year at the alternative school, had been expelled from his

public school due to "heated" arguments with teachers, and he came to the alternative school to finish the school year. He lived with both of his biological parents.

Mark, a 13-year-old eighth grader in his first year at the alternative school, came to the alternative school because of failing grades. He wanted to improve his grades so he would be academically eligible for his home school's next basketball season. He lived with his aunt, whom he called "Mom."

Sally, a 15-year-old eighth grader in her second year at the alternative school, had been placed at this school due to failing grades. Sally had one Black and one White parent and considered herself Black. She lived with her grandmother. Sally's teachers and the school's principal considered her the most intellectually gifted student to ever attend the alternative school, although she admittedly underachieved academically. Sally's cousin Tony also attended the alternative school.

Tony, a 14-year-old seventh grader in his first year at the alternative school, had been placed at the alternative school due to his gang affiliation and failing grades. He lived with his grandmother.

### *Research Design*

This study used a phenomenological qualitative design. According to Mertens (2005), this type of design "seeks the individual's perceptions and meaning of a phenomenon or experience" (p. 240). We sought participants' perceptions and meaning of their experiences regarding the burden of acting White. This phenomenological approach enabled us to examine and understand the "emic" perspective, or the participant's point of view (Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg, & Herman, 2002).

### *Research Procedures*

The implementation of this study involved six steps. First, we collected initial data, which included school and classroom observations and field notes that documented observations of people, places, events, and conversations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Initial data also included researcher reflections and hunches, and they enabled us to develop initial ideals. Second, we reviewed the initial data, identified emergent themes, refined research protocols and procedures, and developed an initial list of interview discussion topics. Third, we used a question set to conduct individual audiotaped interviews with the school's principal, teachers, and students that concentrated on gathering information on the stu-

dent's background experiences with the burden of acting White. Each teacher interview took place during the teacher's 55-minute planning period. The hour-long principal interview occurred before school in her office. At the principal's request, individual student interviews lasted no more than 20 minutes and were conducted in the school's conference room with the door open.

During the first round of individual interviews (see the Appendix for a list of initial discussion topics), we posed two questions:

1. Have you *seen* (for students, *experienced*) the burden of acting White? If so, explain.
2. Have you *observed* (for students, *experienced*) masking academic abilities in the face of the burden of acting White?

Only the school's principal was aware of the burden of acting White and was able to respond to these questions. She described her Black friend's experiences as they earned master's degrees together. During their studies, the Black friend intimated that attaining her master's degree involved more than just course work. For her, obtaining a graduate degree meant experiencing Black peoples' perceptions and comments that she had become "uppity" and had "sold out" her Black community. She said she had to understand her goals and not let others determine her future so she could obtain her degree. After relating this story, the principal said we would have ample opportunities to study the burden of acting White at her alternative school.

Since none of the students or teachers seemed to be aware of the term *the burden of acting White*, we asked them, "Have you ever heard a Black student tell another Black student that he or she acts White?" and "Has anyone ever told you that you act White?" After receiving responses for these questions, we developed additional questions, described in the second step. We did not limit discussions to our list of questions, as we developed spontaneous questions based on participant responses.

Fourth, at the end of student interviews, we provided each student with a 24-exposure disposable camera with instructions to photograph anything they believed influenced the way they felt about school. This method of giving students cameras as a means to elicit discussion and reflection has been employed by many researchers and has been commonly discussed in academic journals, such as *Visual Sociology*, *Visual Anthropology*, and *Visual Anthropology Review*. In 1999, the journal *Visual Sociology* published a special issue on this practice titled "Seeing Kids' Worlds" (Wagner, 1999). The

work of Collier greatly informed this practice (Collier, 1967; Collier & Collier, 1986).

Fifth, we conducted a second 20-minute individual audiotaped student interview to discuss the photographs students had taken and to conduct member checks to verify interpretations from previous discussions (Merriam, 1988). Sixth, students participated in a 45-minute audiotaped focus group that used the same discussion topics as the first individual interview. We did this to determine if students would respond differently to questions when in a group versus during an individual interview.

### Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis followed Mertens' (2005) systematic and comprehensive "steps in qualitative data analysis," which occur throughout data collecting. First, we coded our initial data, which included observations and field notes. To do so, we read all the data, compartmentalized them into smaller units, and documented our comments. Second, we identified relationships, patterns, and distinctions among participants. Third, we employed member checks, as mentioned earlier, and returned to the school site with refined interview topics to determine the validity of our initial analyses. Fourth, we developed initial themes. Fifth, we examined and solidified the validity of our themes in relation to our findings and another literature review. Two authors conducted these steps and the third served as an auditor who assessed research procedures and conclusions. We integrated observations, interview and focus group data, and photographs to confirm emergent themes. A researcher conducted interviews and then observed students across school settings to verify their responses. For example, Sally and Tony stated that they did not ostracize Black students by telling them they acted White because of their grades or language. However, both were observed in the school's cafeteria segregating James from the "Black" table and assigning him to the "White" table. While doing so, they made comments such as, "That's where you belong." Teacher interviews also revealed that these two students had been observed ostracizing Black students. Thus, from this procedure, five themes emerged and were confirmed through multiple sources.

## RESULTS

First, results indicated that the burden of acting White does exist, as all the Black students in this study experi-

enced this burden, although Adam indicated that he did not experience it until this study's focus group interview. Three students admittedly masked their academic abilities. Three of the six Black students alienated, ostracized, and victimized a Black student participant because of his increased academic performance, his "White"-looking clothing, and his "White" speech. Second, students gave definitions for acting Black or White. All six students defined acting Black, but only one explained acting White. Third, Black role models appeared to enable students to circumvent the burden of acting White. Fourth, teachers recognized the burden of acting White but admittedly had few if any skills to deal with it. Fifth, students who expressed postschool transition visions appeared to successfully navigate the burden of acting White. The three students with transition visions all set goals and made decisions regardless of what their peers said. Sixth, not a single student indicated that his or her perceptions influenced academic orientation or attitude, values, and beliefs about education (Ford, 1993), but all students indicated that his or her family significantly influenced his or her academic orientation.

### *Burden of Acting White Exists*

Numerous opportunities existed at the alternative school to study the burden of acting White. For instance, Brenda said she routinely experienced the burden of acting White when Black students and White teachers referred to her as "the little blonde," even though she had black hair. She said they used this phrase to mean that she lacked intelligence, just like a stereotypical blonde. She believed that because her parents could afford to live in an affluent White neighborhood, Black students told her she acted White. She also reported that a White student said she did not "dress Black."

James reported experiencing the burden of acting White:

Black people say you're White because you have good grades and they don't. Black people try to say, since they're not smart, I shouldn't be smart. When you show them your grades and they show you their grades and while you got A's and B's, they be like that's because you hang around all those White people. They say I act White. I don't know what [they were] talking about because [they are] saying that White people are smarter than Black people.

[They are] the stupid one. Not only that, people say it's the way I dress and how I talk.

Mark indicated that he had not experienced the burden of acting White, yet he masked his academic skills out of fear of being called a *nerd*. Mark said that Black students at his home school, which was predominantly Black, had used the word *nerd* to refer to Black students whom they believed acted White. Mark further stated,

It's this dude at our school [the predominantly Black school he formerly attended] that makes good grades . . . so everybody start messing with him a lot and calling him "nerd" and saying that he act White and stuff. They just started picking on him a lot, and I guess he changed schools.

A further demonstration of Mark's coping with the burden of acting White was observed when his English teacher said aloud that Mark was a "great writer." Mark very noticeably slid along the wall until he went outside the classroom and out of view of the students and the teacher. When asked about this behavior, Mark replied that his classmates would never see anything above a C on his report card. When asked why, he said, "I don't want them saying I act White." When asked if he believed he could make straight As, Mark replied, "Yes."

Tony indicated that he witnessed a student coping with the burden of acting White when a Black student "picked on" the student because of his "good" grades. In response to the harassment, Tony said the student began "acting Black" and his "punishment" worsened. Tony believed that jealousy led to the student's harassment. In defining the burden of acting White, Tony said, "It's basically somebody that don't got an education and is mad that he got an education."

