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# Black Female Student's Experiences in a Predominantly White High Achieving Suburban School: Implications for Theory and Practice

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BLACK FEMALE STUDENT'S EXPERIENCES IN A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE  
HIGH ACHIEVING SUBURBAN SCHOOL: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND  
PRACTICE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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*We hereby recommend that the dissertation by:*

Erika Raissa Nash

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HIGH ACHIEVING SUBURBAN SCHOOL: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND  
PRACTICE

*Be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:*

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

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Dr. Matthew E. Lemberger, Chairperson

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## Abstract

Previous literature states that Black females experience cultural discontinuity, academic and social stressors, and inequities that are associated with psychological distress and risky behaviors as a result of not fitting into the school environment. These patterns have been found to exist in low-income, underachieving, urban schools, but middle class, high-achieving, suburban, and predominantly White schools have not been examined.

Primarily through semi-structured interviews, this qualitative study investigated the experiences of 12 Black females who attend a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school in a Midwestern state. Utilizing a grounded theory approach, the data collected suggests that there are two groups of Black girls in this school. In most cases, girls with higher GPA and more years within the district, versus girls with fewer years and lower GPAs, had different perspectives on their school and self expectations, in how they compared their school to other schools, the challenges they faced, and the supports needed to feel successful while attending a predominantly White school. Across the girls, attending a predominantly White school resulted in the need to meet the “norm” standards of the majority, rather than be what or how they aspired to be. These findings have implications for school counselors, who may need increased training and practice to fully understand Black girls and their experiences, especially when they experience cultural discontinuity in a predominantly White school. The proposed Flower model, in conjunction with national standards for counselors, would help school counselors to meet the future needs of Black girls, especially when they are in the minority in their schools.

## Dedication

First, I would like to thank God for enabling me to make it this far. Above all, God has taught me that he is faithful to keep his promises, even when we forget them. This work is also dedicated to my parents, Bob and Domelynne Nash who have instilled in me the value, love, and determination to strive for educational dreams. My parents desire to see their children experience their educational dreams has pushed me to strive hard in the hope of giving back. Your support throughout the years has opened up many doors of possibilities and has taught me to aspire to reach for the sky. I would like to also dedicate this work to my brother, Bobby Nash, who is one of my best friends and biggest supports. You have pushed me to be a good role model for you and I hope that you are continually inspired to do everything that your heart wishes in life.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

An analysis of U.S. Census data for the year 2000 indicated that 33 percent of the nation's African-American children, 45 percent of Hispanic children, 54 percent of Asian children, and 55 percent of White children live in suburban communities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). With increasingly diverse student bodies, suburban schools have attempted to be culturally responsive in meeting the learning and social needs of minority students. Specifically, the experiences of Black students are complex and can impact their education and future success. Black students face social, cultural, and political pressures that can inhibit Black students from academic achievement. Educators and peers, especially in predominantly White schools, need to understand the experiences of Black students in order to assist with their education and social/emotional needs to be successful (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). Schools have often provided their staff with professional development trainings focused on race relations and cultural competence, but little focus is normally spent specifically on the intersection of gender (female), ethnicity (Black), and the environment (their school). In order to bridge the gap between students and staff from diverse backgrounds, it is important to first understand the backgrounds, experiences, and cultures of students. It is imperative for educators, researchers, and the community to understand Black females lived out experiences of connectedness to the education system and analyze how the ideology of racism structures opportunities and limits Black females in the future (Mirza, 1992).

It has been theorized that the academic, career, and social success of Black females is contingent upon their feelings of connectedness in relationships and surrounding environments (Miller, 2003). These connections influence school behaviors

and, thus, influence Black female's ability to perform academically in the classroom. The resulting feelings of success or failure in school not only contribute to one's identity as a student and learner, but they also influence the overall self-concept of students. Accompanying personal reflections of school behaviors, the self-concept is also created in part by how others view the individual and how others tell them they should be (Banks & Grambs, 1972). Any student who exists and participates in a larger school community (e.g., a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school) is affected by the school community's attitudes, values, and norms. Conversely, each of these community influences affect a student's individual self-concept and his or her future success. It can be deduced that the self-concept of Black female students who attend predominately White, high achieving suburban schools is to feel inferior to and devalued by White students and staff in their school. As the prevailing external environment is dominated largely by White social and institutional norms, the important connectedness factors for Black female students are secondary and, thus, reliant upon acceptance of these largely White cultural norms or a non-connected sub-culture.

Poverty, quality instruction, technology, financial resources, and community support have been cited in previous literature as deterrents of Black students' success. In addition, a majority of the cited research has focused on Black males, Black compared to White students, impoverished schools, teacher instruction, and curriculum (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Cotten et al., 1994; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graves, 2006; Gutman et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 1997). Many of these studies have focused on Blacks in low income districts, at-risk populations, and schools with high percentages of Black students enrolled. Previous studies have also focused on

investigating large numbers of students, across various states and ethnicities. Although these studies provide valuable insight into the minority perspective they tend to forego examining the lives of middle class Blacks and their struggle to deal with cultural and social factors in their lives and they do not specifically examine the “lived experiences” of Black females in a predominantly White high achieving suburban school.

### School Connectedness and Black Females

The literature and research that is available has shown that second to the family, schools are the most important stabilizing force in the lives of young people (Blum, 2005). Connection to school is the belief that adults in the school care about their students learning and about the students as individuals. In order to succeed, students need to feel they “belong” in their school. Critical requirements for feeling connected include high academic rigor and expectations coupled with support for learning, positive adult-student relationships, and physical and emotional safety. The following sections will examine the academic achievement, relationships, and physical and emotional safety of Black females in schools.

### *Black Female Academic Achievement*

Race and culture have always been examined when education and social science research investigated achievement (Mirza, 1992). Black females in United States education systems are achieving at higher rates than Black males, but on average they continue to struggle to meet the national standards that White students are meeting (NCES, 2009). For Black females, psychological, racial, and gender obstacles have been theorized as a cause for their gaps in school success. Education and social science research has demonstrated that differing levels of academic achievement have

catastrophic implications for minority communities (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graves, 2006; Gutman et al., 2002; Holcomb-McCoy, 2008; Wilson et al., 1997), but there has been little focus on the implications and achievement interventions specific to Black female students in K-12 schools.

This lack of understanding devalues the importance of an individual's background, the relationships they have, and their contributions to the psychological well-being of all people (Miller, 1976). Multicultural, feminist, and social justice advocates and theorists have highlighted how traditional counseling and development theories have been built on Western ideologies of individualism and competitiveness (Ivey et al., 2007; Miller, 1976), which is contrary to the stereotypical upbringings of most Black girls whose families foster collectivism. Newer theories have been developed to take into account the variety of minority groups that don't subscribe to the Western ideologies or fit their theories, but much of the Western-influenced school systems still foster Eurocentric values.

The foundation of the United States school system, extracurricular activities, and the curriculum are generally based on Eurocentric values (Cholewa & Otjuni-West, 2008). This means that the schooling experience for Black females is a development of viewing the world from a European perspective, with an implied belief, either consciously or subconsciously, in the preeminence of European culture. Students whose cultural backgrounds align closely with Eurocentric norms tend to benefit and have higher levels of success, whereas, students whose cultural backgrounds do not align with the Eurocentric norms fall into a cultural mismatch. Educators, regardless of race, often

fail to recognize this issue, because of the foundation of their pedagogical framework. By not acknowledging cultural diversity, students develop psychological distress with regards to their academics, resulting in lower achievement and/or school success (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2008).

With the integration of high stakes testing and the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) the gap between achievement and failure has increased causing a rise in the number of Black female dropouts, failures, and suspensions (Cotten et al., 1994). In addition, exposure to violence, racial discrimination, domination/power, family, socio-economic status, attitudes toward academics, skin color, and peer relationships (e.g., Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Cotten et al., 1994; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graves, 2006; Gutman et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 1997) have also been investigated to correlate the gap in achievement for Black girls. Fryer (2006) found that as GPA's went up for Black girls, their popularity among other Black students decreased; this was opposite the experience for White students whose popularity increased among other White students. Steele and Aronson (1995) wrote on stereotype threat, a type of confirmation bias, finding that race negatively affected high-ability Black students. The resulting stigma of being Black affects the educational outcomes of Black student by seriously altering their academic achievement and motivation (Steele & Aronson).

Black students from all socio-economic statuses are still performing at lower levels in reading and mathematics than their White counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). For instance, in 2004, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2008) assessed students' performance and change in performance reliability across the



nation using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The data collected demonstrated that Black students' reading scale scores were between 22 – 29 points lower than those of White students. The math scores for Black students were also 23 – 28 points lower than White students. While NAEP data has demonstrated that the gap narrowed considerably through the late 1980s, particularly between Blacks and Whites, progress since then has been marginal. Therefore, in the face of educational reform initiatives targeting the gap in ethnic achievement, there remains unanswered questions as to why the majority of Black students still score considerably lower than White students (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graves, 2006; Gutman et al., 2002; Holcomb-McCoy, 2008; Wilson et al., 1997).

Today, the average Black high school student achieves at about the same level of academic achievement as the average White student in the lowest quartile of White achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). As a result, Black students are much more likely than White students to fall behind in school and drop out, and much less likely to graduate from high school, acquire a college or advanced degree, or earn a middle-class living (Ogbu, 2003). In addition, low-income students in high poverty schools have increased levels of anxiety and depression, greater behavioral difficulty, lower positive engagement in school, less access to mental health care or adequate educational services, and poorest teaching quality (Ogbu).

A variety of factors have been associated with the gaps in achievement – students' racial and/or economic background, their parents' education level, their access to high-quality preschool instruction, school funding, peer influences, teacher's expectations, and

curricular and instructional quality (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Cotten et al., 1994; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graves, 2006; Gutman et al., 2002; Holcomb-McCoy, 2008; Wilson et al., 1997). However, this research is incomplete because much of it has focused on inner-city and high-poverty schools, often overshadowing high achieving schools in the suburbs. Black students in high-achieving, middle- to upper-class, predominantly White schools are also still failing to achieve at the levels set forth by the federal government (Ogbu, 2003; Perry et al., 2003). With Black students also failing in schools that are reporting to be meeting the national standards, it is imperative to investigate their connectedness to school and the relational bonds developed with peers and school staff/administration. The relational bonds developed in school have been shown to increase a sense belonging to the school community, resulting in self-pride and higher academic achievement.

### *Relationships*

Alfred Adler theorized that a sense of community and belonging to social groups fostered psychological development, emotional well-being, and good mental health for an individual (Ivey et al., 2007). When individuals experience feelings of not belonging in relationships it can be assumed that it is attributed to multiple social identities colliding with other social identities from their surroundings (Miller, 2003). Marginalized groups customarily experience cultural oppression, social exclusion, and other forms of social injustices that are relationally constructed from experiences of isolation, shame, humiliation, oppression, marginalization, and micro-aggressions.

Developmentally, adolescents are trying to define their own identity (Stevens, 1997). Black females often struggle with this in additional ways because they are trying

to fit into what society deems is acceptable for teenagers at the same time as they must grapple with issues of classism and racism – issues that can profoundly affect developmental-identity processes and teenagers’ perceptions of themselves (Stevens). Black females in school are challenged each day to be visible or positively viewed by the dominant culture (hooks, 1993; Miller & Mullins, 2006; Ness, 2004). Their attempts of being visible are developed and perpetuated through forms of internalized oppression they endure.

For Black females, desiring to fit into mainstream school culture and the need for respect among their peers is a prized possession (Querimit & Conner, 2003). The depiction of what is beautiful by the dominant population allows one to gain power or respect among peers; however, Black females internalize that they are ugly because they do not look like the dominant population (Stevens, 1997). Black females often feel that acquiring respect among peers will fade what is considered beautiful and gain them popularity, thus enhancing the self-concept of Black females. Black female students in predominately White communities are missing the connection of understanding by school officials. This disconnection at school with school personnel causes feelings of misunderstanding and lack of trust among Black students (Jenkins, 2000; Miller, 2003).

Black females respond to this disconnection by increasing social ties with peers. These social ties are precious commodities. To demonstrate signs of respect, Black females will take a variety of measures in order to protect themselves from anyone or anything that would cause them to look weak in front of their peers (Miller, 2003; Miller & Mullins, 2006; Ness, 2004). In predominantly White schools, Black females are faced with the need to identify with peers that is motivated by an awareness of belonging to a

distinct racial and/or ethnic group that has a shared perception or experiences of racial discrimination and social oppression.

The ability of the Black female to be seen and respected by the dominant culture, such as talking and laughing loudly, affirm a sense of self and give Black females a way to manage their devalued race and gender status within a school (Coker, 2004). The stereotypical boisterousness and masculine behavior are reflections of their uneasiness in various environments and a way of asserting themselves to be respected by the dominant culture (Ness, 2004). This constant tension of needing to be valued often detracts on the main focus of being in school. Black females are distracted with fitting into the dominant culture that often times Black females who are “Blacker” struggle academically.

