

RE-INTERPRETING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: Is Being Bi-cultural the Key to African American Achievement in Predominantly White High Schools?ⁱ

ABSTRACT

This article presents the promising results of a three-year research study which measured and interpreted African American student achievement in a predominantly White suburban Chicago high school. Its results show that academically successful African American students do not, in fact, “act White.” Instead, they internalize a strong bi-cultural identity that enhances their cognitive and affective capacities to academically achieve. African American students who negotiate the triple quandary do not compromise their Black identity. Rather, they embrace it as they accept and appreciate the cultural and racial identities of others. Conversely, African American students without such negotiation skills are more likely to embrace only a Black identity, to seek negative outlets to demonstrate their Black identity, to realize low levels of academic achievement, and to engage in disciplinary violations of the school’s *Code of Conduct*. Of special significance, however, is this study’s ultimate identification of an African American success stream populated by students who internalize ways to manage the practices, norms and pathways related to the school’s rules and to its institutional culture.

REVISITING AND DISPUTING A PREVAILING THEORY

No one disputes the disparity between the academic performances of African American students and their White student counterparts in schools throughout the United States. According to Johnston and Viadero (2000), this disparity, referred to as the “achievement gap,” is not only one of the most pressing issues in education today but is sadly worsening as minority populations in schools increase at rapid rates during the 21st century. Even though this achievement gap began to decrease in the 1970s, progress halted abruptly by the end of the 1980s. As many researchers, educators and organizations attempted to explain this reversal in closing the gap (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Hale-Benson, 1986; Ferguson, 2001; Sampson, 2002; Ogbu, 2002), the general literature on the African American achievement gap suggested the following as reasons for its persistence:

- Doing well in school is often considered “acting White” by African American students.
- Kids care more about the reactions of their peers than they do about the reactions of their parents or teachers.
- White parents interact with their children in ways that better support school success than do African American parents.
- African American parents tend not to encourage their children as much as their students grow older. African American parent involvement is at low levels when compared to those of White parents.

One of the most challenging reasons offered to explain and to interpret the African American achievement gap was put forth by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) in

their article entitled “*Black Students’ School Success: Coping with the Burden of ‘Acting White.’*” Their basic premise held that Black students experience a disproportionate amount of school failure because they are disillusioned about the value of school and because they distrust both school systems and the intentions of educators. Furthermore, Fordham and Ogbu maintained that as White Americans refuse to acknowledge that African Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, Black students begin to question their own intellectual abilities: they define academic success as the prerogative of White students. So, Black students begin to discourage their peers from emulating White students’ academic achievement.

Fordham and Ogbu further explained that Black students respond to the “White” environment of schools by developing an *oppositional collective (social) identity* where there is a “sense of people hood in opposition to the social identity of White Americans because of the way White Americans treat them in economic, political, social and psychological domains, including White exclusion of these groups from true assimilation” (1986: 183). In response to this oppression, these authors theorized that Black students create an *oppositional cultural frame of reference* to protect their Black identity and to maintain “boundaries between them and White students” (1986: 183). Thus, Black students who overcome such barriers to success are theorized to “act White” because they must yield their Black identity in order to be academically accomplished in predominantly White schools.

Based on strong and significant evidence, this article argues that African American students are indeed capable of succeeding academically in predominantly White schools without having to “act White” or to compromise their Black identity even

though some of the conditions stipulated by Fordham and Ogbu to explain the achievement gap continue to exist in school systems today. This article re-interprets the trauma of “acting White” by dissecting the manifold processes of Black student achievement through analyses of qualitative and quantitative data. These processes revealed that African American student achievement was not associated with “acting White.” Instead, it emanated from how African American students internalized their own identities while they simultaneously accepted and appreciated all diverse identities and cultures in a predominantly White high school. Students can internalize a strong bi-cultural identity that enhances their cognitive and affective capacities to achieve academically in advanced courses. In fact, successful students who participated in the research study described in this article have developed a set of significant skills to negotiate the triple quandary, skills that enabled them to compete successfully in advanced and regular college-preparatory courses at their predominantly White high school with a long-standing tradition of student achievement in the Chicagoland area and across the nation.

DEFINING THE TRIPLE QUANDARY AND ITS APPLICATION

A. Wade Boykin recognized a set of distinct orders, patterns and meanings ascribed to a complexity of behaviors that under-girded the bi-cultural status of African American students in most school settings in his article *The Triple Quandary and the Schooling of African American Children* (1986). Because of their unique social position in the United States, African American students are bi-cultural: “One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”

(DuBois 1903). Boykin hypothesized that in order to be successful within and outside their own culture and social climate, African American students confront a triple quandary within which they must negotiate three experiences:

- a) *The Mainstream [White] Experience* involves the conventional assumption of assimilation into the dominant culture. The end result is a melting pot in which cultural difference and diversity are integrated into a homogeneous environment with shared rules, goals and values. African Americans and members of other groups of color may perceive the melting pot as a forced conformity to a set of rules applied unevenly and typically to hold them in inferior positions.
- b) *The Minority Experience* involves exposure to a set of culturally, politically, socially and economically oppressive conditions that have reduced African American life chances. These conditions – such as African enslavement, anti-miscegenation laws, segregation, restrictive covenants, redlining, lynching, political disenfranchisement, racial profiling and racial balancing, residential segregation – place African Americans in an out-group position in community, society and schools. This status evolves into a vicious cycle: African Americans are labeled inferior and are victimized by discrimination; the label of inferiority and discriminatory treatment are subsequently used to blame African Americans for not trying hard enough; their failure is ultimately attributed to their inferiority.
- c) *The Black Cultural Experience* involves the complex ways in which African

Americans develop particular coping strategies to negotiate the multiple contexts and situations they encounter in their everyday lived mainstream [White] experiences in the United States, where their culture's centrality is either marginal or invisible. Some of these coping and negotiating strategies resemble efforts to "cross over" and negotiate mainstream [White] by internalizing only those rules and cultural values that lead to success. As Boykin stated, "some passive strategies that derive from mental colonization are connected to the mainstream (e.g., 'a piece of the action'), and some active strategies are related to Black culture (e.g., identification with Black Nationalist movements)" (74).