Sally noted that she had experienced the burden of acting White when a Black female student at her home school told her, "You're Black and you're first [academically] in the class . . . dang, you act White!" When Sally asked why, the student made the comment, "You make good grades." Sally said she believed the girl's comments were "stupid." Sally said she had not treated, nor would she ever treat, another Black student in a similar fashion and that she would not mask her academic abilities. After being told that she acted White, however, Sally promptly stopped completing her school assignments and subsequently failed the eighth grade twice. Still, Sally said that the burden of acting White had no role in

her academic failure, grade repetition, and placement into the alternative school.

### *Students Define Acting Black and White*

When asked what it meant to act Black, students spoke of bad grades, sagging pants, and use of “slang.” When asked what it meant to act White, only one student had a response. Sally said that to act White was to act like the Black male researcher, who had a bald head, wore a gold hoop earring in each ear, dressed in casual business attire, and was said to speak articulately. Together, these characteristics seemed to indicate to her that he was somehow less “Black.”

### *Teachers and the Burden of Acting White*

All five teachers said they had not heard the term *the burden of acting White*, but when asked if they had ever seen a Black student being told that he or she acted White because of grades, dress, or language, the teachers reported observing such incidents. Two teachers singled out the same Black male student who no longer attended the alternative school due to academic failure. The first teacher described him as intelligent, articulate, and one who “sabotaged his future.” Both teachers said that the literate student participated in class discussions and routinely answered pre-exam questions orally but did not complete written exams. The second teacher believed that this student tried to “prove that he didn’t have to do that crap, and seemed to display to other Black students that he was ‘smart enough’ to realize that education was not important.”

The five teachers discussed their observations of Black students’ experiencing the burden of acting White and said it caused Black students to “dumb down” and “mask their academic abilities.” They unanimously agreed that these actions led to academic underachievement, special education placement, increased dropout rates, school failure, and poor postschool transition outcomes. Interestingly, all of the teachers reported having no idea of how to intervene to counteract the undesirable changes brought on by the burden of acting White.

### *Postschool Visions Indicate Overcoming the Burden of Acting White*

Having postschool transition employment and education visions seemed to enable students in this study to successfully navigate the burden of acting White. The

three students who verbalized postschool transition visions had also set goals. Adam wanted to return to his home school to play on the school’s basketball team and earn a college basketball scholarship. He hoped his scholarship would enable him to earn an advanced college degree, just like his parents. Sally, who had failed the eighth grade twice, wanted to attend the school’s alternative high school credit recovery program so she could graduate on time. She dreamed of graduating from high school, attending college like her uncle, and then becoming a model. Mark, like Adam, wanted to return to his home high school and play for the school’s basketball team to earn a college basketball scholarship and eventually be drafted into the National Basketball Association. Interestingly, each of these students chose postschool goals pertaining to entertainment or the fashion field.

While they were at the alternative school, these three students made significant academic and social gains that would soon facilitate their return to their home schools. It appears to us that identifying postschool visions and setting goals contributed to these students’ ability to successfully navigate the burden of acting White. In contrast, the three students without stated postschool visions and goals did not make satisfactory progress at their alternative school.

### *Family Members’ Significance to Black Students’ Academic Orientation*

To better understand the influences on participating Black students’ academic orientation, we asked them to photograph anything they believed influenced their attitudes, values, and beliefs about school. Students snapped 86 photographs, 63 of which were images of home and family, suggesting the significance of family members’ influences on Black students’ academic orientation. Only the two female students took pictures of themselves.

Adam took 10 photographs of his mother and house because his home life “heavily” influenced his academic orientation. Adam said he did not think to photograph himself, but he photographed a poster on his wall that contained a caricature of his face. When asked why all his photographs captured images at his home, he replied,

I earned all this stuff. You have to earn things. You have to work for things. My mom just didn’t give me the money to get this. She just helped me to understand that hard works pays off and the things you want come from work. Like if I drop out from school, they going to

kick me out the house cause education is my job right now.