Cholewa and West-Olatunji (2008) theorized that Black students view themselves negatively in terms of their schooling when they experience a disconnection between their home and school culture. School culture is often dictated by the policies and practices that support some groups of students while devaluing others. A school’s responsiveness both culturally and racially is a necessity in schools. The visibility, understanding, and response that is necessary when working with Black students is imperative. Cultural mistrust could be perpetuated or lower academic achievement could be a result of not being understood or confused in a school structure, which would be detrimental to not only the student, but the school system and society.

Multicultural and feminist theorists suggest that a lack of knowledge and awareness of women and people of color’s background and relational experiences guides many mental health professionals to mischaracterize these individuals (Buckley & Carter, 2005). If Black females are mischaracterized in school, it could potentially lead to Black

girls depriving themselves of connecting with other people in a school setting. Resulting in their outlook of relationships in general may become negative and distrustful. That connection could be a result of being a minority in a predominantly White school, being a female, and/or being an out-of-district student.

*Connection and Disconnection.* The Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) (Miller & Stiver, 1994), which was developed to help understand the experiences of Black women, emphasized the significance of how we create and break connections with people. In normal life function, people have the ability to connect and disconnect with other people for a variety of reasons. Connections and disconnections can also develop because of preset norms or traumatic events. Both connections and disconnections can lead to either growth or profound loss for individuals (Miller, 1986). “The inner sense of connection to others is the central organizing feature of women’s psychological development” (Miller & Stiver, 1994, p.6) growth and healing are outcomes for connection, while pain, suffering and psychological problems are from disconnections.

Miller (1986) identified specific experiential outcomes of being in connection, which she referred to as the “five good things” (p. 3): 1) Greater sense of vitality and energy; 2) Able to be active in the world; 3) Accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s); 4) Greater sense of worth; and, 5) More connected to other persons and exhibits a greater motivation to connect with other people beyond those in one’s primary relationships.

Disconnections can result from numerous situations that include everything from simple misunderstanding to abuses. Disconnection can also be periodic or chronic. In early childhood the manifestation of disconnection is the worst, because individuals feel

most vulnerable and helpless. Jordan and Dooley (2000), described the experience of disconnection as people feeling: 1) depleted energy; 2) helpless; 3) confused and unclear; 4) unworthy and bad; and 5) forced to turn away from relationships. Feelings of shame, fear, frustration, humiliation, and self-blame can contribute to the relational disconnection a person experiences in his or her life and within society.

Relational disconnections, power differentials, gender role socialization, racism, cultural oppression, health disparities, heterosexism, and other social injustices can drive people to isolate themselves, an emotional state referred to as “condemned isolation” (Jordan & Dooley, 2000) in which people are susceptible to self-destruction and self-blame. Because women tend to carry more of the responsibility for the well-being of their relationships, disconnection is more common among women than men (Miller, 2003). Individuals who experience a sense of condemned isolation are at high risk of emotional and psychological difficulties. Feelings of condemned isolation can be reinforced when Black females routinely face the myth of meritocracy. As a result they tend to blame themselves for personal failures which are often associated to factors in the broader cultural context (Hartling et al., 2003; Jordan, 1999; Miller & Stiver, 1994).

The lack of connection within the school system and culture, resulting from the lack of acknowledgment to a student’s ethnic and cultural experiences, decreases that student’s sense of belonging within that school system and culture. The ignoring of these feelings and issues ultimately could result in lower academic achievement, psychological distress, and feeling unsafe in the school environment.

*Physical and Emotional Safety*

Black females are often subjected to a variety of forms of violence from complex problems of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, etc., as a result, forms of fear and psychological disconnections with others develop (e.g., hooks, 1993; Miller & Stiver, 1994). By hiding or denying large parts of their life experiences, and relating inauthentically with others in an effort to reconnect in non mutual relationships, often becomes a strategy for surviving the emotional distress associated with feelings of condemned isolation (Miller & Stiver, 1994).

Slaves lived deceiving lives in order to protect themselves and their families from White slave owners who would brutally punish slaves. hooks (1993) claimed that Blacks have developed a culture that has produced a social norm to lie and hide behind a false appearance. The art of skillfully lying protected one's safety and access to greater resources, or made resistance possible (hooks). When racial oppression took the form of lynching and murder one had to be careful about speaking the truth to Whites.

Black children have been taught to be honest; however, most of these children are caught in double binds by their parent's emphasis on dissimulation. To fight the fear of past oppressions, Black females need to collectively unmask their true selves in order to empower themselves against the dominant culture that silences their pursuits of success. Often Black females, in a pursuit to unmask, find it easy to "tell it like it is" when they are angry and desire to use "the truth" as a weapon to wound others. Even though they are telling the truth, the underlying intent is to assert power over another person, resulting in the use of truth to assault another (hooks, 1993). In today's society this practice often takes the form of calling someone out or "dissin" them. Having someone critically analyze another person exposes the aspects of their reality that are hidden or denied. This

sort of exchange can be constructive and even pleasurable; however, it usually takes place in a context where the intent is to hurt or wound. According to hooks, this faulty logic is traced to the survival of Blacks that developed to adjust to living in a White world. To gain a sense of control over their situation, Blacks set standards for behavior as appropriate safeguards to the Euro-American world.

Over the years, instead of developing strategies to affirm their children, adult Blacks would oftentimes disparage, ridicule, or mock their own family members to prepare for the harsh remarks of White America (hooks, 1993). The self-critique and enforcement of the changing of one's behavior accordingly were thought to protect family members from the dominant culture. This masking of the self has created a society of Blacks searching for their own identity and ridiculing other Blacks to hide their own insecurities. This learned behavior and ways of thought are often brought into school systems where it collides with a White school system and resulting in feelings of mistrust and poor self-concept.

This behavior often results in Black females being suspended from school, which further results in time out of class and missing valuable information or the materials needed to learn to be academically successful. The historical cycle that Black females often find themselves in, collides with the dominant White culture values and "ways of being". This mentality that is unconscious is often misunderstood by White school officials and results in individuals not wanting to assist or support positive changes in Black females. This behavior is commonly expected and acceptable among Black males, but when faced with Black females, school officials are unsure of how to proceed or react to the situation and may often "label" a student. For many Black female students, to



succeed means, they should adopt more Eurocentric values regarding education (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Researchers have hypothesized that a positive correlation between Eurocentric values and Black students achieving academically, can be viewed as Black students as "acting White". Constantine and Blackmon (2002) suggested that "acting White" could be detrimental to many Black female's academic self-efficacy. It is believed to be one reason why Black students are underrepresented in gifted programs, honors and advanced placement courses.

In addition, researchers have assumed psychological well being of high school Black females has been attributed to high grades, school attendance, and an absence of conduct issues (e.g., Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Cotten et al., 1994; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graves, 2006; Gutman et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 1997). However, for some Black females, such behaviors categorized of being psychologically healthy can portray a perception of "acting White" to other Black students resulting in forms of bullying, ridicule, social isolation, reduced peer and social self-esteem, and feelings of community and cultural betrayal (Constantine et al., 1998; Wilson et al., 1997). Literature has stated that the adoption of cultural or ethnic pride demonstrated in the orientations, attitudes, and behaviors of Blacks will actually promote a greater sense of academic and psychological well being for many Black females (Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Spencer et al., 2001; Tyson et al., 2005).

#### *Theoretical Framework – Black Females in Predominantly White Schools*

The school connectedness construct was empirically developed as a general indicator of a student's perceived bonding and quality of relationship with peers and teachers. Whitlock (2006) later proposed a theoretical model to explain how it might

operate as a protective force for youth. She found support for a conceptual model based on the linkages of connectedness with increased student (a) involvement in meaningful roles at school, (b) safety at school, (c) opportunities for creative engagement, and (d) opportunities for academic engagement. Researchers have reported that school connectedness is associated with reduced risk of negative development outcomes. For example, it has been shown to buffer against aggressive behavior and exposure to violent behavior (Brookmeyer et al., 2006). In addition, school connectedness is positively associated with the reduction of substance use (Wang et al, 2005), exposure to weapon violence (Henrich et al., 2005), the initiation of smoking (Dornbusch et al., 2001), and the prevention of dropping out of school (Miltich et al., 2004). These assertions could provide Black females in a predominantly White school with greater academic, personal/emotional, and social success. However, the literature on school connectedness broadly focuses on the school environment, culture, and staff and fails to take into account an individual's unique culture and background history like those of Black girls in particular. School connectedness is general and geared for all students; it does not look at the diversity of minority students who have specific needs in order to feel connected in their schools.

With the school environment dominated largely by White social and institutional norms, school connectedness would also be dominated by the White macro-culture possibly making it difficult for Black females to find connection in their school environment. While the theory of school connectedness is useful, it does not fully assist with the psychological growth and relational development of individuals, which is

important when working with Black females whose racial, societal, individual, and emotional experiences and challenges will vary from other subgroups of students. Select literature has addressed Black adolescents by focusing on a "deficit model" (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), which has been found to promote lower expectations, academic failure, and poor self-concept among Black adolescents (Spencer et al., 2001). Schools have been found to be able to promote academic achievement and a positive self-concept emphasizing their resilience and strength through culturally related models of instruction and environment (Gutman et al., 2002). Other models, both internal and systemic-ecological, have been developed to identify specific factors that may prevent Black female students from obtaining school success (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Trusty, 2002).

To understand both the academic and personal development of Black females, the Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) (Miller, 2003) can be used to assist with this cause. RCT is the idea that the goal of development is the ability to participate actively in relationships that foster the well being of everyone involved. It theorizes that growth-fostering relationships are a central human necessity and disconnections are the source of psychological problems, much like the theory of school connectedness. The core tenants and assumptions of Relational Cultural Theory (Miller, 2003) are that:

- 1) People grow through and toward relationships throughout the life span;
- 2) Movement toward mutuality rather than separation characterizes mature functioning;
- 3) The ability to participate in increasingly complex and diversified relational networks characterizes psychological growth;
- 4) Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships;
- 5) Authenticity is necessary for real engagement in growth-fostering relationships;
- 6) When people contribute to the development of growth fostering relationships, they grow as a result of their participation in such relationships; and,
- 7) The goal of development is the realization of increased relational competence over the life span (p. 2).

Additionally, RCT investigates the impact of disconnections (opposite of connection) in relationships. As a result of a disconnection:

An injured or less powerful person is unable to represent herself or her feelings in a relationship, or when she receives a response of indifference, additional injury, or denial of her experience, she will begin to keep aspects of herself out of relationship in order to keep the relationship. (Jordan & Hartling, 2002, p.50)

Connections and disconnections occur at the individual, familial, and sociocultural level.

There are numerous societal practices (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism) that have an impact on a person's sense of connection and disconnection (Walker & Miller, 2001) by impeding all individuals' ability to connect and contribute in healthy relationships. RCT although focuses more on the individual process, does not provide a clear framework for educators and counselors working specifically with Black girls in a predominantly White school. It merely provides insight in looking at how power may affect a less powerful person's ability to be successful.

To date, I have not found any published studies or recommendations that are geared specifically for educators and counselors working with Black females attending a predominantly White high achieving suburban school. With a growing population of Black females in suburban, predominantly White schools across the country it was imperative to study and build a theoretical model based off the data analyzed from the Black girl's responses to provide educators with the insight into this specialized population. This study utilized a grounded theory approach to provide a description of the experiences, including challenges, opportunities, and feelings of connectedness of Black females attending a predominantly White high achieving suburban school with a model and recommendations for schools, counselors, and counselor educators in improving their schools work with Black female students.

Grounded theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) is a qualitative research approach based on symbolic interactionism, which focuses on the processes of people's social interactions and the meanings they assign to events. These interactions are said to be symbolic as something (language, words, symbols) is used to convey their meaning and facilitate the interaction (Denzin, 1989). Because symbolic interactionism is a branch of interpretivism, this qualitative study, like those before it, is based on the assumption that people develop meanings to an event through experience and social interaction that begins to build their behavior. My approach therefore seeks to explain social processes. In addition, I seek to ground theoretical development in my data, through iterative data collection, analysis, and reading of the literature. Not only does the grounded theory develop theory, but can modify and further develop existing theories (McCann & Clark, 2003). Grounded Theorists use literature reviews for theoretical sensitivity and also for theory comparisons. The literature review is also used to justify the study and provide background. Theoretical sensitivity enables researchers to enter the field of study with an awareness and understanding of the data so as to be able to isolate the appropriate from the inappropriate information (McCann & Clark).

This study's goal was to understand the Black female experience in schools and provide resources to increase academic achievement and social/emotional support and provide schools, educators, and counselor's resources to empower Black girls in a predominantly White environment. Utilizing a grounded theory approach provided insight into the systemic, structural, and social/emotional experiences of being a Black female, attending a predominantly White high achieving suburban school, and described the feelings of connectedness they encountered in their school. Additionally, based upon

the findings from the grounded theory methodology, a theoretical model incorporating this study's data analysis, school connectedness, and the Relational Cultural Theory is presented for counselors and educators in predominantly White schools working with Black females and possibly result in further research and program restructuring.