Some coping strategies which are used by African American high school students and may appear to be conforming or passive are usually perceived and understood as acceptable by mainstream [White] experiences. Other strategies, such as identification with Black cultural experience, are usually labeled *radical* or *militant* in the context of the mainstream [White] experience because, on appearance, these are defined as abrasive, are often interpreted harshly, and are frequently addressed through disciplinary action or expulsion. If African American students come from a bi-cultural experience within which they are hypothesized to negotiate a triple quandary, their academic achievement must be investigated from this broader social context. However, Black culture was too broad of an experience to undertake in the research study described in this article. Because of the importance of Black culture and its relationship to academic achievement, racial identity – albeit a very narrowed and watered-down version of the Black cultural experience – was designated as one way to understand students' achievement experience in a

predominantly White high school context. Thus, the research study dealt not with the broadness and depth of the Black cultural experience but rather with a more limited measure of racial and ethnic identity. This choice was based on finite resources and on the more specific focus of the research study's design on the correlation between ethnic/racial identity and academic achievement in a predominantly White suburban public high school.

Therefore, the research study applied Boykin's theory of the triple quandary to the hypothesis that the academic achievement of Black students is enhanced for those students who successfully negotiate its three constructs. African American students who do this are likely to

- Develop peer relationships across racial, ethnic, class and gender boundaries;
- Participate in homogenous and heterogeneous extracurricular activities;
- Develop coping strategies to overcome inconsistencies between mainstream [White] values and their home and community values;
- Internalize only those mainstream [White] values that they define as necessary for their academic achievement.

DESIGN AND METHODS

This article summarizes an intensive and extensive three-year research study conducted at Oak Park and River Forest High School (OPRFHS), a suburban public high school that borders the city of Chicago. The school serves a diverse student body in which a majority is White (60.6%) while the remainder is African American (29.0%), Hispanic (3.9%), Native American (.1%) and other or those who identify themselves as multi-racial,

bi-racial or foreign-born nationals (3.7%). The study was launched as a collaborative effort which required two local academic researchers and five school practitioners to investigate the actual and perceived barriers to African American achievement for two important reasons: to realize school district goals related to achievement and school climate; to understand standards to measure educational equity, availability and use of educational resources, and access to equal education.

Sampling Frame

Five population parameters controlled the selection of a stratified random sample of African American students who were sophomores, juniors and seniors during the 2000-2001 academic year at OPRFHS:

1. Weighted Grade Point Average which included BELOW as measured by 2.0 and under; MIDDLE as measured by the interval between 2.0 and 3.5; and HIGH as measured by 3.5 and above;
2. Attendance irregularities – the sum of absences and tardies across class periods for a given school year;
3. Disciplinary records which included no disciplinary record, warning, detention, single in-school suspension (ISS), after-school suspension (ASP), multiple ISS and/or ASP, and out-of-school suspension (OSS) or multiple OSS;
4. Family structure which included mother and father, mother only, father only, or other;
5. Sender school student information which included Oak Park and River Forest public and private schools as well as non-Oak Park and River Forest

public and private schools.

Although a total of fifty-three African American sophomores, juniors and seniors received parental approval to participate in the study, a total of forty-one students eventually participated in the interview component of the study. This sample was representative of the total population of African American students at OPRFHS and was proportionately distributed by grade level, gender and mean weighted GPA. Also proportionately distributed throughout the sample were the type of sender school with the majority of students in both the sample and the overall population coming from local sender districts; family structure with over half of the African American students at OPRFHS coming from mother-only families; encounters with the discipline system; and attendance irregularities. Because the sample was representative of the total population of African American students at OPRFHS, findings from the study can be generalized to the total population of African American students at this school.

Quantitative Analysis of Academic Achievement

Grade distributions for Black and White students enrolled in the Classes of 2000, 2001 and 2002 at OPRFHS showed that the White student GPA and grade distributions were statistically significantly different from those of their Black student counterparts. Not only were White students in regular education and special education courses more likely to receive grades of *A* or *B* than were their Black student counterparts, but these differences were also statistically significant.

Overall, the data collected and analyzed revealed a one-point gap in the academic achievement of Black and White students. On average, Black students' mean cumulative weighted GPAs (2.27) placed them at academic risk while those of White students (3.26)

placed at academic promise. Furthermore, because the weighted GPA is a strong predictor of college admissions – especially in competitive colleges and universities where Black students are typically under-represented, this one-point difference in weighted GPA is extremely important and very significant for the future career options and life opportunities of African American students. Also noteworthy as a statistically significant difference was the mean cumulative weighted GPA of White special education students (2.38) when compared to Black special education students (2.05).

Equally important as statistically significant differences were the modal grades in all grade-granting courses, i.e., basic, regular, and honors courses, for White students and for Black students at OPRFHS. White students were more than twice as likely to receive a grade of *A* (39.5%) than were Black students who received a grade of *A* (16.8%). Grades of *B* also showed discrepancies: White students received 36.4% and Black students received 29.5%. Conversely, Black students were over four times more likely to receive a grade of *F* (7.7%) when compared to White students (1.7%). Issues of being placed at academic promise or at academic risk may be embedded in students' races at this school.

Qualitative Analysis of Academic Achievement Gap

A student portfolio was designed to guide the development of a set of both standard and unique questions for face-to-face interviews with each student in the sample who was available for the interview component of the study. Each interview was videotaped and audio-recorded so that all non-verbal forms of communication, including gestures and body language, could be recorded and analyzed. The QSR N5, a windows-based application for analyzing qualitative research, was used to determine the percentage of

coded text in each transcript by the overall number of text units in each interview (QSR International, 2000). This was done to determine the “thickness” of students’ voices in describing their academic experiences at OPRFHS.