Brenda returned 16 photos, with 14 of family members or her home and one of herself. When asked about the picture of herself, she dismissed it, saying her mother had taken the photo. Brenda later indicated that it probably was her mother sending her a message. She said, "I don't like me," and "I do not know why I do not like me." In discussing her pictures, Brenda focused on a photo of her Bible and said,

I like to read it because my parents are always telling me to get knowledge and understanding and I'm like, "Why?" Then they gave me the Bible and said, "Read it," and I read it. Now, I wake up every morning and read it because the Bible says get knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

James returned five photographs taken at his home and five taken at the alternative school. He had no photos of himself, of family members, or of anyone's face. He remarked, "I really don't get close to people." He reticently discussed his photographs, and when looking at a picture of clothes in a basket, he said,

If I don't have a decent pair of clothes, I'm not going to school. I just can't look bad when I go outside because it doesn't help me out because it just makes me look bad and people talk about me.

Mark returned 12 photographs, with 11 taken of his home and family members. Mark did not take a photograph of himself, although he photographed his stomach and said it reminded him of his athleticism. Mark said he took so many pictures of family members because

They influence me to go to school because I was supposed [to be their] role model. They want to be like me. I'm going to try to do the best that I want [them] to do and so [they] can be like me.

Mark spoke of his "auntie," whom he calls "Mom," as being most influential on his academic orientation, although her image was noticeably absent from his photos. When asked why, he pointed to a photograph of breakfast foods she had prepared for him before going to sleep that morning and said,

I couldn't get up in time to take a picture of her because she works late nights at the mall, and she doing what she do to put food on the table, and pay rent and stuff like that. She influences me because she letting me live at her house. So the best thing I can do is finish school so I can make her happy and the rest of my family too.

Sally returned 29 photographs, with 15 of her home and family and 14 taken at school. Of the 9 photographs that included her, she said, "I just jumped in." Sally used the word "socialize" to describe the majority of these photos. When asked why her photographs contained so many people, she replied, "I have a lot of people influence me. People are real influential to me." She focused on one photograph in particular, which she believed held the image that most influenced her academic orientation. When looking at this photo of her and her uncle, she said, "I want to be like a good example to like my niece and stuff. I guess my role model is my uncle. I want to become like him [a college student]."

Tony returned nine photographs, with eight of home and family and one taken at school. He did not photograph himself because, he said, he did not think about it. When looking at the photograph of "gang movies" depicting "kids out on the street not going to school," Tony said these movies influenced him not to go to school because

It's basically like you're looking. They ain't doing nothing but basically beating each other up and shooting at everybody. But the parts that influence me not to go to school are the parts where they show everybody out on the street. They just out there having their little fun parties and stuff. I just want to be like out there in the streets partying like they was but not getting shot at.

Tony also discussed a photograph showing family members who influenced him to go to school and not be in gangs like his incarcerated brothers. One photograph showed his now-deceased uncle, who had had severe MR, and one of his brothers, who was a gang member. In the photograph the uncle faced the camera, but the brother turned his back as the camera flashed. When asked what it meant that his brother had turned his back, Tony replied, "I don't want to live that gang life no more. Because it ain't going to get me nowhere." Tony

also said that his grandmother, not his brother, now served as his role model.

These photographs and discussions suggest the significant and strong influence of Black families on Black students' academic orientations. Almost 80% of the photographs consisted of family members or the family home. Brenda, for instance, returned only one photo of herself, which she said her mother took. Brenda also said that she had carefully photographed anything that influenced her academic orientation. Thus, it may be that Brenda's mother was demonstrating to Brenda her significance to her own academic orientation. Many conclusions may be drawn from these photographs, but none should omit the significance of the Black family's influence on Black students' educational perceptions. These photographs also beg the question of why students did not take more photos of themselves. Did they not see themselves as influences upon their academic orientation? Did these students not understand the control they have over their educations?

### *Observing the Burden of Acting White*

The evolution of this research project led us to use a focus group interview to discover whether students would change their responses they had given individually when in a group of their Black peers. We believed this would reveal students' true reactions to the burden of acting White and its survival conflict, because changing their answers might indicate that they were succumbing to their peers' influence. For example, we first asked, "Have you ever heard a Black student tell another Black student they act White because of their grades?" James said "No," which contradicted the response he had given when asked this question individually. When designing this focus group interview, we believed that students' different responses to certain questions would provide evidence of the burden of acting White.