### Summary

Research indicates that Black females in predominantly White, high achieving schools are being met with the challenge of academically falling behind White students, having increasing levels of psychological distress, and poor self-concept. The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of Black female students who are attending a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school and provide implications for theory and practices for those who work with this population. To this end, this study has employed a qualitative methodology to expand understanding of the complexity of adolescent Black girl's lives in the schooling experience and offers a theory insofar as what educators can do in meeting the needs of this particular population. The student's feelings of belonging, acceptance, and understanding based on their family background, experiences of racism, previous schooling, and extracurricular activities; is answered through the following question: What are the experiences of connectedness for Black female students in a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school? The results of this study begins to address the significant gaps that exist in the literature, specifically targeting Blacks, females, school and community support, and perceptions of connection. The results can also lead to improvements in the way school and other educators respond and learn to understand Black female's academic and social/emotional needs.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of the literature related to the experiences of Black females in predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools. The academic and social challenges for Black females in the United States education system has been discussed extensively in education, sociology, anthropology, and counseling literature. Numerous studies have examined the social problems encountered by Black females (Brown, 1993; Gay, 1987), many of which highlighting academic achievement and gender bias (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Delpit, 1995), while others emphasize the behavioral issues (Patton, 1995, hooks, 1993), and the alienation of Blacks in the education system (James, 1990; Soloman, 1992; Yon, 1994).

A majority of the studies have focused on Black males, Black males and incidents of school drop out, the deficiencies of Black students compared to White students, and how ethnic affiliation and identification as an at-risk population or in a low socioeconomic position influences school behaviors and outcomes. The existing literature, while providing critical insight into related phenomena, does not provide a clear theoretical explanation of the experiences of Black females in predominantly White schools. Therefore, the first section of this review of the literature will revisit academic achievement and the impact of challenges attending a high achieving school for Black girls. The second section, will describe Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), its core elements of: *connection* and *disconnection*, *authenticity*, *empathy*, and *mutuality*. The last section will apply RCT as it provides a possible theoretical structure to explain the experiences of Black female students in predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools.

## Academic Achievement and African American Girls

Today's schools face a variety of challenges to provide quality education to culturally diverse (ethnic, socio-economic status, ability) students. This section will revisit the academic achievement for Black girls, and describe the need for a theoretical model that will assist Black girls to be successful in school. School success is influenced by the socialization and educational experiences within the school environment. Black girls are faced with unique challenges resulting from social problems, such as poverty, violence, and racism, which can obstruct their emotional, social, and academic growth (Bauer, Sapp, & Johnson, 2000). These factors could stifle Black girls academically, because they may hide their talents, diminish their future aspirations or may not participate in classroom activities (Kramer, 1986; Pipher, 1995). Additionally, Black girls may suffer socially from a lack of courage, lack of expression, or they may adopt a persona that is not representative of their true identities (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Rogers, 1961).

Today's urban schools are faced with the challenges to provide a quality education for culturally diverse youth and to make their schools culturally responsive (Bemak et al., 2004; Locke, 2003). Oftentimes students having problems in school are preoccupied with concerns outside the school setting. The growing academic achievement gap problems stem from a wide range of both internal and external forces (Atkinson et al., 1993). Poor inner-city youth has been documented and found to be associated with fewer educational opportunities, a poor quality of education (College Board, 1999a, 1999b; Education Trust, 1998; House & Martin, 1998), high dropout rates, negative stereotyping (Jackson, 1999), and fewer resources (Education Trust, 1998). Thus, this section will begin with a



brief overview of the unique problems facing Black girls regarding educational achievement, an examination of high achieving schools, and the conflicts between Black girls attending high achieving schools.

### *Challenges of Educational Achievement*

Black girls face various obstacles that are probable to hinder their ability to learn and be successful in school (Bemak, 2005; Bemak & Chung, 2003; Dryfoos, 1994, 1998; Jagers & Mock, 1993; Witherspoon et al., 1997). Black girls have been found to experience higher rates of delinquency, violent and aggressive behavior, psychological problems, behavioral problems, and educational and occupational expectations (Black & Krishnakumar, 1998). In addition, the literature indicates that Black girls have higher rates of academic failure and school behavioral problems (Gallay & Flanagan, 2000; Kenny et al., 2002; Sameroff & Seifer, 1995). For example, it is estimated that 40% of Black girls in the nation will dropout of high school (National Women's Law Center, 2007). The lack of school connectedness that Black girls face correlated with increased risks for feelings of hopelessness and other associated problems (Bolland, 2003, Boyd-Franklin, 1995; Guerra et al., 1995), such as substance abuse, violent and aggressive behavior, and teenage pregnancy.

### *Black Girls in Schools*

It is essential to examine the social, economic, political, historical and ecological context Black girls experiences in public schools. The historical discrepancies in equal educational opportunities continue to reinforce Black children to experience chronic school failure in high rates resulting in low expectations for future success and internalized self-perceptions (Education Trust, 1998; Graham et al., 1998). Research has

shown that Black children may internalize feelings of powerlessness associated with racial identity, and the depreciation of Black culture (Gibson, 1993; Justice et al., 1999).

For example, Chavous and Associates (2008) investigated whether adolescents' school-based racial discrimination in peer and classroom contexts during 8th and 11th grade was a significant risk factor for poor academic adjustment (academic performance, personal beliefs about the importance of academics, academic self-concept) and whether youth's identification with being Black (racial centrality) related to these outcomes. Their goal was to examine the gender differences in racial discrimination experiences, by exploring whether discrimination affected the academic outcomes for boys and girls. In addition, they examined gender variations in youth's racial centrality to investigate if it served as a factor in relation to achievement outcomes and/or served as a protective factor with regard to the negative impact of discrimination on academic outcomes.

In this study, the authors found a correlation in peer and classroom discrimination and academic outcomes. They also recommended that educators need to think about "academic achievement" in terms of self-evaluations, school attitudes, and performance, as well as in terms of how students' experiences lead to these different outcomes, is warranted given the variation in relationships among discrimination perceptions, racial identity, and the three adjustment outcomes across gender groups. Although overall Black girls showed higher academic outcomes than boys, it is important to attend to the means through which racism may distinctively influence academic motivation and development. In addition, the presence of a strong identity may serve to generally diminish discrimination effects (protect academic motivation) or intensify discrimination

effects, which could cause the development of a low academic self-concept, academic devaluation, or oppositional school attitudes (Smalls et al., 2007).

A negative self perception, behavior, and delinquency can be caused from exposure to racism, violence, and by internalizing harmful attitudes about being Black (Belgrave et al., 1994; Kunjufu, 1986; Lyles et al., 1985); regardless of positively identifying with one's own racial group (Phinney, 1996). To ensure a positive self-image, one must develop a positive and healthy racial identity and adopt a system that promotes emotional, physical, and social well-being (Thomas et al., 2003).

These related social problems have been a majority of the focus on Black girls in public schools. Researchers have found that Black girls have higher instances of teenage pregnancy, problems with substance abuse, violence, gang membership, and high infant mortality rates (Cousins & Mabrey, 1998). In addition, Black girls that had witnessed violence were found to be withdrawn, anxious, depressed (Cooley-Quil et al., 2001), increased rates of physical fighting (Hudley, 2001), and higher rates of suicide attempts compared to their European American counterparts (Millstein, 1989). Despite the problems mentioned above that have an impact on school success; numerous Black students attain high standards of achievement (Sciarra, 2001).

### *High-Achieving Schools*

There are three designations available for schools to be classified as high achieving. The first is given by the U.S. Department of Education's Blue Ribbon Schools Recognition Program. The second would come from the individual state's department of education recognition program. And lastly, a nomination for the national No Child Left Behind/Blue Ribbon Schools Program, which is based on the school's performance on

standardized tests. For any of these distinctions schools must demonstrate effective leadership, innovative instructional programs, and high levels of parent and community involvement (Missouri DESE, 2009).

Schools across the country work to create high achieving learning environments for all students, by providing higher curriculum and instruction techniques to support learning. In high-achieving schools, teachers have been found to engage students in complex problem solving and classroom activities that draw on a student's culture, experiences, and knowledge. At-risk students, in particular, need environments that engage them in authentic tasks and offer them significant opportunities to develop knowledge (Archbald & Newmann, 1988). It is important for schools to know and build upon student's culture, experiences, and knowledge to create a high achieving environment.

Honora (2002) examined the connection between future outlook and school achievement among low-income, urban African American adolescents. Sixteen participants, ranging in age from 14 to 16 years, completed questionnaire and two semi-structured interviews assessing the anticipation and expected timing of major life events. The study's findings suggested that gender and achievement differences in adolescent's goals and expectations. Higher achieving girls articulated increased future goals and expectations and contemplated more long-term goals than higher achieving boys and lower achieving girls and boys. The family and significant others had an influence on the goals and expectations of the participants. In addition, the study highlighted the importance of understanding the historical and cultural contexts that may shape adolescent's perceptions of the future.

With many teachers not believing that all students can learn, do not have high expectations for all students, or understand the culture and needs of diverse students continue to teach Black students in schools in traditional learning environments that highlight disjointed knowledge and basic skills instead of by utilizing higher-order thinking skills. Conversely, in high-achieving environments, teachers have high expectations for all students, provide an enriched curriculum, engage students in a mixture of learning activities that challenge students, and promote culture, life experiences, and knowledge of all students (Slavin, 1990). Teachers of high-achieving classrooms ensure they are safe to allow students to openly discuss, debate, and examine issues and concepts. Students gain knowledge by exploring and solving problems rather than just memorizing it. Other characteristics of a high achieving school environment are:

- 1) Student, faculty, and the community share a common vision for student achievement;
- 2) All students are surrounded by adults who believe in and support them;
- 3) Each student, faculty member, parent, and community member has a personal reason for wanting to raise student achievement;
- 4) The concepts of high expectations are concretely and clearly described and measurable;
- 5) All students clearly understand the expectations that are held for them; and
- 6) Effective guidance and advisement system that:
  - (a) Connects students to an adult;
  - (b) Connects students with a goal;
  - (c) Connects students and parent through an advisory system assuring they know how to navigate the system;
  - (d) Ensures that parents meet annually with an adviser to address goals and high school plans; and,
  - (e) Ensures that every student has a niche, a place where he or she belongs (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004).

### *High Achieving Schools and Black Girls' Achievement*

For many Black girls, being connected or having feelings of belonging to a high achieving school depends greatly on the school environment and socially fitting in. For Black students at predominantly White, high achieving schools there is no research on this subgroup. It can be theorized that to reduce risk of negative development outcomes and increased connectedness with students in high achieving schools is critical. However,

for Black girls to feel connected in schools, schools must focus on an individual's culture and background history as it relates to the school community, environment, staff, curriculum, expectations, and resources. Black girls have very specific needs in order to feel connected in their schools and to be successful in a high achieving learning environment.

For example, Bemak and Associates (2005) studied the impact of Empowerment Groups for Academic Success (EGAS) with at-risk urban Black girls. The seven girls in the study were identified as a high risk for school failure. The EGAS approach was based on structural group interventions that targeted one specific problem area for each girl to focus on. This intervention improved attendance, study habits, future aspirations, fewer discipline referrals, and higher grades. By providing a structured group focused on the unique individual challenges allowed the girls to feel connected to others, find support, and ultimately participate in a more successful learning environment.

Many theories available to assist educators in working with Black girls to be successful in all learning environments, have focused on a deficit model ignoring the levels of connection or the relationships that have been built or broken that promote school connectedness. As a result, the Relational-Cultural Theory (Jordan et al., 1991) of development could assist educators to focus on the relationships needing to be built or engaged by Black girls in high achieving schools.

#### Relational Theories of Development

Many alternative theories have been developed in response to the problematic nature of the separate self approach to development (Basseches, 1980; Fairbairn, 1952). Although the relational models focus on relationship and connection, they maintain an

implicit goal of separate self. Many “relational” models equate psychological health with the development and maintenance of a cohesive self (Walker & Rosen, 2004). The implicit goal for development in many of these models focuses on individualization and outgrows the need for relationship (Jordan, 2001).

### *Female Development Theories*

Over the last three decades, feminist psychologists dissatisfied with the male bias in Western developmental theories developed a relational approach focused on incorporating the relational nature of a woman’s sense of self. With 51% of the U.S. population being women (U.S. Census, 2007), the voice of women continues to be underrepresented in existing literature and research (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan and many other theorists have focused on the relational approaches to development for women, in order to fill the gap that exists in the literature and research (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1990).