Development of the student portfolio involved the method of triangulation in which quantitative and qualitative information about each student was drawn from a variety of information systems. This process illuminated the multiple and complex ways in which African American students not only perform academically but also perceive their racial identity at OPRFHS. Each student’s portfolio was reviewed in detail before a “theory of the student” was formulated. This theory consisted of developing interview directions and questions about each student’s academic achievement process. The interview protocol also standardized questions which were designed for all students as well as questions which were unique to individual students. Each portfolio included these fifteen items: GPA and weighted GPA; attendance irregularities; discipline record; participation in extracurricular activities (homogeneous and heterogeneous); family status; sender school; attempted honors courses; education, occupation and income of parent(s); resources available in the home and resources used at school; official transcript; working transcript; final examination grades; teacher progress reports; teacher comments for current semester courses; and results of the *Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale* (BRIAS).

The BRIAS was used as a surrogate measure of the three experiences – mainstream [White], minority, and Black cultural – articulated in the triple quandary. Even though this study presented the first opportunity for the BRIAS to be used to investigate the effect of racial identity on high school student achievement, the BRIAS

has been widely used in the social sciences to understand racial identity.ⁱⁱ This tool requires respondents to assign to each of its twenty-nine items a ranking drawn from five-scaled options beginning with strongly agree (#1) and ending with strongly disagree (#5). Originally created by William E. Cross, Jr. (1971; 1978) and further developed by Janet E. Helms (1981), the Helms BRIAS has been associated with a range of behavioral, affective, cognitive and cultural variables. Helms and Parham found that racial identity has a direct influence on self-esteem (*Attitudes of Racial Identity and Self-Esteem: An Exploratory Investigation* 136). Past usage of the BRIAS has shown that one or more of its four statuses are related to preference for counselors' race (Helms and Parham), to affective state (Helms and Parham), to cultural values (Helms and Carter), and to cognitive styles (Helms).

Alpha coefficients were run on the items for each subscale to determine support for content, construct and criterion validity (Helms and Carter 1990). Alpha coefficients have been reported by Helms and Carter (1990) as the following: .69 for Pre-Encounter; .50 for Encounter; .67 for Immersion; and .79 for Internalization. For this study's sample, alpha coefficients for the subscales were .49 for Pre-Encounter; .49 for Encounter; .41 for Immersion; and .66 for Internalization. Although the alphas for the sample were low, this circumstance was attributed to the ages and to the lower maturation which the sample had with some BRIAS items. The caveat maintained in interpreting the results are that these alphas reflect a high school sample which may not score in comparable ways with more mature college student samples used by Helms and Carter (1990).

Because this study held that racial identity is a very important attribute of the African American academic achievement gap at OPRFHS, the BRIAS was carefully and deliberately selected as a critical tool in the research study. Each status which the BRIAS measures reflects experiences of being in a mainstream [White] experience or a minority experience or a Black cultural experience. In this study, the BRIAS was used as a surrogate measure for the four triple quandary proposed themes related to Black student achievement:

1. **Pre-Encounter (*Mainstream [White] Experience*)**

This status is characterized by dependency on White cultural norms for self-definition and approval as well as by attitudes that are White-identified and Black-rejective.

2. **Encounter (*Minority Experience*)**

This status is marked by feelings of racial identity confusion and by an increasing desire to cultivate a Black identity. Attitudes at this status are often based on an experience that challenges preconceived notions of self (e.g., “Don’t you know you’re Black!”).

3. **Immersion-Emersion (*Black Cultural Experience*)**

This status is characterized by absorption in the Black experience and sweeping rejection of the White cultural world. Attitudes at this status are Black-identified and White-rejective.

4. **Internalization**

In this status, one sees strengths and weaknesses in both races while viewing one's Black identity as a positive and a valued aspect of self. Attitudes in this status are Black-identified but are not White-rejective.

The study hypothesized that students in the sample who endorsed a Black identity that was not White-rejective (the status of internalization) were more likely to negotiate the triple quandary. Mindful that the BRIAS is a narrow and limited measure of the triple quandary and of African American student identity, this study nevertheless endorsed the belief that the use of the BRIAS, in combination with a series of other research techniques, strengthened the understanding of African American students and their academic achievement at OPRFHS.

RESULTS

The results of the study show that the BRIAS status of internalization is more likely to be endorsed by students in the sample. Table 1 shows the mean status scores of students in the sample for each of the four statuses measured by the BRIAS: the lower the mean, the greater the endorsement of that status (see Table 1).

Table 1.—Sample Mean Status Scores for Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale (BRIAS) ($p < .05$)

Status	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of the Mean
Pre-encounter	4.04245	.561133	.077077
Encounter	3.10692	.715439	.098273
Immersion	3.73855	.511054	.070199
Internalization	2.32933	.401532	.055155

These results were revealing. The sample clearly rejected pre-encounter (Mainstream White) as a status and leaned considerably toward disagreeing with the immersion status (Black Cultural Experience). This may suggest that some of the items used to measure this scale created some degree of uncertainty for students. A simple correlation revealed that the internalization score was negatively correlated with student weighted GPA: thus, the lower the internalization score, the higher the weighted GPA. These findings suggested that African American students who endorsed internalization were more likely to have higher weighted GPAs than those who did not endorse internationalization (see Table 2).