We asked, "Have you ever masked your academic abilities for fear of being told you act White?" Brenda, Mark, and Sally said, "Yes." All students except Adam began laughing. Adam, looking rather disillusioned, asked, "What's so funny? I don't see what's so funny." Sally, sitting immediately to his right, said, "You know you want to laugh, or do you think you're better than us?" Tony, sitting directly to James's left, asked James, "What you laughing at? You know you act White!" Sally then said loudly to James and the group, "James, you hear it every day. Yeah, 'cause of the way you talk!" James then hesitantly denied the accusation while slouching down in

his seat to match Tony's posture and changing his speech to match Tony's. Sally then loudly said, "Look at him over there trying to act Black!"

Sally and Tony, who earlier had said they would not treat other Black students in this manner, led the attack on James. James appeared flustered and disengaged from the group. His responses became very short, and he even said he could not remember his role model's name. When asked, "Why do Black students tell other Black students they act White?" James said he believed they were jealous " 'cause they're not making good grades." Adam, while looking at Sally and Tony, said, "They shouldn't be, 'cause it's their fault. If they had been studying, I don't see how you can be jealous of someone's grades." Adam's few words stopped the attack on James.

This focus group interview confirmed the existence of the burden of acting White and provided us the opportunity to observe Black students telling other Black students that they act White. We also saw a Black student changing his speech and body language in the face of being told he acted White. These findings suggest that a Black student might indeed sabotage his or her academics to find the favor of Black peers. This focus group experience, when combined with Adam's individual responses, confirmed the significance of Black role models. Adam, who had the only parent who routinely visited the alternative school as a volunteer and who seemed to be the student least affected by the burden of acting White, reported neither being aware of nor experiencing the burden of acting White until experiencing the focus group interview. When asked why he believed this to be so, he said, "Parents are the difference . . . and if we had more Black teachers, other students wouldn't either."

## DISCUSSION

Findings from this study suggest that the burden of acting White existed for the Black students attending this alternative school, that it can depress academic performance, and that students with clearly identified postschool transition visions seem to successfully navigate the burden of acting White. Students easily defined that acting Black meant wearing sagging pants, using slang, and getting poor grades. Only one student defined acting White, and she said it meant acting like the Black male graduate research assistant involved in this study. Participating teachers recognized the burden of acting White but did not know how to help minimize it



for students. Students did not see themselves as influencing their own educational attitudes, beliefs, and values, but they did indicate that their families significantly influenced the way they viewed education.

The finding that five of the six students experienced the burden of acting White before being placed in the alternative school and before being labeled as at risk differs from the findings of many researchers (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Cook & Ludwig, 1998). Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, and Harpalani (2001), for instance, concluded that the burden of acting White does not exist, because they did not find Black students equating academic success with Eurocentric values. These authors further discussed the self-hatred needed to perpetuate the burden of acting White. Yet, we discovered that self-hatred might not be the only perpetrator of the burden of acting White. A Black student's burden of acting White may actually be a cry for help in the form of a perverted sense of self-control.

*The Coleman Report* (1966) identified a Black student's sense of control over his or her education and destiny as the best predictor of a Black student's academic achievement. Some might argue that these students, some of whom admitted to academic sabotage and underachievement, were not academic achievers. We would argue that if their goal was academic sabotage and underachievement, by their standards, these students were goal-setting and goal-attaining academic achievers in control of their education and destinies. Thus, the burden of acting White may not be the problem. The problem may reside in these students' inappropriate academic goals. The students in this study who fell prey to the burden of acting White did not demonstrate the self-determination to make educational decisions free from undue external influence, even though they could not define acting White. Also, self-hatred may not perpetuate the burden of acting White as much as inappropriate goal setting in response to a lack of the necessary self-awareness to understand that they are not intellectually inferior. This lack of self-awareness begs for increased self-determination in Black students; to be self-determined, one must first know and value oneself.

This finding indicates that Black students need self-determination, the type of self-determination that Franklin (1984) found existing among the enslaved ancestors of today's U. S. Black students. Franklin examined artifact narratives, songs, sermons, and interviews of slaves and former slaves. He found that many of them believed in self-determination and defined it as

control over their destiny. Many of the slaves also believed that education brought self-determination, and self-determination brought freedom. The problem of inappropriate goal setting, revealed in the voices of this study's Black students, illustrates that Black students need self-determination because being self-determined means acting as "the primary causal agent in one's life and [making] choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influence or interference" (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007, p. 3).