Jean Baker Miller (1976) proposed a developmental model emphasizing the gender differences in the construction of the self. Miller found that a women’s sense of self is organized around the ability to make and maintain affiliation and relationships. The universal human developmental model being based solely on male development leads to problems for women and men (Miller). Miller believes that in Western society the intellectual and emotional ability of women is undervalued, empowers others and aids building on one another’s strengths, resources, effectiveness, and well being. Women are at a disadvantage because society tends to focus on separation, autonomy, and individuation which contributes to lack of power held by women.

In addition, Carol Gilligan (1982) explored the development of women through their being in relationships. She found that all of the women's identity were defined by their relationship and judged by their level of responsibility and care. These women described their identity by describing the relationship with a mother, child, lover, or friend. A women's sense of self revolves around issues of responsibility for, care of, and inclusion of other people (Gilligan). The male identity is clearer, more direct, more distinct, and sharp-edged. Seldom do male's self descriptions describe particular people or relationships; however they commonly mention the activity of the relationship (Gilligan).

#### *The Relational-Cultural Theory of Development*

The development of a new theory inspired by the feminist movement gave voice to the unique development of women and added a new dimension to our total understanding of male and female psychology (Miller & Stiver, 1994). Opposing that separation is the standard measure of maturity through which human beings must exhibit as independence and self-sufficiency. Jean Baker Miller, Judith Jordan, Janet Surrey, and Irene Stiver (1991) developed a theory emphasizing that growth develops within relationships. Both or all people are encouraged and challenged to maintain connection, and to foster, adapt to, and change with the growth of the others (Jordan et al., 1991). This model is known as the Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). RCT emphasizes the centrality of connection in women's lives, and disconnection is viewed as the source of most human suffering (Jordan, 1997).



According to RCT, growth occurs through fostering relationships and not by developing a separate self (Jordan, 1986). RCT emphasizes that individual development occurs through the relational experience instead of separation that earlier theories stated (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan, 1997; Jordan et al., 1991; Walker & Rosen, 2004). The next sections summarize the key elements (*connection* and *disconnection*, *authenticity*, *empathy*, and *mutuality*) of the Relational Cultural Theory (RCT).

*Connection and Disconnection.* Within RCT, the concept of connection is essential to the psychological development, like stated in other traditional developmental theories (Miller, 1988; Walker & Rosen, 2004). Connection in RCT is the mutually empathetic and empowering interaction that occurs between two or more people (Miller & Stiver, 1994) and the ability to being emotionally accessible (Miller & Stiver, 1991). The concept of connection in RCT is not a one way interaction and only represented through qualities of interpersonal harmony, warm support, pleasant feelings, and similarities with others. It encompasses a distinct and bidirectional nature of connection. In RCT, connection is both encountered and an active process (Walker & Rosen) and actively “participating in a relationship that invites exposure, curiosity, and openness to possibility” (Miller, 1986, p.9). This connection provides feelings of comfort, closeness, and safety from contempt and humiliation; however, it does not promise comfort. Connections often are “a portal to increased conflict, because safety in a relationship allows important differences to surface” (Miller, p.9).

Connection is an essential element to development – alternatively, disconnections are inevitable in life. The experience of disconnection can feel like: 1) a drop in energy we feel in the moment; 2) feelings of negative affect, sad, angry, or depressed; 3) fear and

immobilization; 4) a diminishing sense of investment in connection; or 5) a heightened self-consciousness or disassociation (Jordan, 1995). Many things can lead to disconnection, some sources of disconnection could include, but not limited to: a dysfunctional upbringing, absence of a parent, sexual abuse, non-attention, preoccupation, withdrawal, use of substances which numb feelings, and role-playing (Miller & Stiver, 1994). Disconnection is primarily triggered by fear. “When others have been non responsive or, worse yet, abusive in the face of our need and vulnerability, we are left feeling wounded, and we question the wisdom of turning to others in time of need” (Miller & Stiver, p.4). A second trigger for disconnection is when a relationship is not mutual. Specifically, when a relationship is imbalanced by one person frequently accommodating the other, relationship becomes erroneous, and resentment sets in (Miller & Stiver). A third trigger is found in the misperception of our emotions that leads us to distance ourselves from others towards a perceived place of safety (Miller & Stiver). Finally, disconnection occurs when we are ashamed that we cannot bring part of ourselves into a relationship fully (Jordan, 1989).

Disconnection occurs in all settings – it can be commonly found in school settings. Miller and Stiver (1994) investigated the experiences of school children with their teachers. The children usually experience their teachers as powerful figures. As a result, some of the children would create strategies for disconnection when teachers appear intimidating and critical. Some of the strategies of disconnection used by the children were using silence, disappearing, and becoming skillful at not being seen. In addition some students adopted the role of being a good student, essentially attempting to be what the teacher wants in order to win their approval, instead of doing it intrinsically

for themselves. The other more common strategy is to act up, which gave the child power, captured the teacher's attention, and acquiring the ability to predict or control the teacher's critical reactions (Miller & Stiver).

Strategies for disconnection are also gender specific. According to Miller and Stiver (1994), women often placate and accommodate to those they feel are more powerful than they are, and men tend to stay out of connection by avoidance, compulsory activity at work or over-involvement in activities like sports. Additionally, men are much less likely to make efforts to establish connection.

*Authenticity.* Authenticity is “the ongoing challenge to feel emotionally real, connected, vital, clear, and purposeful in relationship” (Surrey, 1985, p.10). Authenticity is in constant motion; it is an ongoing true and real representation of a relationship (Miller & Stiver, 1994), which is similar to Carl Roger's (1966) term of “genuineness” or being real and aware of our feelings and the ability to be willing to express in words, the feelings and attitudes that exists within us. This is not just a “feel good experience”, however Surrey points out that “authenticity necessitates risk; conflict; and expression of a full range of affect, including anger and other difficult emotions” (p.11). Authenticity challenges the relationship and provides the energy for growth (Surrey).

*Empathy.* Empathy is recognized as the primary concept in a woman's relational experience (Jordan et al., 1991). It has been defined as “a complex cognitive-affective skill that involves the ability to join with another in his or her experience, while maintaining cognitive clarity about the source of the arousal” (Jordan, 2002, p.235). Empathy is first experienced by perceiving other's affective cues, verbal and nonverbal when there's motivation to be engaged in a human relationship. Second, by surrendering

to affective arousal in oneself – as if the perceived affective cues were one’s own – produces a temporary identification with the other person’s emotional state. Lastly, there’s a reflection period after one returns to a separate self and engages in understanding. The complex process of empathy is more than just conversation or being a nice person when it is associated within RCT. It is a healing process where people empathetically join each other and move out of isolation and view each other as worthy of respect and connection (Jordan, 2000).

Jordan (1997) described the dynamics of empathy as to be open and connected to another person through all of their experiences, regardless of it being difficult, conflictual, and having destructive thoughts and feelings. Conversely, it also means to be with the strengths and potential strengths as well. RCT views empathy differently from the traditional self-theory’s apply by not being a fusion, loss of self, or a lower level of maturation.

*Mutuality.* The core relational development growth is based on mutual empathy (Jordan et al., 1991). In RCT, in order for a person to empathize with another, they must sincerely appreciate and tolerate the differences in others and have a high level of authenticity and appreciation for others and their subjective experiences. Surrey (1991) described in the book, *Women Growth in Connection*, that mutuality is “being seen and feeling seen by the other, and seeing the other and sensing the other feeling seen” (p.55). Mutuality is an exchange, whereby one is both affecting, and being affected by the other (Jordan, 1986). Miller (2002) stated that people feel they can impact their world because of mutual empathy. Jordan (2002) maintains that an individual must know that their experiences matter to the other person they are attempting to relate to and that they are

just not “taking in” their experience. Failing to acknowledge the experience(s) could generate feelings of shame or relational incompetence, possibly leading the other person to feelings of isolation.

For the purpose of this study, it is important to also note the relationship between empathy and gender. There are significant differences in the way men and women construct meaning or use channels of communication, which make coming together in mutual exchange, quite problematic (Jordan, 1986). Jordan reports, that generally speaking, “Women are often attuned to and want sensitivity to feeling, while men tend to focus more on action” (p.8).

Women tend to have an increased aptitude for relatedness, emotional closeness, and emotional flexibility than men (Surrey, 1985). Hoffman (1977) concurs that men have difficulty surrendering, which is an essential in order to connect with others. Due to the socialization process, men equate empathy as being passive, losing objectivity, and losing control. Winnicott (1971) describes how young boys are socialized to be good soldiers and effective competitors in a largely alienated world. They are encouraged to master tasks and refrain from expressing themselves affectively. For them, high developed empathy might almost seem maladaptive. Conversely, girls are encouraged to attend to one another’s affective states, and maintain closeness to others. They, additionally, are allowed and often encouraged, to demonstrate significant affective expression and urged to develop perceptive acuity in reading others.

Additionally, women have difficulties with empathy unlike those of men. For them there is a difficulty in cognitively structuring the experience, or instating a sense of self when it is passed. In addition, women have trouble showing empathy toward

themselves or what is known as “self empathy” (Jordan, 1990). The male-female relationship is complicated to develop because of the difference in each gender’s mutually empathetic experiences. In heterosexual relationships, women commonly complain of not being listened to, not taken in, not having impact (Jordan, 1999); but mutuality comes more easily for women in women-to-women relationships which can provide sustaining mutual empathy and care.

*Outcomes of the relational cultural theory.* Growth-fostering relationships empower all people in them. Those who experience connecting relationships experience: (a) greater clarity about themselves and others, (b) greater capacity for action, (c) increased vitality, (d) increased self-worth, and (e) the capacity for further connection (Jordan, 1990; Miller, 1986).

In summary, the relational-cultural theory contends that human beings have a need for connection and essential emotional joining. Mutual empathy, characterized by authenticity, creates connections and relational competence. These relationships are mutually beneficial for all parties. They are growth fostering, in that through them mutual development occurs.

#### RCT and Black Females in Predominantly White Schools

During the high school years, Black females are faced with a special relational challenge as they transition to adulthood. Specifically, Black girls are entering high school and developmentally changing into adults and preparing for their transition into the “real world”. High school is a developmental tornado that combines students in a variety of development phases from a variety of cultural (ethnic, SES, ability, religious, gender, and sexuality) backgrounds to network and develop relational roles. High school

can be seen as a competitive place where students are measured against their peers (Sassen, 1980). Schools emphasize grades and competitive endeavors, students come to feel that learning is a private matter that sharing of ideas may lessen their competitive stance, and even that sharing their academic status with friends may disrupt feelings of trust and support (Kaplan et al., 1985).

A competitive and interpersonal classroom can foster self-doubt resulting in women disconnecting through silence. Many Black female students feel invalidated and have lowered self-esteem, even though they are academically successful or have the academic potential to succeed. Black females have been found to feel alienated in schools, due to reaching out to teachers and being perceived as needy instead of wanting to develop a relational connection (Crawford & Mcloed, 1990). In order for Black girls to be successful in school, they must perform more like males (using argumentation, challenge teachers, and assert their opinions) (Guinier et al., 1994). However, this game of role playing only creates feelings of alienation and isolation (Kaplan et al., 1985)

The silencing of Black girls in Fordham's (1993) study was found to be an impact of school achievement. The study site was a racially diverse school located in a predominantly Black neighborhood of Washington, DC. Fordham posits that Black girls are able to reap academic success in one of two ways: a) by becoming and remaining silent, or b) by symbolically representing herself like a male. Fordham identifies three general patterns of behavior that high achieving Black girls engage in to secure academic success: 1) having an invisible status at school; 2) having excellent grades and the lack of a true personal self-identity; and, 3) parenting, teaching, and child-rearing practices that reward their invisibility of good grades. The distress of Black girls from the isolation and

alienation they experience from their Black female peers is developed in the socialization to be silent and invisible. It is damaging to Black girls because it encourages a disconnection, ambivalence, and uncertainty about academic achievement that grows from a perceived lack of support from parents, particularly mothers, guardians, and female teachers.

In addition Black female students in predominantly White schools often need to employ numerous strategies in order to navigate successfully through the various levels of school. Some Black females struggle with the euro-American norms of schools and expressed themselves through the RCT term of *disconnection* by not doing class work, getting into fights, cutting class, and through self-defeating behavior, while others become silent and give in to the social norms that have been equated to achievement in school; despite their own values and self concept.

The behavior of high achieving Black girls, vastly differ from those who struggle academically (Fordham, 1993). The feelings of *connection* to their school by Black girls results in a positive effect on their academic achievement. Conversely, the feelings of *disconnection* have shown to lower their levels of self-esteem which may hinder their academic performance, social development, and emotional well being (Jordan et al., 1991).

The unaware necessity of relational connections to a student's development often misguides the decisions of Black female students to forget their achievement goals (Fordham, 1993). Fordham wrote about Black girls who decline to be silent and invisible in order to attain school acceptance and academic success and its connection to their academic underachievement. Fordham found that these girls had poor grade point



averages, but surprisingly, their standardized tests scores were high. In addition, they possessed a strong connection to their communities and receive great support from their parents or guardians. Consequently, these Black girls were able to balance their sense of self as Black girl in a school that promotes White middle-class norms and identity.