Table 9.—Correlation of Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale (BRIAS) and Weighted GPA

Correlation Matrix	Weighted GPA	Pre-encounter	Encounter	Immersion	Internalization
Weighted GPA	1.00				
Pre-encounter	.100	1.00			
Encounter	-.029	-.041	1.00		
Immersion	.038	.250	.439**	1.00	
Internalization	-.313*	-.362**	.131	.086	1.00

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Overall, the study’s findings suggested that students in the sample were less likely to express an attitude and/or identity that valorized either a White or a Black cultural identity. They did not reject White cultural norms; instead, they negotiated mainstream [White], minority and Black cultural experiences within the social ecology and everyday construction of the school environment and culture. More importantly, this suggests that African American student achievement is associated with internalization and that students succeed not by acting White but by positively identifying with who they are in relationship to all other students in the school. A statistically significant correlation between encounter and immersion (.439) suggests that students who did not endorse encounter also did not endorse immersion: the higher the score, the less the endorsement.

Neither a need to find and over-identify with a Black self nor a need to reject White culture was endorsed by the sample. Moreover, the significant negative correlation between internalization and pre-encounter straightforwardly suggests that students in the sample who endorsed internationalization (a score of 2 or less) were more likely to reject the pre-encounter status of the BRIAS. Thus, the need to “act White” to achieve academically at OPRFHS was not endorsed by the sample (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986).

These findings also suggest that those African American students who endorsed internalization were more likely to successfully negotiate the triple quandary and to find ways to do the following:

- Develop peer relationships across racial, ethnic, class and gender boundaries;
- Participate in homogenous and heterogeneous extracurricular activities;
- Develop coping strategies to overcome inconsistencies between mainstream [White] values and their home and community values;
- Internalize only those mainstream [White] values which they define as necessary for their academic achievement.

The more students in the sample endorsed internalization on the BRIAS, the more they tended to be able to negotiate mainstream [White], minority and Black cultural experiences in the school without compromising or diminishing either their own identity or the identity of other groups in the school. However, although endorsement of internalization was correlated with higher GPA outcomes, it did not eliminate the academic achievement gap between African American and White students at OPRFHS.

A cluster of eleven items on the BRIAS that measured internalization were interrogated to provide deeper understanding of the gap for those students who endorsed

internalization. This investigation revealed that although a quarter of the students endorsed internalization, they responded differently from others in the sample on items that related to: “I feel comfortable wherever I am;” “I feel good about being Black but don’t limit myself to Black activities;” and “I involve myself in social action and political groups even if there are no other Blacks involved.” When students in the sample were sorted by their disagreement or their strong disagreement with these three BRIAS items that measured internalization, the findings revealed a segment of students who clearly endorsed a stronger Black identity.

Internalized Negotiated vs. Internalized Non-negotiated Streams

Analysis of qualitative face-to-face interview data led to the discovery of two distinct groups within the internalization status of those students who endorsed this status. Those African American students who endorsed internalization by agreeing with the previous three BRIAS items were labeled the “internalized negotiated stream” because they satisfied all four conditions of the study’s triple quandary hypothesis. However, further analysis of the interview data revealed that a quarter of the students who endorsed internalization also endorsed a Black identity where they were less inclined to negotiate their identity in the school environment. This group of students who endorsed internalization while maintaining and promoting a Black identity were labeled the “internalized non-negotiated stream” because they did not agree with the previous three BRIAS internalization statement, and their interview data also revealed their reluctance to develop heterogeneous peer groups and to participate in heterogeneous extracurricular activities. However, three of these students who were relatively academically successful with weighted GPAs that ranged from 2.5 to 3.0 attempted to perform academically

without feeling the need to negotiate the several experiences of the triple quandary to succeed. The remaining nine students in the internalized non-negotiated stream who did not experience academic success had discipline records and low mean weighted GPAs.

Other data revealed characteristics of the internalized negotiated and non-negotiated streams in the sample. African American female students were the larger gender group in the internalized negotiated success stream (66.7%), while male students constituted the larger gender group in the non-negotiated stream (78.6%). Those in the non-negotiated stream were more likely to live with both parents (42.9%) than were those in the negotiated stream (35.9%). Overall, a majority of both internalized streams resided with their mothers only, 56.4% for the negotiated stream and 57.1% for the non-negotiated stream. A statistically significant difference also existed in the mean weighted GPAs of those in the internalized negotiated stream (2.50) and those in the non-negotiated stream (1.79). Additionally, these two groups showed statistically significant differences in their ACT composite scores (19.68 compared to 14.75, respectively) as well as scores on the BRIAS internalization status (2.17 compared to 2.74, respectively). Finally, there were no statistically significant differences in attendance irregularities.

The videotaped interviews showed that there were no differences in apparel, language and attentiveness during the interviews of the three African American students in the internalized non-negotiated stream: they looked identical to the twenty-four students in the internalized negotiated success stream in their casual but modern apparel choices, their use of standard English, their practice of addressing the interviewer with non-verbal cues that indicated their interest and investment in the interview process. Thus, those students in the internalized negotiated success stream appear to have

developed strategies to negotiate their success while those in the non-negotiated stream seem to have “blended in” and not called attention to themselves. To some degree, the latter negotiated an outward appearance while maintaining a Black identity. This might be what Boykin meant by referring to those in the triple quandary who “get over” while endorsing a Black identity (Boykin, 1986: p. 78).

Conversely, the remaining nine students in the internalized non-negotiated stream acted out their Black identity in dress, demeanor and speech. During their videotaped interviews, most of these students adopted postures of indifference by slouching, maintaining poor eye contact with the interviewer, and generally exhibiting disinterest until questions about the school’s discipline system were asked. Their discipline records had revealed that they had often called attention to themselves in classroom and hallway encounters with faculty and staff and that their behavior, described as disruptive and defiant of authority, required disciplinary action. Most described the disciplinary consequences of their behavior as too severe; they remarked that “their side of the story” was seldom heard or believed by the disciplinary staff. Yet these students offered detailed encounters with and elaborately articulated perspectives about the school’s discipline system. Therefore, conclusions were drawn about the possibility of positive assets which had not been identified or developed or tapped for these students in the school’s learning environment. The belief that these students could acquire skills and strategies to adopt behaviors associated with those in the internalized negotiated success stream surfaced. For OPRFHS or any system within this school’s structure to focus primarily on these students’ deficits automatically places them at academic risk. The school must persistently harness and unreservedly dedicate adequate resources to

determine how its learning environment can identify the assets of such students.