Self-determination also provides the skills, knowledge, and beliefs needed to engage in goal-directed behaviors that are based on an understanding of one's strengths, limitations, and self (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998a). Self-determination involves self-awareness, self-advocacy, decision-making, independent performance, self-evaluation, and adjustment skills that facilitate goal setting and goal attainment (Martin & Marshall, 1995). Students best learn to become self-determined when educators use interventions that systematically teach goal setting and attainment skills (Konrad, Fowler, Walker, Test, & Wood, in press).

Black students also need increased self-determination because a growing body of research has suggested that a strong relationship exists among self-determination skills, academic performance, and successful postschool transition outcomes. Konrad et al. (in press) found that increased self-determination skills seemed associated with increased academic performance. Martin and colleagues (2003) found significant advances in academic performance as students' self-determination skills increased. A 20-year longitudinal study (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992; Goldberg, Higgins, Raskind, & Herman, 2003; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999) revealed that self-determination attributes predicted post-high school success. It also revealed that former students who identified postschool goals during early adolescence had better postschool transition outcomes. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) measured the self-determination of students with learning disabilities and MR prior to their exiting high school. Students with higher levels of self-determination had higher employment rates. Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003) replicated the 1997 study and found the same positive benefits of increased self-determination skills. Martin, Mithaug, Oliphint, Husch, and Frazier (2002) compared employment outcomes for almost 600 workers with disabilities who completed a systematic self-determination and job placement program with outcomes for 200 workers who completed only the job placement program. Participants who completed the

self-determination and job placement programs kept their jobs significantly longer than those who did not.

Links between self-determination and transition outcomes prompted the Council for Exceptional Children's Division on Career Development and Transition to call for the inclusion of self-determination instructional strategies to prepare students for their transition from high school (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998b). Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, and Herman (2002) believed that teaching disability awareness, goal setting, and other self-determination skills should become a part of the secondary special education curriculum. Learning to become self-determined increases the control that students experience over their education and transition outcomes (Mithaug, Mithaug, Agran, Martin, & Wehmeyer, 2003).

This study also identified that participating Black students with clearly identified postschool visions seemed to successfully navigate the burden of acting White. These students used visions of their future selves to set and attain goals to become those individuals. This finding leads us to suggest that Black students could benefit from transition programs with a focus on self-determination. These programs would center on teaching goal setting and goal attainment skills based on the students' postschool visions. According to our findings, to develop these programs, teacher awareness of the burden of acting White would have to be dramatically increased.

This study found, as did Ford (1993), that the Black family heavily influences a Black student's academic orientation. Nearly 80% of student photographs about what they believed influenced the way they felt about school contained their home or family members. This suggests that the Black family serves as a potent vehicle for increasing Black students' self-determination. It also suggests that the Black family needs increased self-determination levels to model self-determined decision making and behaviors.

### *Future Implications*

We believe these results expand the literature base in at least six ways. First, Black students need to be included in discussions about their in-school and postschool outcomes because they provide invaluable data sources. By including Black students in this study, we learned how better to empower them. As seen in the focus group, Adam seemingly empowered James by including him and apparently adding value to his words. This act en-

abled James to respond to the question of why Black students tell other Black students they act White: "I think it's a bunch of people who want to be something else, but they don't think they need the education to do it." Each student agreed with James, who afterwards regained the posture and vernacular he exhibited before being told he acted White. From this experience, we learned that including Black students in discourses about the burden of acting White has the ability to empower them and may empower them to be solutions to the burden of acting White.

Second, establishing postschool transition visions seems to enable students to combat the burden of acting White. The three students in this study who articulated postschool transition visions set goals to attain their visions and did not allow the burden of acting White to depress their academic achievements. All three of these students wanted to attend college, each had lofty employment expectations, and each had begun actively working to attain these expectations. If setting goals and taking action to attain those goals wards off the burden of acting White, then implementing systematic transition programs focused on increasing self-determination, goal setting, and attainment skills may improve the academic and postschool outcomes of Black youth who are at risk for school failure and for students with and without disabilities.