For minority children, they often question their competence, intelligence, and self-worth (Delgado, 1995) because of the racial stereotypes they learn and hear. Black girls often defined themselves by how they fit in at school. Fitting in tends to be associated with skin complexion (light vs. dark), hair texture (curly vs. straight), hair style (braids, processed, natural, weave) facial features (lips and nose) (hooks, 1990, 1992; Takara, 2002; Williams, 1997). In comparison to the socio-economic status, intelligence, and social status of White students determines where the level of popularity in school.

Black girls often live two lives, one that is of their true self and one that is influenced by the dominant group. This is possible due to *self-definition*, which allows members of minority groups to act like the dominant group in order to acquire acceptance in their society citation. This process is powerful to Black girls, because it allows them to live two lives simultaneously (Christian, 1985). However, it is dangerous as it denies Black women of being themselves in order to not be dehumanized (Ashcroft et al., 1998), reject their connections with other Black women, and become entitled to acquire special treatment for themselves to further separate themselves from other Black girls (Collins, 1990).

Despite Black girls continuing to perform academically below White students, Black girls sustain a high level of self-esteem throughout school (Hare, 1973). Research

suggests that the combination of education and identity are often difficult for Black girls, due to their perspective of what it means to be Black and female often conflict with the cultural norms of the school (Fordham, 1993). Black girls who suffer academically are often found to have a strong racial identity and resist being defined by others. Often times studies fail to account for how gender interacts with a student's race and who do not identify the demographic factors that shape the lives of the students continues to support a practice that emphasize Whites as the norm resulting in the experiences of White students over-generalizing to all other groups (Fordham, 1993). Ultimately, these studies tend to neglect the experiences of diverse student groups and are really just pertinent to the education of White girls.

#### Summary

Little research exists on how Black females experience growth fostering relationships in predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools through mutual empathy and mutual empowerment. Specifically, the RCT has not been applied to this type of school setting and subgroup of students before. Additionally, relational cultural theorists have not explored the differences and similarities of the Black girls in such a setting. Therefore, no literature is available regarding this particular phenomenon.

This chapter outlined the development and evolution of the Relational Cultural Theory. Context for this development was created by providing a historical survey of several Western human developmental theories. Traditional development theory maintains that growth occurs in separation. Relational development theory maintains that growth occurs in separation. Relation theory espouses that growth occurs in relationship. However, many types of relational theories retain a utilitarian and objectification

perspective regarding relationships. Additionally, they do not seem to fit the women's experience.

A developing theory that more closely fits a female's experience is the Relational Cultural Theory. It holds a bidirectional perspective concerning relationships, and posits that growth occurs within them. According to the RCT connection through these types of relationships create vitality, a greater capacity for action, clarity, an increase sense self-worth, and a desire for additional connection.

Many studies have focused on aspects of psychological growth, relationship, and connection. None, however, have examined how this may, or may not, occur within predominantly White, high achieving suburban school settings, where Black females are a minority ethnically and by their gender. In-depth interviews with Black females who attend predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools are an important part of understanding this phenomenon.

By focusing on how RCT can be used to understand the experiences of Black females in predominantly White schools would add significantly to the current body of literature allowing school administration to be more actively engaged in the fostering of growth of their students and improving academic achievement. By applying RCT in a study with Black females in a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school could develop a model to increase an understanding of Black females within their schools and develop higher levels of school connectedness.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

### Overview of the Qualitative Inquiry

The purpose of this study was to develop a data-driven theory related to the experiences of Black female students who are attending predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools. Examining their feelings of belonging, acceptance, understanding, and achievement allowed the researcher to hear their stories and the variations in family backgrounds, experiences of racism, previous schooling, and extracurricular activities that factored in the ways Black females approach their education and themselves. As the face of the student body changes and cultural norms become outdated, it was critical to study the perceptions of students who are a minority and investigate if there are experiences that need further research or action taken to improve how Black females feel in school.

To garner the type of data necessary to describe the complexity of Black girl's experiences in a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school, qualitative research is necessary. It can help us understand the complexity of people's lives by examining individual perspectives in context (Heppner et al., 2008). It additionally emphasizes the importance of context, assisting researchers in understanding a phenomenon of interest. In this chapter, I will provide the rationale for the research design, a description of specific research methods (including interview, observation and field notes), interview/data collection protocols, researcher information, description of study site, trustworthiness, and limitations. (Note: As is customary in qualitative research, the principal investigator will be referred to in first person tense throughout the remainder of this manuscript.)

## Qualitative Research Approach

This study used qualitative research approaches to theorize the experiences of Black female students attending a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school. This type of methodology was used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional quantitative research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, this type of research design could establish theory that provides insight relative to the experiences of Black female participants in this study and possibly provide further information about the experiences of other students from similar backgrounds at these types of schools.

Qualitative research, which began as early as 1900, is designed to understand a process, describe poorly understood phenomena, understand differences between stated and implemented policies or theories, and discover unspecified contextual variables (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002). In essence, qualitative research is an inquiry approach that explores a central construct or phenomenon. This research process focuses on developing an in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon by studying a small number of people or sites (Creswell, 2005). The process is inductive in nature, occurs in the natural setting, and is considered to be subjective and biased. As a result, qualitative studies take an in-depth look at multiple realities to determine the “truth” about a central phenomenon. The process involves focusing on participant’s experiences by asking broad, general questions and allowing participants to describe their experiences. Conducting a qualitative study allowed me to gather information from 12 Black female

high school students in the 10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade attending a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school.

### Grounded Theory Design

This qualitative research study utilized a grounded theory design. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined grounded theory as deriving theory from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. Creswell (2005) stated that grounded theory allows the researcher to generate a theory about the qualitative central phenomenon grounded in the data. Three key elements of grounded theory are the data collection, analysis, and theory. Each element works together to build a theory that is sound and provides a true portrayal of the phenomenon being studied.

Grounded theory was originally developed in 1967 by two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Hatch, 2002). More recently, three grounded theory designs have been distinguished: 1) the Systematic Design associated with Strauss and Corbin (1998), 2) the Emerging Design associated with Glaser (1992), and 3) the Constructivist Design associated with Charmaz (2000). I conducted a systematic research design of grounded theory that uses the strategic steps of open, axial, and selective coding in order to build and present a visual diagram of the theory grounded in the data. Theory that is actually developed from data is likely to be a more accurate portrayal of the reality of the participants. Developing a grounded theory involves: identifying categories, connecting the categories, and forming a theory that explains the process.

### Research Design

A grounded theory research method was chosen to develop a theory from the data using an inductive approach and making meaning that moves from the specific to the

more general. Grounded theory takes a case rather than variable perspective, although the distinction is nearly impossible to draw. To clarify, I took different cases to be wholes, in which the variables interact as a unit to produce certain outcomes. I used a variety of data collection methods were used such as an initial interview, follow-up interview, field notes, and personal observation notes. After the data was collected, the data was transcribed by an outside agency. I then reviewed each interview for clarity, and analyzed each using a process called Content Analysis, which will be discussed later in the chapter. Additionally, I conducted a follow-up interview with each participant. Throughout this process, categories were formed, which in turn were used as the basis of the created theory to describe the experiences of the Black female students in a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school.

#### Recruitment of Participants

According to Patton (2002), there are no rules concerning sample size. The actual sample size depends on “what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with the available time and resources” (Patton, p. 244). The goal of the study was to discover the subject’s lived experiences regarding attending a predominantly White, high achieving school as a Black female student and provide implications for better theory and practice when working with Black females. The study sought to determine how subjects make sense of their experiences related to the research questions and the social/cultural contexts in which these experiences occurred. As a result, each study participant provided a large amount of data compared to typical quantitative methods.

The quality of data can affect the sample size and this is why theoretical sampling is recommended when using grounded theory. Theoretical sampling procedure dictated that I choose participants who have experienced or are experiencing the phenomena under study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I choose ‘experts’ in the phenomena and thus was able to provide the best data available. However, the process of selecting participants was an evolving process based on the evolving patterns, categories and dimensions emerging from the data. I sought out participants that might be able to provide deeper insights into the emerging patterns, categories and dimensions. Thus, if the participants were predetermined, I may have found that I may have had to increase the samples size in order to follow the emerging themes. By using theoretical sampling and targeting the most knowledgeable participants, one can increase the quality of the data gathered in each interview. “There is an inverse relationship between the amount of usable data obtained from each participant and the number of participants” (Morse, 2000, p. 4). In other words, the greater the amount of usable data a researcher is able to gather from a single participant, fewer participants will be required (Morse).

Theoretical sampling can provide a sample that is more likely to highlight the patterns, concepts, categories, properties, and dimensions of the given phenomena (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This provides a clearer picture for a model of the phenomena to be developed and then tested using other methods. The end result is that sample size for grounded theory relies on the point of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss; Strauss & Corbin). Researchers can not make a judgment regarding sample size until they are involved in the data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss; Strauss & Corbin).



### *Sample*

Participants met the following criteria: (a) they were currently a full-time student; (b) they had attended the school for at least one full year, (c) they identify themselves as “Black” or African-American; and (d) they were in the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, or 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Using the previous criteria, I identified the participants by using the school’s student database where I am one of the school counselors. To begin, I attempted to recruit 18 participants in order to make up a diverse sample to study. I contacted the potential participants (who met the above 3 criteria) using a flyer and interest survey to introduced the purpose and nature of the study. Eighteen girls volunteered and so I sent them an informed consent packet, which included the cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and the approved University Institutional Review Board (IRB) informed consent and assent forms.

Twelve girls returned the consent and assent forms and were scheduled to participate. The 12 girls met my desires for a diverse sample. They consisted of one 10<sup>th</sup> grader, three 11<sup>th</sup> graders, and eight 12<sup>th</sup> graders, ranging in grade point average from 1.97 to 4.11 on a 4.0 scale, and all but one living within the school district’s boundaries. Due to theoretical saturation I did not recruit more participants from the initial pool of respondents. Detailed information on each participant can be found in Table 2 and in the following chapter.

### *Data Collection Tools*

The data provided for this research study are narratives and insights of participating students collected individually through (1) an interest survey, (2) initial and follow-up semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, and (3) field notes and theoretical

memos. The interview data was recorded using a digital audio recorder and handwritten notes, and later organized for interpretation.

*Interest Survey.* From the study site, 115 Black female students in grades 10 – 12 met the study’s criteria and so they received a flyer announcing the study. Attached to the flyer (see Appendix A) was the Interest Survey (see Appendix B). Interested participants completed the interest survey and returned it to me. The interest survey was used to create an interest and to obtain a random sample of participants.

The Interest Survey contained various questions ranging from the potential participant’s family background to extracurricular activities they participated in. The purpose in collecting this information was to obtain valuable background information about the participants. This information helped me to provide a background context for each participant and provided me with trends in the participants’ lives outside and inside school. This was an essential piece, because it provided data for me to analyze along with their interviews and my field notes.

*Pilot, Initial, and Follow-up Interviews.* I developed an interview Protocol (see Appendix C) using the existing literature focused on Black females, school experiences, racial identity, and issues regarding the achievement gap. A series of questions focused on the connection or disconnection that may be present for Black females attending a predominantly White school. As a semi-structured interview, the protocol contained 15 questions, but I used additional probes to clarify information or to encourage participants to expand their answers. Thus, the protocol was used more as a guide and reminder than as a formal set of questions. A semi-structured interview was selected because it allowed me to examine the research phenomenon and give the participants the freedom to respond

as they wished, which is consistent with qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). Semi-structured interviews allow participants to provide their own unique perspective (Merriam, 1998). The protocol aided me to elicit the stories about salient events and insights regarding lived experiences of the participants.

Before officially starting the study, I used the Interview Protocol to conduct a pilot interview with three participants from the 9<sup>th</sup> grade class. This pilot interview examined the content and clarity of the questions. It also gave me a chance to see if the participants felt their voices were heard and to insure that the interview is relevant to the way the females perceive life at their high school. Additionally, the pilot interviews provided me with an opportunity to become comfortable with the protocol. The feedback obtained from these pilot interviews resulted in not needing to modify the protocol questions.

Then, I conducted an initial interview, which ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, with each of the 12 participants in 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades. This initial interview allowed access into the participant's everyday lived experiences and created an open space for the girls to tell me their stories. My role was to elicit information and gain insight into these student's backgrounds, thoughts, worldviews, experiences, and assumptions relative to the research study.

After each individual interview session, the participants were given pseudonyms, and the interviews were transcribed by an outside agency verbatim with identifying information omitted and unnecessary non-language utterances (e.g., "um", "ah") deleted. As the transcriptions came in, I analyzed each, to attempt to make meaning from the

girls' answers, search for patterns, and begin to build a theory to answer the research question.