Although most African American students at OPRFHS are placed at academic risk, these nine students and others like them require a radical change in investment first to determine their assets and then to develop tactics that educators can use to place such students at academic promise.

Honors Grade Distributions

Because a one-point gap in the achievement of students in the internalized negotiated success stream and the achievement of White students also persisted at OPRFHS, the school's honors program was investigated. When grade distributions for Black and White students in honors courses were compared, not only were similar patterns of grade distribution disparity for Black and White students discovered, but the differences were found to be statistically significant and important. A comparison of the distribution of the grade of *A* showed that Black students received 23.9% while White students received 41.8%. When distributions for the grade of *C* were compared, Black students received 25.6% and White students received 15.8%.

To further understand the gap in honor courses, a distinction was made in the research study between "true" honors students and those students "testing" the honors level. The definition and measure of a "true" honors student was based on how the OPRFHS weighted grade system limits the positive effects of weighting for successful (grade of *A* or *B*) completion of honors courses to no more than twenty-four such experiences over a student's four years in high school. Based on this weighting system, the research study selected seniors from the Class of 2000 to determine how many took twelve or more honors courses over their four years. One hundred and sixty White and Black seniors in the

Class of 2000 were identified as having met this criterion. However, of the 160 seniors taking twelve or more honors courses, 154 were White while only six were Black in the Class of 2000.

Weighted GPA and State Reading and Mathematics Examination Scores

Because so few apparently qualified Black students in the Class of 2000 – only six – did not attempt twelve or more honors courses, correlations were run between weighted GPA and reading and mathematics scores on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) which these students had taken as sophomores in the spring of 1998. The remarkably high correlation between GPAs and reading scale scores for the six Black students (.831) in this category merited further study because such a correlation did not exist for comparable group of 154 White students (.128). A reasonable assumption of the research study was that reading skill acquisition would underpin academic success in honors-level courses. Whereas this appeared to be the case for Black students, it did not apply to White students who took a high number of honors-level courses. Similarly, the correlation between mean weighted GPA and ISAT mathematics scale scores for Black students in this group (.643) was significantly higher than that for White students (.255) in the comparable group. Additionally, differences in the mean cumulative weighted GPA for White and Black students in these two groups also showed statistical significance: 4.00 for White students, 3.36 for Black students. Furthermore, the level of success rate in honors courses for White students in this category (.8922) was higher than that of comparable Black students (.6329) – another statistically significant difference.

Such differences in performance levels by race raised questions:

- Why were the correlations between standardized test scores and academic performance so high for the six Black honors-level students and not for the comparable 154 White students?

- Why were the six Black honors-level students not performing at the same high academic level as their White counterparts even when their standardized reading test scores were comparable?
- What in the definition and understanding of the OPRFHS grading system enables White students to be more academically successful than comparable Black students even when reading skill level appears to be the same?
- What in honors courses blocks or impedes the academic achievement of Black students?
- Is there some level of privilege or entitlement in the distribution of grades at the honors level that favors higher success rates for White students regardless of their true academic ability and regardless of reading performance on the ISAT?
- Does race or skin color serve to permanently restrict a student's success in honors courses?

These findings and resultant questions underscored the need to understand and to investigate the standards by which Black and White students in honors courses are assessed. Hypotheses of the research study asserted that Black students negotiate a triple quandary of mainstream [White] experience, minority experience and their Black cultural experience. Analysis of the BRIAS showed that Black students internalize only those mainstream [White] values necessary for academic success while they negotiate ways to neutralize the impact of their minority experience and their Black cultural experience on their course performance in order to succeed. They may need to identify with only those mainstream [White] experiences that may be more present in honors courses if they are to succeed. The study further assumed that Black students in honors courses, especially

those six who had taken twelve or more honors-level courses during their high school careers, had acquired insights about honors standards and had demonstrated their knowledge of mainstream [White] values in both the curriculum and the culture of honors courses. The results of the honors grade distribution clearly suggests that Black students succeed but not at the level of their White student counterparts even when Black students not only had attained similar reading performance levels on standardized tests but also had a similar history of enrollment in honors-level courses.

Results of Qualitative Face-to-Face Videotaped Interviews

The forty-one students in the sample who participated in the interview component of the study were challenged to speak candidly about their weighted GPAs as well as about factors which explained these. Most blamed themselves for what they perceived as not working up to their academic potential. However, when probed for details, students volunteered clarifications about the nuances of their practices and their everyday lived experiences which became important explanations of their weighted GPAs. All forty-one videotaped interviews and text generated nearly fifteen hundred pages of transcription. The interviews were meticulously reviewed so that each initial “theory of the student” – as developed from each student’s portfolio – could be compared and analyzed with the “reality of the student” as revealed during the videotaped interviews. Students with very low GPAs were often surprisingly articulate about reasons for their poor academic performances. Such candor and clarity enabled the cogent discerning of the multidimensional, complicated and complex factors that explained each student’s weighted GPA.

Face-to-face interviews also provided insight on other critical aspects of each student's schooling experience. One related to school climate. School climate relates to how students feel and how they express their feelings in both classroom and non-classroom situations. Students who believe that they can share their feelings and intellects openly and honestly with faculty and staff are more likely to experience the school as a safe and reinforcing environment. Conversely, students who feel that they are not able to express openly and to share candidly their feelings and intellects are more likely to perceive and experience the school as uncomfortable. The following quotation from the interview transcripts reflects feelings of alienation and separation from school climate which many other students in the sample expressed:

“And then when I get here [OPRFHS], it's like a wall and I ain't got no arms to climb it. I ain't trying to disappoint my family. I want to be able to achieve in school and get good grades and stuff, but there is a part of me that is saying the hell with it if I have to do all this work and still get nowhere. It's like having a dead-end job, not going anywhere, and having to do so much and getting nothing out of it.”