Third, Black students need self-determination to resist the burden of acting White because self-determination is founded upon first knowing and valuing oneself. According to Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, and Harpalani (2001), self-hatred may fuel the burden of acting White. The students in this study each identified themselves as Black and identified acting Black as having "bad" grades. This may not indicate self-hatred as much as it may indicate a lack of self-awareness. This lack of self-awareness may lead many Black students to believe and perpetuate the historical White slave society perception that Blacks were intellectually inferior.

Fourth, attempts to decrease Black students' disproportional representation in special education will require further exploration of the impact of the burden of acting White on academic achievement and identity. Academic sabotage may contribute to the inappropriate placement of many Black students into special education's MR and ED disability categories. These students will most likely receive their education in restrictive settings amidst negative stigmas that may contribute to a greater lack of self-awareness and higher dropout rates, adding to the likelihood that they will experience poverty

after exiting high school. Poverty in turn increases the chances of their children's placement in special education, and the cycle begins anew. Increased awareness of the burden of acting White and strategies for identifying it and intervening to diminish its harmful impact may decrease the number of Black students who are inappropriately placed in special education and end their disproportional representation.

Fifth, an increased awareness of the burden of acting White might also lead Black students and their communities to better understand that by devaluing education, they themselves contribute to their own in-school and postschool shortcomings. A Black student's academic orientation, which this study found to be heavily influenced by family members, shapes that student's attitudes, values, and beliefs about education. Family members' devaluing of education may actually reduce Black students' freedom to be academic achievers.

Sixth, our findings make a strong argument that Black students victimize one another. Although none of the students in the study admitted to victimizing other Black students by telling them they act White, we observed two students doing so. We also found two students who believed they were victimized by other Black students and three other students who said they had witnessed other Black students being told they act White. It appears that these students more readily believed that they were victims and not victimizers. This supports Freire's (1970) findings that many oppressed people seek to be victims and that victims need and seek victimization to maintain their identification as a victim. However, remaining the victim makes it difficult for many Black students to become self-determined and to control their destiny, because they have relinquished their control and power over their education and destinies.

### Limitations

The fact that only one study participant—the school's principal, who had recently earned her doctoral degree in special education—understood the burden of acting White can be viewed as a limitation of this study. To decrease the bias due to this lack of understanding, the researchers, rather than defining the burden of acting White, only asked participants if they had had seen Black students being told they act White. This question alone seemed sufficient to elicit participants' understanding of the issue and to provide the qualitative data we sought. The lack of Black students in this study who were in spe-

cial education placements might be considered a limitation, reducing our findings' generalizability. However, we purposefully chose Black students who had been identified as at risk because they were at risk for school failure, special education placement, and the same post-school transition outcomes as Black students' in special education, which may contribute to Black students' special education referral and placement and their continued disproportional special education representation. We thus see this as a strength of the study: By studying Black students *before* any special education placement, we learned that postschool visions enabled some of these students to become goal-setting academic achievers who did not enter special education.

### Conclusion

Since Blacks' arrival on U.S. soil as enslaved Africans, the education of Black students has been a topic of debate. Presently, that debate seems centered on educational shortcomings. Many people have discussed discrimination and institutionalized racism, which relegated Black students to an inferior status worthy of an inferior education. Many individuals believe that discrimination and institutionalized racism perpetuate Black students' increased dropout rates, disproportional representation in special education, decreased secondary and postsecondary graduation rates, and eventual poverty. However, many of these discussions have excluded the Black student's voice. Freire (1970) found that to exclude an oppressed people from discussing and finding solutions to their oppression treats them as *objects* to be saved, which further disenfranchises and disempowers them and adds to their victimization. Excluding Black students from discussions about their own educational experiences and treating them as objects to be saved might lead many Black students into a state of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness produces victims who are powerless to change their educational circumstances because they have no control over them.

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## APPENDIX: INITIAL LIST OF DISCUSSION TOPICS

Have you ever heard a Black student tell another Black student that he or she acts White?  
 Has anyone ever told you that you act White?  
 Has someone told you that you act White because of your grades?  
 Do you know of any other instances of Black people saying Black people act White?  
 What is acting Black?

What is acting White?  
 Do you think you act Black, White, or either?  
 Do you ever try to act Black?  
 How do you feel about school?  
 How important is your education to you?  
 How much control do you believe you have over your education?  
 What do you want to be when you grow up?