A follow-up interview can increase credibility in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1998) to establish a correspondence between the way the participants viewed and communicated a social construct and the way I portrayed their viewpoints (Mertens, 2005). To this end follow-up interviews were scheduled with each participant about two weeks after the first interview; these lasted approximately 15–30 minutes. These follow-up interviews enabled me to summarize what I saw as the results of the initial interview, in order to probe if the participant's opinions and comments had been accurately reflected in the transcribed notes. Each participant generally agreed with their personal portrayals and the viewpoints that emerged.

*Field and Personal Notes.* Triangulation, data analysis that synthesizes data from multiple sources (Heppner et al., 2008; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991), was useful in examining the existing data to strengthen interpretations. Triangulation strengthens the dependability and credibility of the study. I took field notes as a triangulation method.

Field notes and other writings are integral to participant observation. They include: 1) descriptions and interpretations of individuals, interactions, and events; and 2) time and location of observations, as well as key contextual information (such as weather, other events happening, and their significance). Throughout the data collection process, I also kept *theoretical memos*, which are the tentative interpretations emerging and being assessed through further data collection (Merriam, 1998).

In this study, I took note of what happened and reviewed the transcribed audio recordings. By taking field notes, it assisted me in collecting more data to obtain the

whole picture of what is happening. I also recorded my personal observations of the participant before, during, and after the interviews and impressions regarding the participant's insight, personality, non-verbal communications, and notable non-occurrences during the interview. My personal reactions were important to note, because they help me to see my possible influences on the data and the effects of personal events to the data collection and analysis.

### Data Processing and Analysis

Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in my data analysis process, thematic categories, such as disconnection with school culture, home life, and psychological distress, were identified and the coding of key terms was used to delineate the personal accounts given. I worked between listening to the girls' perspectives, and checking the extant literature to see whether and how their ideas were addressed. In short, I analyzed the data collected to attempt to make meaning of the girls' perspectives and to build a theory in relation to the research question.

Grounded theory is a systematic way of constructing a theory that is developed from data (Berg, 2004; Strauss, 1987). One goal of developing a successful theory grounded in the data is by formulating hypotheses that are based on conceptual ideas that are generated by comparing the data gathered (Berg 2004). These theories can then be applied to other observations (Berg). Berg developed a stage model for content analysis in qualitative research. The intention behind the content analysis is for purposes of grounded theory. The development of grounded theory through the use of content analysis may allow for the emergence of major themes in the data and the category development that builds the theory.

The first step, in Berg's model, is to identify the research question. For purposes of this study, my question was: What are the experiences of Black female students in a predominantly White, high achieving public school, and what are the implications of this research for educational and counseling theory and practice?

The data analysis process began by the individual interviews being transcribed verbatim and I coded the transcriptions for salient themes, reoccurring interventions, or belief patterns provided by the participants. The second step was to establish the analytic categories of the research. In this step, I analyzed the data by generating a description of the participant's experiences and perceptions through their voices, feelings, actions, and meanings. For example, a participant's experience with a teacher who took time to get to know her might result in the participant feeling good about her self and result in academic success.

The third step in Berg's model is open and axial coding. Open coding is the first level of abstraction of the data. The transcriptions and field notes are analyzed line by line. In this tedious phase, I conceptualized all of incidents in the data, which yielded over eight pages of codes that emerged from the data. These were compared as I coded more data, and merged into new concepts, and eventually renamed and modified. I went back and forth while comparing data and constantly modifying the theory.

Axial coding is a second pass through the data. In axial coding, I began with an organized set of initial codes designed from the open coding stage. Additional codes emerged during this pass, and I noted them; but my primary task remained on reviewing and examining the initial codes. I moved toward organizing ideas or themes and identified the axis of key concepts in analysis. During axial coding I coded the data to

reflect if the participant viewed what is being said as a positive, negative, or neutral description. This step helped me further break down the participant's relationship of various events and participants' understandings of those events they described (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Finally, a discussion at the end of each summary of analysis attempts to attribute meaning to the experiences of the participants, which adds meaning to the words that were said in the interviews. This also poses a challenge for me to not add my own bias and assumptions to the data. The analysis of data proceeds through the stages is outlined in Figure 1.

#### Principal Investigator Information

My role as the principal investigator, in grounded theory, is to build a substantive theory, which is localized and deals with a real-world situation (Merriam, 2002). I was an observer and an interviewer in this tradition of qualitative inquiry exhibiting objectivity and sensitivity. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), "...objectivity is necessary to arrive at an impartial and accurate interpretation of events. Sensitivity is required to perceive the subtle nuances and meanings in data to recognize the connections between concepts" (p. 42-43). I did not begin with a preconceived theory in mind. Instead, I began the study and allowed the theory to emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated, "A theory usually is more than a set of findings; it offers an explanation about the phenomena" (p. 22). I played a major part of the phenomenon being studied, because in order to understand the personal meaning and subjective experiences of the participants I had to be involved with the lives of the people being studied (Oxford Journals, 2009). To this end, it is imperative to offer assumptions

and biases that I had prior to data collection. As an “instrument” in the study, then, it is imperative to offer assumptions and biases that I had prior to data collection (Glesne, 1999).

The qualitative research paradigm acknowledges that the researcher is an integral part of the process that cannot be separated from the topic or people that are being studied (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). I entered the world of Black females who are attending a predominantly White, high achieving suburban high school. In order to highlight the subjective nature of the study and place myself within the research, I offer a brief personal introduction. I am a school counselor within the school I am studying and am very connected to the environment, students, faculty, staff, and community. I have often witnessed pain, confusion, and hopelessness by Black females that come into my office. Common statements made to me revolved around girls not feeling connected to the school, feeling invisible, and the academic bar being set too high; these issues involved in this research are pertinent and consequential to my own life. I grew up as a multi-ethnic Black minority in classrooms filled with White students. I, at times, did not feel understood or acknowledged; but somehow I achieved and have worked towards the goals I have set for myself.

I acknowledge that my personal background as a person of color and an adult counselor, as well as an awareness of the literature, will inevitably influence the interview process as well as the interpretation of the data. My knowledge of the struggles and challenges of this population created a certain level of empathy for the females I interviewed. This might have led to conscious and unconscious expectations to hear about various obstacles, and these expectations could undoubtedly impact the interview



process or how I interpreted data. Conversely, my background and empathy assisted in leading participants to freely share their own experiences. My professional experience as a counselor provided me the necessary skills to establish rapport and engage individuals to open up and explore themselves from a more in depth perspective. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, girls of color in this school had sought me out on a number of occasions, even though I was not officially their counselor. Additionally, as an adult researcher, I was presented with another challenge. I am not a teenager and have not attended high school in the new millennium and therefore my interpretation of girls and “new” school dynamics may be limited. Thus, I had to make every effort to account for my particular interpretations during the study, so that I could clearly articulate the voices and perspectives of the Black females interviewed to the best of my ability.

#### Study Site: High School in a Midwestern City

The participants in this study were chosen from a Midwestern high school that represented a fairly typical U.S. suburban school.. The study site was selected for the following reasons: 1) the school is located in a location that is comparable to the national statistical representation of individuals self-identifying as being Black; 2) the school’s composition of Black student population is representative of their county population; 3) the school is located in a middle to high class area which neutralizes the issues of economic disadvantages within the school district that have been theorized as being related to the school failures of minority students; 4) the above average standardized test scores and high levels of academic distinction issued by the State’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; and 5) the technological and teacher advancements that prove to exceed or meet the state standards.

## Trustworthiness, Qualitative Validity, and Delimitations

Trustworthiness in qualitative research usually includes some elements of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Guba and Lincoln proposed four criteria (Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability) for evaluating the accuracy of qualitative research which are also alternatives to traditional quantitative criteria. In this section, I will explain how I addressed each of these concepts.

A study is deemed credible if the participants' experiences and feeling about the phenomena of interest are faithfully described (Koch, 2006). The participant's perspective in the research is important to focus on when establishing the credibility of the results of the qualitative research. Credibility in the study were principally addressed by engaging in three pilot interviews and providing a rich, thick description of the phenomena in order to give the reader an element of shared experiences (Creswell, 2005). My follow-up interviews also help me to establish credibility.

Transferability requires that the context of the study be adequately described so that the reader can make a judgment as to the degree to which a study's findings can fit into contexts outside of the study's situations (Guba & Lincoln). Transferability was enhanced by providing a sufficient description of the context of the study and its participants so that the reader can decide if the prevailing environment is similar to other situations with which the reader is familiar in order to justify the application of the findings to other settings (Shenton, 2004).

According to Sandelowski (1986), a study is dependable when another researcher can clearly follow the study's original methods and procedures and arrive at comparable

conclusions. Dependability was addressed by providing the reader with a dense description of the research methods employed by this study (Krefting, 1991) and by an auditing research process, by documenting all the raw data generated and assessing method of data analysis, commonly known as an *audit trail* (Guba & Lincoln, 1998).

Efforts at establishing trustworthiness were incorporated throughout the study. Researchers often seek to disconfirm emerging hypotheses through the process known as negative case analysis. I used negative case analysis in this study reexamining each participant's story, after the initial analysis, to determine if the characteristics of the emergent themes applied to all of the cases (Bowen, 2005). Negative case analysis can increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research and is useful in verifying data (Padgett, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The results that could be confirmed or corroborated by others is know as confirmability. In order to enhance confirmability the researcher can document the procedures for checking and rechecking the data throughout the study. In addition, another researcher can review the results and document their process from a "devil's advocate" role. The researcher can also search for and describe negative instances that contradict prior observations. And, at the conclusion of the study, the researcher can conduct a data audit which examines the data collected and analyze the procedures to make judgments about the potential for bias. My dissertation committee served to help me confirm my results.

In qualitative studies, the challenge is that each individual researcher studies the data and transforms it into findings in individual ways. There are a vast amount of guides and examples, but each study is very specific and unique and the investigator can

interpret the data differently than other investigators. However, in this study this common limitation actually may prove to be a benefit because the principal investigator is a major part of the phenomenon being studied and is involved in the lives of the participants being studied. Data is collected in the “field” – the natural world where people live and experience life. As a school counselor within the school, the data I may receive could be true and authentic compared to what may be said or interpreted by someone outside of the school. The participant’s may feel a sense of comfort in sharing with me their experiences, because I am not a stranger and I may already have a preexisting relationship built with them.

Another limitation is the lack of transferability of the findings of this grounded theory-oriented study. Generally in qualitative studies, data is often collected from a few cases or individuals, which means that findings cannot be generalized to the larger population. While specific findings obtained from the current study may not be transferable to schools across the nation, from this research I may determine what questions schools must ask when it comes to developing culturally competent responses to counseling students of color.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations obviously arise in any research study involving human subjects. My primary responsibility is the obligation to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the study participants (Creswell, 2005). Accordingly, the National Institutes of Health (n.d.) protections for human subjects will be used in this study. First, the study is designed to place the participants at no greater psychological risk than they would otherwise incur in daily life. Second, the procedures of the study were fully

disclosed and the participant's informed consent was obtained. Third, the freedom to withdraw from any study is absolute, and participants were fully informed of this right.

Fourth, I strove to fully understand and validate the depiction of the participants' personal experiences, and so I conducted a follow up, member-checking interviews with each of the girls. Member checking or member validation satisfies the ethical responsibility of the principal investigator to verify the accuracy of the data by asking the study participants to review the transcribed data and the study findings (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2007).

Finally, while I have the responsibility to accurately present the data and the results of the study in an unaltered form, the confidentiality of the participants is a vital aspect of the study, because "confidentiality protections minimize subject's concerns over the use (or misuse) of the data" (NHRPAC, 2002, p.1). As a result of a participant's confidentiality being maintained, participants tend to provide more accurate information to investigators, thereby improving the data used in the analysis and thus the overall quality of the research. In addition, confidentiality of participants allows researchers to conduct complicated research on important societal problems (e.g., drug abuse, the spread of HIV, violence, etc.). In this study, the data provided by the participants and the identity of the participants were kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and all study materials were kept in a locked vault that I had sole access to.

### Summary

The development of a theory related to the experiences of Black female students who are attending predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools were achieved

using a grounded theory study design. The feelings of belonging, acceptance, understanding, and achievement that will be captured through Black female's stories could explain the ways Black females approach education and look at themselves. With a more diverse student body in today's education system and traditional cultural norms becoming outdated, it is important to study the perceptions of how Black females feel in school.