Crossing-over is often complicated and challenging. Black students in a predominantly White high school want to feel comfortable and accepted. To realize these feelings, they may opt out of negotiating their self-identity in extracurricular activities in which White students are predominantly involved. This student speaks about feelings that involvement in extracurricular activities that “cross-over” challenge one's social identity and group boundaries:

“I think a lot of it is, like you said, they need to say, ‘We want you involved.’”

A lot of people feel reproach, and they don't want to follow other students because they don't think they'll be accepted and that's a big thing – especially being a teenager and being in the environment. You want to be accepted and wherever you fit in is where you're comfortable. And because a lot of African Americans now choose not to participate, younger African Americans, especially freshmen, come along and say, ' Well, African American kids who are juniors and seniors don't participate, and I'm Black, so I'm not going to participate either because then I'm not accepted by my fellow Black people.' It's almost like they have their own color group because it's something they identify with; it's something they're comfortable with. It's a very sad thing, but it's prevalent.”

A large intersection of the school's third floor hallway is a common space and place for African American students to be “down” during passing periods. This area has been acknowledged as both a contentious space and a comfort zone for African American students. Intra-group interpretations of this space and its dynamics are articulated in the following quotation in which a student describes in the social ecology of the school both the positive need for the space as well as the negative external reactions which “other races” might have because of their limited involvement with Black students. In one sense, this area is valued as one of the few spaces where African American students can openly share their feelings and intellects. In another sense, the actions of students who gather in this space have been perceived as disrespectful and non-intellectual. Yet, even Black students with high grade point averages value this space for its presence of a “large amount of African Americans” and their need to be accepted by the group with whom

they most identify at OPRFHS. Finally, this student's comment suggests that this area is a place where one can be absorbed into a common racial group without having to identify with the totality of the group and with what it represents to outsiders and insiders:

“The third floor hallway – a lot of kids stand there and, in my opinion, just simply act ignorant. They scream real loud, they curse, and they make themselves look bad. They make African American students as a whole look bad to other students of other races who don't know anyone Black. They see that and they think that's how we are. And maybe not completely, but those who haven't expanded their mind yet, you know, that's what they see. And it's tempting to get mad at those students who act wild and say, 'You know, you're making us look bad and why are you acting like that? I know you don't usually act like that; there's no need.' But, at the same time, you have to understand that this is their comfort zone and that's where a large amount of African Americans and it's just – it's a natural way for humans to act.”

Students also provided insight on the school's discipline system and its *Code of Conduct*. Annually-collected data confirms that African American students are more likely to be disciplined for behavior that is described as defiant, aggressive and disruptive at the school. One-third of the African American males in the Class of 2000-2001 were involved in the school's discipline system as early as their freshman year. The following student's comments suggest that the school's disciplinary climate is less flexible for African American students who conclude that they are “outsiders,” that is, they are restricted from participating fully in the everyday life of the school. Like this student, many who have been deeply involved in the discipline system have become estranged

from the school climate: some feel bound by a behavior contract that cuts them off from participating in school activities:

“ . . . I would say, loosen up on the code of conduct and get rid of that contract. Because the contract is basically you signing your life away. . . . I think Oak Park can do without the contract. Because the code of conduct, I mean, most of that is. . . African American people, females and males, females and males do get put on contract. Man, if you a freshman and you get on contract, they have you on until you graduate. Because I signed the contract my freshman year, and it says until the year 2005 that I could not participate or be allowed to any after-school activities, meaning like even though I graduated, I couldn't come here to visit. I couldn't come to see – because I have a little brother here and he's a freshman now – say if he was playing in a kind of sport, you know, I wouldn't be able to come and see him play a sport.”

Students come to school with affective and cognitive skills (Comer, 1993). Both are part of child and student development and both must be part of the school's developmental process, the purpose of which is to understand the whole child and not just the individual actions of individual students. Building ways to relate to students as soon as they enter the discipline system is a key intervention and is expressed through the following student's voice:

“What I see is, I think there should be a little stricter discipline. When a person – first time a person ever gets into conflict – has to go to the dean, I believe that maybe they should talk to a counselor or call home to see

what's going on. Because it may not have started in school; it might have started at home. Not to say that that's their first time in dean's discipline; it's not to say they're not going to be in there a second time. I think they need to get the punishment for whatever happened in school but try to figure out what's going on out of school, try to get to the bottom of it. It seems like it has to be a number of things that happened before a student is sat down and talked to by a counselor or teacher or somebody. I think it should start the very first time. It seems it doesn't start the first time, then it builds up, builds up, builds up and more stuff seems to happen. The student gets angrier and probably more withdrawn.”

Student interviews also provided insight about parental participation in their student's schooling experiences. Although parents of Black students in the internalized negotiated success stream were involved in school activities and extracurricular events, there were few parents of Black students in the non-negotiated stream who were involved. The following student's remarks indicate that strong parental values that encourage educational achievement in the home are often reinforced by family participation in a network of community institutions and organizations that stimulate positive student performance and behavior:

“A lot of it's from my family and church – things like that, that build me up as a person. Because in order to go out and do extracurricular activities, you have to have a certain amount of confidence to say, you know, I can do this. So they instilled a lot of that in me. I like my voice to be heard, to be honest, and I like to get involved and because I feel that my opinion is valid. I want it

to be voiced at the school so that I want to do BOSS because I thought I could help. You know, I don't want to say my own people because that really is not the right thing to say. But, you know, there was a group that I saw needed a lot of help and one that was off-track last year; and this year, we're wonderful. We're better than we have been in a long time. We achieved a lot. And so, I figure that I have certain gifts or certain traits that were positive, and I wanted to use them to benefit my community.”