A qualitative research design was chosen in order to obtain personal experiences and perspectives on the phenomenon being studied through the development of close relationships between the principal investigator, participants, and the central phenomenon. The grounded theory systematic design was employed in order to explain the lived experiences of Black females attending a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school in St. Louis County. A total of 12 self-identified Black 10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade girls participated. Using the primary data source of grounded theory research, all participants were interviewed in person and participated in one follow-up interview for clarification of meanings. Throughout, categories were developed through the use of open, axial, and selective coding of the data. Three separate verification procedures were used to establish credibility: three pilot interviews, the use of member-checking, and providing a rich, thick description of the phenomena. Implementing these procedures allows me to control for biases and produce a well-grounded study.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Theories available for educators and counselors (e.g., school connectedness and Relational Cultural Theory) are not specifically designed for working with Black females attending predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools and provide little guidance for clinical practice. To this end, conducting a grounded theory study allows for these theories to be further developed and based from the data provided by this subgroup for redesign. In an effort to improve these theories, this study explored the experiences of Black females attending a predominantly White, high-achieving suburban school to provide a reapplication of existing theories for educators and counselors and develop an easy to use model for clinical practice which will be further discussed in Chapter Five.

It can be assumed that students in general will have expectations, challenges, and needs while attending high school. More importantly as schools grow increasingly more diverse it is imperative to understand these may affect, positively and/or negatively, Black female success in predominantly White high achieving suburban schools. Theories of school connectedness (Whitlock, 2005) provided schools with environmental changes to stimulate feelings of belonging for all students, but failed to specifically look at the ethnic and gender diversity that exist. In addition, the RCT concentrated on the feelings of connection and disconnection developed in relationships with others. Both of these theories focus on belonging and connection, but take two approaches. RCT focuses on the individual people, while school connectedness focuses on the environment. As I began my data analysis, I questioned whether and how these approaches were validated by the data.

To translate the data from the participants into a usable theory for practitioners, I constructed coding categories from the data. The categories captured the perceptions of the participants regarding their experiences in their school. The school experience was broken down into three assertions that emerged through the coding process. 1) Girls described their experiences through comparisons and expectations of their peers and school environment. 2) Girls described their experiences through the challenges they faced and endured. 3) Girls described their experiences through the support systems they needed to be successful. In this chapter, I will first provide background information for each of the participants. Second, each section will introduce and describe each coding category as to support for each of assertions made for redesigning the current theories available. Finally, each category will include example quotes from participants or descriptors of the type of statements made by participants to prove the reapplication of current theories and the need for a theoretical model geared towards Black girls in a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school.

### The Girls

Twelve girls provided me their stories of attending a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school. Specific background information about each of the girls who participated in this study can be found in Table 2. The participants consisted of one 10<sup>th</sup> grader, three 11<sup>th</sup> graders, and eight 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Seven of the girls who had a 3.0 or higher grade point average (GPA) had taken three or more honor or advanced level classes. Five girls had a GPA below 2.9. Half of the girls participated in the federal free/reduced lunch program as a result of their family's socioeconomic status, and had their mother as head of household. For the other half of the participants, two girls lived



with both parents, two lived with their father only, and two lived with other members of their extended family. Four girls attended school within the district from kindergarten through senior year, four transferred in as freshmen, two as sophomores, and two as juniors.

The girls stated throughout their interviews an appreciation for and embraced the academic rigor of school because of the potential future academic and career opportunities. Additionally, in support of the theories of school connectedness, participants cited that they experienced a safe learning environment, engaging faculty, and a variety of non-academic activities available to them. In addition, as theorized by RCT, the girls often found that attending a predominantly White school was a personal challenge or a sense of disconnection in that they felt a need to fit in, were isolated, and perceived to have greater academic expectations. To deal with the challenges of attending a predominantly White, high achieving school in a suburban setting, the girls consistently mentioned the need to have more support from school faculty and staff. Each participant mentioned that family support, coupled with the assistance of select teachers, aided them both academically and socially/emotionally. Teachers were cited to be important support figures in the school; not one girl mentioned a school counselor, who by job description can work with the students and support them through their academic careers.

### Expectations and Comparisons

It is important to note that connections are often manifested in the relationships with peers and teachers, and, thus, can affect a Black female student's ability to perform academically. Therefore, Black girls often perceive their classroom performance in

comparison to other learners resulting in feelings of success or failure and how the student understands herself. Thus, the relationships implicit to the study participants, given their ethnic status, within a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school influenced the types of relationships experienced and how these relationships influenced their learning and achievement. Throughout the study, the girls had or made two types of expectations and comparisons: personal and about their school environment.

### *Personal Expectations and Comparisons*

School connectedness and RCT do not fit entirely with the data obtained, because both theories do not address or take into account the importance of length of attendance (time) in a district and grade point average (academic expectations) as predictors of perceptions of fitting in or belonging. This is an important finding in that the responses from the girls patterned responses from other girls like them. The girl's responses were divided by GPA and length of attendance. The longer length of attendance and higher GPA girls felt isolated and were perceived as acting White by their Black peers, while the newer to the district or lower GPA girls were deemed as drama queens and didn't feel popular. In addition, neither group felt that they fit in or were meeting set expectations.

In an effort to describe this point, I have presented two case studies of participants who present these characteristics and one case study that was they only outlier to this assertion. These cases are described from the interviews and the field notes I took before, during, and after the interviews.

*Case Study #1 Janae – High GPA & Long Attendance.* Janae entered the interview quiet and studious; she seemed hesitant as to what might take place. She had dark brown skin and wore her hair slicked back into a ponytail. She sat down and looked

at me through her red rimmed glasses and smiled weakly. Janae is a junior who has attended school within the school district for the last 12 years. She began to tell me about her family and proudly stated that her parents were still married and had been for 23 years. She had found church to be a family value and base of support for herself. As she began explaining what school was like for her, she spoke in depth about feeling safe and the environment being friendly. The more she talked about school, the more she mentioned grades, academic excellence, and an air of confidence in her academic abilities began to display itself. She had been placed in the gifted and talented program and took the toughest courses offered in the high school.

However, she also mentioned a feeling of uneasiness and a sense of isolation. One particular time was when her honors English class read the book *Huckleberry Finn* which uses the “N word” throughout. She did not know quite how to handle this situation and felt that all of the other White students in her class were staring at her. She also explained that in her Honors course she would be the only Black student and was often referred to by her Black friends as acting White because she had good grades and was in honors classes. This was disturbing to her, because she felt that she was just herself and that she wasn’t understood by either group of peers, but rather left alone to navigate through school.

*Case Study #2 Ciara – Low GPA & Short Attendance.* At first glance, Ciara seemed quite the opposite of Janae. She came into my office while laughing loudly at what someone had told her in the hall. Her hair was braided in an interesting pattern on her head, and she was wearing a men’s FUBU shirt and sagging jean shorts. She plopped down in the chair said, “Whazzup Ms. Nash?” Now Ciara had never come to visit with

me in the counseling center, but entered my office as if we had been friends for life. She very quickly opened up and told me about her father who is serving in the military in Iraq and that she lives with grandmother. When asked about her experiences in high school, she explained that it was good but boring. She claimed there was no action and not enough fights. As I sat there puzzled about this statement, as she explained that all of the Black students who were in honors classes or getting really good grades were not living life and were not being themselves. They were merely posers and trying to be like the White kids, rather than be loud and expressing themselves as Black students. When I pressed as to where she got this notion, she claimed that this was the way Blacks are; they are colorful, animated, loud, and engage in discussions that often times erupt into possible fights. It was the way to be real and authentic. She went on further to say that the students that were “goodie goodie” or getting good grades were popular at school and that since she did not get good grades, she was viewed as “ghetto” and “uneducated.”

*Case Study #3 Aundrea – Low GPA & Long Attendance.* Aundrea was my last interview, and I very quickly saw her as a negative case. She had attended school in the district since kindergarten, but had one of the lowest GPAs of the participants interviewed. She was small in stature and had relaxed hair pulled back in a ponytail. She began to say that her family was big, and clarified in saying her grandmother had seven children, but she just lived with her mother. She also had mentioned that her father and mother had never gotten married because her father was mentally unstable as he was a schizophrenic. She and her mother were close and would have a mother-daughter outing each Wednesday. Aundrea had attended school in the district since kindergarten and had large groups of friends, was accepted by both groups of students (Black and White), but

found the academic portion of school not interesting. She stated that the academic thing was just not her and that although she could get good grades didn't find motivation to aspire to achieve them. She also didn't feel the need to be loud or "obnoxious", but also didn't want to kiss a teacher's "butt" in order to be liked in class. She loved going to school and being with her friends, but not studying.

These three case studies highlighted the importance that the length of attendance (time) in a district and grade point average (academic expectations) were for Black girls perceptions of fitting in or belonging in predominantly White school. In addition, it was important to show that the data was trustworthy through an outlier that didn't fit what the majority claims.

#### *School Environment*

In education literature, factors that deem schools worthy of high achieving status require a school to exceed the set standards of academic achievement set by federal or state education agencies. The school also has to demonstrate to education stakeholders, that they provide a comprehensive curriculum to all of their students. For most schools that have been given this distinction they have been compared to a set of standards or other schools. School connectedness describes the ability of providing high quality schools, by characteristics such as competence of teachers, academic rigor, and a safe and friendly environment. In addition, to complement this, RCT describes the relationships that create these environments through peers and faculty and staff members. To qualify these assertions in the data the girls critiqued their school and based off their responses against other school they previously attended (whether it was in the district or not), to deem what is important to their success. Eleven of the 12 participants reported they

enjoyed their school and found it to be a friendly, safe, and supportive environment. Generally speaking, the participants described their school in terms of (a) liking their school, (b) characteristics of the students and faculty, and (c) involvement which takes what school connectedness describes and combines it with the principles of RCT.

*“I Like This School”*. The predominantly White, high achieving suburban school was described as welcoming, friendly, and peaceful by almost every Black girl participating in the study. For instance, Danielle said, “I think my school is a great school, a great learning environment, and great students.” Janae found the school to be peaceful and safe:

I guess it’s like a good atmosphere because I don’t have to worry about someone pulling out a knife on somebody or something like that. Like it’s a good school. It’s kind of peaceful...Like there’s not a fight every single week so.

Typically students described their school in positive terms by comparing it to other schools. For example, there is an implicit comparison in Janae’s comment above, perhaps about a previous school she attended or stories she has heard about “inner-city” schools. Likewise, Alexia explained, “Coming here they are [reference to students and staff] all more welcoming.” She had explained that previous schools she attended were not as welcoming or open to new people. With school being peaceful and safe, students felt that they could focus and participate in not only educational activities, but non-education activities.

One student, Ciara, did, however, mention that she did not like the school. She felt that the school environment as a whole was boring and not lively with action. She would prefer to be at a school that provided more drama. She claimed that this activity provided more entertainment for her. Given other statements made by this participant

and upon considering her academic performance, these statements could refer to her lack of feeling successful. Out of all the participants she had the lowest GPA and was the least involved. This lends weight to the theory that connection and building empowering relationships is critical for developing a positive academic identity.

*Characteristics of the Students, Faculty, and Staff.* On numerous occasions the participants referenced that their teachers were knowledgeable and supportive, and believed that they were overall good teachers. Most of the students identified the caring nature of their teachers. Janae found that, “The students and teachers are more friendly towards each other.” Again, there is an implicit comparison in her statement by claiming that teachers here are *more* friendly. She continued in saying that teachers were easy to approach and talk to. Students didn’t feel that any teacher was not willing to help them academically or to be there to listen to their concerns. Jane said:

We can joke around a whole a lot more [with teachers]. In some of my classes some of the teachers they kind of pick on some of the students, but the students know that and they joke right back with them... so it’s really fun.

Zoe also stated, “You can go to your teacher or anybody and ask them to help you with something and they’ll be ready to help you.” Participants described that teachers don’t just teach by lecturing but try to provide a variety of teaching styles and believe that students are able to do well in their classes. Jane said, “Here at school like most teachers like a lot of teachers they expect you to do well.” Almost all the girls claimed that they felt “safe,” and accepted without judgment. All 12 of the girls described their relationships with teachers and administrators in these generally positive ways: caring, friendly, and genuinely good teachers.

*School Involvement.* On numerous occasions, participants reflected back on their previous school experiences of schools that did not provide students with a variety of extracurricular activities, often because of budget cuts. Their current school, according to the participants, provides a solid education, wide variety of activities, supports, and opportunities. The educational and non-educational activities available to these participants were quite varied and included: a variety of teaching styles, sports, student council, clubs designed by teachers, clubs designed by students, study groups, and before and afterschool tutoring. Danielle, when comparing her previous school (which was predominantly Black and downtown in the city) to her current predominantly White suburban school stated:

I love the fact that they have a variety of just about any sport that you could think of for kids to stay involved in and then kids have the opportunity to start up any club they want. You know they have a lot of ways for kids to stay involved so they don't just come here and then go home.

All of the girls were happy to be attending their school, found meaningful relationships with teachers, and were involved in an average of 4 activities/clubs per participant. Nine of the girls mentioned something related school involvement and of these 9, this theme occurred 27 times and often relating the necessity of being involved in their school to their feelings of academic and school success. Girls that had attended school in the district longer and had higher GPAs believed that being involved was a necessity in order to obtain their long term goals. Whereas, girls with short length attendance found being involved a necessity to belong in school. Both groups found involvement to be a necessity, but their attendance at a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school came with its challenges.