This quotation also reflects how social networks which students bring to the school are used to model student interaction and participation in school organizations that resemble parent, family and community networks. Participation in these networks outside of the school help students learn ways to negotiate their minority experience in mainstream [White] majority contexts. Clearly, Black students seek to find in the school a social ecology that mirrors their social interaction in family and community and that becomes a critical element in understanding their academic achievement, role and place in the school. The racial identity and social networks of Black students mediate the observed practices, policies, processes and organizational structures of the school. Both school and student receive messages from descriptive practices and processes about behaviors that seem appropriate to the school. Overt and subtle messages are communicated to students about their ability to succeed, their reliability and their trustworthiness. Cultural characteristics, race, gender, social class, education and training affect the manner in which Black students and the school enact role sets for academic achievement.

Student comments during the interviews also show that they are keenly aware of the importance of peers and peer relationships in their lives. The following student places value on being a good student as well as a good friend:

“Well, I thought making friends with people at school was my first priority. Freshman and sophomore years after school I would be at friends’ houses and we would just talk until 6:00 p.m. And I would go home and I would rush and do work so that I could watch TV or something like that and I wasn’t like taking a lot of time, but now I’m adjusting now, and so it’s not as important as it used to be.”

A distinguishable fraction of African American students in the sample, some of whom were in the internalized non-negotiated stream, challenged the relevance and the applicability of the content of the school’s curriculum to their lives and career opportunities. Voices in this group often cited curricular reading materials which they perceived as personally disconnected from their individual experiences as well as unrelated to the experience of being Black in America. While this representative group did not indicate rejection of the mainstream [White] culture, they seemed to express the necessity for inclusion in the curriculum of both lessons and examples which embrace more consistently and more fully the Black experience in the school’s learning environment. This student’s voice echoes these feelings:

“ . . . I think we were doing like the little short stories or like the plays and stuff like that we had to read, like most of Shakespeare’s work. Like I really can’t understand what was said and I can’t really get into it. And if I can’t get into it, I can’t really focus on it. So, I think that’s what that

was. I like to read and I like a lot of books. I like one of Shakespeare's stories, *Romeo and Juliet*, but *Julius Caesar*, I can't really catch what they are saying or what they are doing. In his sentences, he puts the verb before the noun and when we talk, we put the noun before the verb. So it's sort of backwards."

Most Black students negotiate a set of stereotypes in the learning community at OPRFHS. Many see fellow African American students who perpetuate these stereotypes through actions as reinforcing a group stigma. Thus, African American students perceive that they are not treated as individuals in the school but rather as a group with generalized deficits whose unique and individual differences are not sought after and nurtured by some members of the school, mainly teachers and staff. The subtle but penetrating messages communicated to African American students in comments such as "You're different from the rest" is taken to mean "You're not like one of them" are detrimental to the life chances of all students and, in particular, to African American students:

"I believe as a people that African Americans that are doing wrong, that are showing that they're ignorant, knowing that we're not and basically showing the Whites here that we are nothing and that we can't achieve anything, that we are ignorant as the stereotypes are, and it gets me angry to see that because now you're just proving our stereotype. And that's not right because I'm not one of those stereotypes."

The impact of the minority experience on students and adults is important to investigate and to understand. Knowing and attempting to understand each student's assets and accepting the whole student require a willingness to believe that affective and

cognitive processes are integrally interwoven into the fabric of all students. Belief in the interdependency between affective and cognitive processes is at the core of a relationship model. The following student's comments emphasize that the learning environment at OPRFHS should do much more than simply assess the academic skills of students. Creating a caring and compassionate environment in which all human beings and their differences are embraced is central to any culture of academic achievement:

“As far as being good, I could say that there is some teachers in this school who care about their students more than their academics. Because some teachers would just think about, oh well, his academics are low so something is probably wrong with him. But then again, you got other teachers that is like okay, well, let me see what's wrong with the student and see why his academics are low and he's not doing good. There are some teachers here that actually want to see what's wrong with the student before the academics because it's not always the academics that make the students. The student got to make academics to make his grades and stuff.”

Students in the sample who recognized ways to manage, cope and negotiate the triple quandary were academically successful. They were conscious of the images and the subtle messages of their group; they developed strategies acquired from their family and community to successfully negotiate mainstream [White] and minority experiences at the school. When the triple quandary was unsuccessfully negotiated, these two experiences could limit the academic achievement of African American students.

Representative remarks of those students who successfully negotiated the triple quandary show that they were more likely to

1. *Develop peer relationship across racial, ethnic, class and gender boundaries*

“But, you know, I grew up around – from the time, as long as I can remember until eighth grade – I was the only African American student in my class. So that makes – it makes it a lot easier because a lot of the programs are predominantly White and a lot of Black people are scared to step out of their racial boundaries and, you know, explore other people, other cultures, you know, things that they’re afraid of or whatever. So the fact that I have been raised around different races made it a lot easier.”

2. *Participate in homogeneous and heterogeneous extracurricular activities*

“Tennis is just a passion. I always loved sports and both volleyball and basketball, but I’m very short. So since my parents had me take tennis lessons when I was younger and they enjoyed it that was kind of a natural decision. And one of the things I appreciate about that is it’s a way for me to meet different people because BOSS, of course, is all African American students and then tennis is predominantly White, and so a lot of my White friends came from here.”

3. *Develop coping strategies to overcome inconsistencies with mainstream [White] values and their home and community values*

“It’s funny, because as the acceptances started coming in, you know, I didn’t tell people because of the, well, you know, if I got in and other people didn’t, I don’t want them to be awkward about it. I just – if it

comes up, we'll talk about it, but I'm not going to bring it up. So every morning, she'd [mother] asked me, 'Did you get any college news?' And I'm like, 'Okay, well, I got into Harvard.' And she physically hit me. She'd be like, 'Are you kidding me? Why aren't you more excited?' And she would be ten times more excited than I was and just that kind of support really helped."

4. *Internalize only those mainstream [White] values which they define as necessary for their academic achievement*

"I'm not saying all higher learning is all bad, I mean, some things are like it's mandatory for life but it's like right now. . . now is to be six or seven-page essay about somebody else's life. I don't have no ideas what it's about. I mean I heard about Edgar Allan Poe, but I'm not so into his life that I just want to write about him. I mean give me something else that will help me out later on in life and not just put me in a classroom where I just sit down and listen to somebody."

While most of the Black students in the sample who endorsed internalization (twenty-four) and thus a way to negotiate their academic achievement through the triple quandary, there was still a one-point GPA gap in comparison to their White student counterparts.

DISCUSSION

The triple quandary hypotheses effectively guided the research study in probing the lived experiences of African American students at OPRFHS. The use of the BRIAS with secondary students was affirmed because it revealed a bi-modal population of African

American students at the school – the internalized negotiated success stream and the internalized non-negotiated stream. The former realized academic success while the latter did not. The discovery of an internalized negotiated success stream in the sample challenged the “acting White” theory of why Black students do not succeed in predominantly White schools; this finding replaces “acting White” with the ability of Black students to negotiate mainstream [White], minority and Black cultural experiences in predominantly White schools. Although there is some evidence to support an underlying “oppositional cultural frame of reference” that may be present in the internalized non-negotiated stream, it is not the prevalent norm for Black students in the sample and at OPRFHS.

Students’ quotations – their statements during their face-to-face interviews – provided deep understandings of the multiple ways in which African American students perceived and experienced their high school. For some students, the complexity of climate and safety issues was difficult to navigate. Others who found this complexity less difficult to navigate were students who were involved in extracurricular activities. And still others who experienced the least difficulty with navigating the complexity of school climate and of safety issues were students who had prior contact or involvement with the school itself, possibly through a sibling or relative who was previously enrolled at OPRFHS.

The research study also revealed that African American students benefited from parental support which was positive and straightforward in terms of providing resources in the home and of being engaged with the school in significant ways. Both underscored the importance of parental investment in academic achievement. Another important

aspect of the lives of students in the sample involved their keen awareness of the roles which their peers played in their academic experience. During their interviews, students repeatedly showed that they were sensitive to and savvy about peers with whom they should either associate or disassociate; they were equally savvy about the need to keep peer activities aligned with academic activities and expectations. When the interviews turned to the use of school support services, most students in the sample consistently offered limited commentary other than brief references to their daily planners.

Conversely, students in the sample talked extensively about their awareness of the importance of building positive relationships with teachers, counselors and other adults. The text for these sections of the interviews was rich; it resonated with heartfelt emotions which emphasized the salutary effects on a student's academic experience and academic well-being when adults demonstrated their concern about individual student's academic performance. Some students supported this hypothesis by describing negative relationships with teachers and limited interactions with counselors which contributed to feelings of being placed on the perimeter rather than at the core of the learning community.

Also rich in text were interviewed students' statements related to the study's effort to understand how students negotiate the triple quandary. Especially significant was the emergence of a fourth status which extended the triple quandary. One group of students in the sample revealed that they were conscious of their own identities as well as of the identities of others – these students were the internalized negotiated success stream. Furthermore, these students showed that they had acquired skills to negotiate each status of the triple quandary – mainstream [White], minority and Black cultural

experiences – but that no status validated their own experience. Thus, a fourth status or stream that was bi-modal became evident: the internalized negotiated success stream and the internalized non-negotiated stream. Students in the former showed that they had successfully

- Developed peer relationships across racial, ethnic, class and gender boundaries;
- Participated in homogeneous and heterogeneous extracurricular activities;
- Developed coping strategies to overcome inconsistencies with mainstream [White] values and their home and community values;
- Internalized only those mainstream [White] values which they defined as necessary for their academic achievement.

The identification of a fourth academic success stream is a critical finding. It suggests the need to develop further opportunities in predominantly White schools that embrace and encourage African American students to take advantage of a full range of curricular and extracurricular programs without compromising either their own identity or the identities of others. The programs must allow for the full expression of multiple student identities without valorizing one identity, i.e., mainstream [White], over all others in those situations where African Americans excel – the fourth success stream.

CONCLUSION

Using the concept of the triple quandary, this research study demonstrates that Black student achievement is statistically significant with Black student grade point average and the status of internalization in the Black Racial Attitude and Identity Scale (Helms, 1990). Black students in the study's sample were more likely to endorse internalization

(accepting their own Black culture while being appreciative of all other cultures at the school) while rejecting encounter – mainstream [White] experience of “acting White.” Black students who had low internalization scores (responses close to *agree* and *strongly agree*) had higher grade point averages than those who endorsed other statuses (e.g., encounter, immersion and emersion). Thus, Black student success in this study’s findings is not tied to “coping with the burden of ‘acting White’”; instead, it is linked to a positive identification of their own culture while showing an openness and willingness to treat all other cultures with the same respect and dignity.

These findings suggest that Black student achievement in a predominantly White school with a history of academic success is more likely tied to students’ ability to acquire the skills and values that allow them to negotiate their Black identity in several school settings and situations (e.g., classroom and extracurricular activities). This means that Black student success is tied to a fourth success stream which is related to their ability to adopt and acquire skills to negotiate mainstream [White] culture by internalizing only those norms and values within that culture that they find critical to their successful performance in academic and extracurricular activities. The study’s findings suggest that predominantly White schools throughout the United States with concern about the achievement gap between Black and White students adopt an enriching approach that involves

- Assessing Black student success through the lens of the triple quandary;
- Identifying those Black students with these skills as role models;
- Helping other Black students acquire and adopt those skills that will enable them to negotiate the triple quandary without having to over-identify with mainstream

[White] cultural norms and values to be academically successful in their school's learning environment.

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ENDNOTES

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ⁱⁱ In a telephone conversation, Janet Helms noted that the BRIAS had never been used with high school students.