### Challenges



It is assumed that the Black female student's adoption or rejection of the school's attitudes, values, and norms could devalue Black girls and, thus, create a sense of inferiority to White students and staff, which is described as a disconnection in RCT. High school is difficult for many students. Moreover, it happens at a time when students develop into young adults, have increased responsibility, academic rigor, and the formation of non-family social relationships. At a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school, Black girls face unique challenges in addition to the more general difficulties previously mentioned. They face feelings of needing to fit in, feelings of isolation, "drama," and living up to the academic standards, all of which are not specifically discussed in RCT or school connectedness theory.

From the data, Black girls have significantly more challenges that need to be supported and recognized by school officials (administrators, teachers, and counselors) to ensure school success. They face the pressures of academic performance and standardized tests, along with trying to connect authentically with their peers, both Black and White. In addition, the concept of time is also an important challenge; RCT and school connectedness do not discuss the duration of time in a relationship or school environment and its affect. The longer a person engages in a relationship in a particular context, such as a community school district, could affect their level of connection or disconnection to each subsequent school. Additionally, the more time in an environment could predict a feeling of belonging. The ideas of needing to fit in, feelings of isolation, drama, and living up to the academic standards are real challenges faced over time by this population and need specific attention in order to assist students with being successful academically, socially, and emotionally.

### *Needing to Fit In*

Eight of the girls describe their experiences of needing to fit into their new school environment, whereas the four students claimed they were viewed as acting White. The need to fit in, into the school environment or among their Black peers, was mentioned on 36 occasions across the 12 interviews. Students continually stated the need to feel free to be genuine in the context of the relationship (Jordan, 1992, 1997; Miller & Stiver, 1994). There were two camps of perspectives that came out. First, students who had attended school within the district often commented on that they didn't feel they fit the stereotypical characteristics of Black students (e.g., being loud, living in the city, not educated, sagging clothes or loud hair colors), but were perceived as 'acting White'. Janae described how she is viewed as 'acting White',

I guess like I'm not like I know I'm not like a ghetto black kid or whatever like just dressing normal and also like the honors classes and stuff so...not like going overboard with like the accessories and how much glitter and like the different all the fifty different pairs of shoes and stuff.

Jezzel stated, "...not acting black I guess and I think that's probably like a stereotype of like loud and obnoxious and not smart." These feelings frustrated the students, and often times they questioned whether they should subscribe to the expected norm in order to feel connected to their school or to be who they are. Linda describes how some of her Black friends would feel about her, because she was not subscribing to their norm; instead they felt that she was "acting White",

I think that because I wasn't acting all loud or getting all upset or just being obnoxious for no apparent reason I was kind of to myself and because I'm not saying that they don't have goals, but because I have goals I was like I need to do this, this and that. I guess they felt like 'oh she thinks she's too good' and I guess they started to see that.

Conversely, for the other the girls who did not attend K- 9<sup>th</sup> grade within the district or transferred in after freshmen year, they felt as if they were not a part of the “in” group or a “popular student.” The girls who attended K-12 found themselves a part of the majority and had fewer Black friends. Tanesha described it as, “It’s more or less like their clothes they wear and their personality and more or less the like their school they went to. They’ve been in the district for like ever so it’s like gradually they became more popular.”

For Catherine being both Black and White, she found school to be a place where she didn’t feel that she belonged. By being half Black and growing up in a White family created an interesting tension for herself. She stated:

It was kind of like living two lives but at the same time it kind of fit into like my family life because I always had to try to do what everyone wanted in order to kind of feel loved or accepted.

In most cases, participants reflected on periods of trying to fit in and currently choosing who they want to be for themselves. Oftentimes, students wanting to fit in perceived a sense of isolation for being Black and not White, which created a hypersensitivity to be the only Black student in class or shying away from conflict and drama to not associate with the stereotypical Black behavior of being loud and getting into fights.

#### *Token Black Kid*

Frequently the participants described what it was like being the only Black kid in a class or when they walked into the cafeteria how it felt segregated. All of the students who had a 3.0 or higher GPA made references to themselves as the “token black kid” in their classes. As the girls progressed academically, taking rigorous classes and honors level curriculum, they began to feel isolated from their Black peers. They also stated

continuously how being a minority in advanced classes and at a predominantly White high-achieving suburban school created higher expectations as well as feelings of self-doubt in their abilities. Six of the twelve participants mentioned something about their experiences of being the single Black student in their classes. Six participants mentioned experiences of tokenism and it was mentioned on 22 different occasions by these students. For example, Geena stated:

I have been the token black kid in the class; especially in grade school there was I think two of us in class and um you know it's kind of tough sometimes. There's no one to talk to really. It's particularly harder for us to make friends cuz especially at a young age all kids know is: 'that person doesn't look like me.' People eventually they opened up, and I made a lot of friends and they saw me for who I was and not the color of my skin.

### *Drama*

Students also saw themselves self-isolating to avoid being caught up in, to use their terms, "drama," which often meant gossiping or getting into fights with other Black girls. All but one of the girls commented on how they would avoid being with other Black girls when there was drama associated with the interaction. The girls felt that the behavior displayed by other Black girls engaging in "drama" was not what they wanted to participate in or be associated with. Instead they would all shy away from being in those social circles. Tanesha described her isolation as, "I keep to myself I don't like hang around with the whole big social circle because there's too much drama." Alexia stated,

Usually if you see a fight at school you won't see me there, because I don't really like confrontation. I don't like fighting. So when everyone runs towards the fight I'm just minding my business going where I was headed.

Aundrea describes it as,

I just don't think it's right to just exclude kids from a clique. That's why I don't really center myself in a clique. I kind of move from different people because I

don't think it's right to just not have a certain person just because you know stereotype.

Drama at a predominantly White high achieving suburban school proved to be a major challenge for Black girls. Every girl mentioned the drama in their interviews and it was mentioned a total of 24 times throughout the twelve interviews. When pressed further about the reasons Black girls would engage in the drama, each one claimed it was to gain attention and show how tough they were.

#### *Living up to the Academic Standards*

For all of the Black girls at a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school, academic standards were reported to be higher than previous schools attended. All of the girls desired to fit the school's academic standards and obtain school success. They all described feelings of frustration either personally or for their Black peers, of not being smart enough and matching up with their White peers academically. Even the girls who had above a 3.8 GPA felt that they were not smart enough or that they felt they needed to work harder in order to even achieve what they felt White students were achieving. Each of the 12 girls described the academic standards they must meet in order to feel successful and this was mentioned a total of 27 times during the interviews. Alexia described the expectations as, "Not only do Black people have to live up to White standards, but there's always also division within ourselves that we have to live up to." The girls perceived that they needed to work harder or do more in order to be viewed as equals to their White counterparts in class. The girls on various occasions talked about how Black kids weren't in honors classes, but in the regular and special education classes. All of them felt students had the potential but were afraid to take the classes.

Geena found, “African American kids have the potential to be in those classes are scared and stirred away from those classes because they are predominantly White.”

Janae stated:

I guess like the mainly all the black kids are either in like the normal or the special classes and like I don't see more black people in the honors classes. I went to the National Honor Society induction last week and I saw that there was only one other black person out of and like there was sixty seven people and there was only two black kids.

Alexia explained it as, “...at the awards program there were only two Black kids that won or got an award. I'm like that's ridiculous because we should be just as high on the level of academics as the White kids.” Jezza stated,

I think maybe the black kids feel like they can't take like honors classes or like really hard classes because they won't do well or like they're not expected to do well or like expected to take those kind of classes.

Unique challenges for Black girls in predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools requires additional supports that are specifically geared to assist Black girls. School staff must be culturally competent based upon Black standards versus predominantly White values. School districts need to provide counselors and other support staff services in doing multicultural counseling to assist diverse students and make school more successful.

#### Needing More Support

School connectedness has not discussed in the literature how to provide additional supports; it rather addresses how to change environments. Changes to environments are complicated because contexts are constant undergoing changes already, and because they involve humans who are constantly in flux as well. It is impossible to expect a school to change its environment and find that all students will fit the mold. Providing additional

supports that are focused on understanding an individual, their unique qualities and the challenges they face, and discover ways for that individual to be authentic and co-exist in the environment, is essential. That is done by providing trained professionals who specialize in working with individuals from a variety of cultures in schools.

In this section, the data of what was said was not as important as to what was not said in the interviews. All of the girls during various points in the interview claimed the need for more support in order to be academically and socially successful in their schools. They mentioned on numerous occasions how they felt comfortable and supported by only one or two teachers. They felt that their counselor and a majority of the teachers did not understand them or want to develop a relationship with them. In addition, participants commented on how school counselors were focused only on the task of college/career exploration or doing a schedule change and did not feel comfortable in coming to them with personal, social, or emotional concerns or guidance.

They stated that much of their support came from their families. It is interesting to note that only two families have both parents in the household and all but one has had a turbulent past. From parents dying to father's serving in the armed forces in Iraq, these twelve girls were fighting an uphill battle. Much of their lives have been turbulent and filled with trials and tribulations. In addition, many of their caregivers were just making ends meet and getting by. With half of the girls on free/reduced lunch, I can theorize that there are far more hardships they face than what was mentioned in their interviews. Their school has the resources to have seven counselors and a school social worker within their school building and not one of them mentioned getting or needing support from these professionals other than a schedule change or to submit college applications.

What they did find in their schools were opportunities to be supported by their peers and teachers with whom they made personal connections. Teachers who supported them did so by taking the time to care and encourage the girls to be successful in their own individual way and through peer role models. Linda said that teachers have told her that, “She’s a good bright student who wants to succeed academically and I can see that in her. She’s taking the time to come out instead of just being like forget it.” Ciara stated,

I’m proud of myself because I brought my grades up tremendously. Like I used to didn’t even care about my grades. When I was at my previous school, I never cared and the teachers didn’t care so I didn’t care but when I came here one of my teachers cared. The teachers here are really good. They brought my grades up a lot. No, I brought my grades up a lot and I know I can.

Alexandra also found support from a teacher who took the time to encourage her to keep trying and to not drop an AP class,

Like honors U.S. studies AP you have both of those classes you’re in there for two hours and then it’s just like oh my gosh these kids are so much smarter than me. My teacher even said you’re able to do the work and there was also a point when he said ... “ you can do it”.

When students talked about their predominantly White, high achieving suburban school, they all noted that they had learned a lot by attending the school. At the school despite the challenges they faced took the opportunity to attend a better school and did so with no regrets. They have found the strength to survive and succeed. Geena found strength in being with her Black peers, she stated,

I was included in a study group for African Americans that are in honors classes and I think that helped because one I figured I found out that I wasn’t alone. There was like ten or twelve black kids that were in honors classes and I didn’t know that.



In addition to learning, the participants noted that they felt uplifted and generally better about themselves through their experience. Alexia felt that being able to be apart of the dance team helped her to feel supported by her peers who shared common interest with her gave her the feeling that, “I felt like I was actually part of something. I felt like I had a little miniature family.”

Participants described that to be successful or fit in at their school they needed to change their current behaviors. Linda stated, “Just trying to succeed in like these advanced classes because everything is not handed to you right in your face sometimes you have to really go to a teacher or you even kind of step out of your shell.” The challenges and changes a Black girl must go through in order to achieve success in a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school requires support from their families, teachers, peers, and changing their behaviors that prohibit them from being successful. All of which is drastic for a high schooler of any gender or race to endure. Much of what they need was not mentioned. The need to be supported by all teachers and staff, the need to have school standards fit who they are without needing to change, and to have professionals that can facilitate some of the crises in their lives to help facilitate smoother paths.

### Summary

The need to improve theoretical models focused on schools and Black females is essential. Despite all 12 participants stating that “*school is great*”, safe, inviting, and given a great comprehensive education, throughout the interviews the girls were constantly comparing themselves to each other and basing those comparisons on their level of success. They compared previous schools and their current school, their

academic potential to that of their White peers, what they needed to do in order to feel like they fit in, and to decide to act like a ghetto Black kid or be viewed as acting White. Not one of the girls reported that they ever compared others to themselves. They never compared academic potential to what they were doing or how other students should be active and involved in school activities like all of them. There seems to be a sense that attending a school where you are a minority, that you need to constantly meet the “norm” standards of the majority, rather than being what they themselves aspire to be. Their courage, desire, resilience, and intelligence are astonishing. They have charted amazing courses for themselves and have survived some very difficult times without realizing that they are the ones that other students should aspire to be like. It is essential to build theories based off of their experiences and provide comprehensive services geared for them specifically because of their unique challenges. Providing the needed support requires specialized training and a clear theory/model that can provide educators and counselors with the necessary resources to first understand, engage, and empower Black girls in predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Exploring the experiences of twelve Black girls in grades 10 - 12 attending a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school in a Midwestern city was important to understand their feelings of school success and connectedness. Also, findings from such an exploration could shed light on the unique challenges this population might face in schools and, therefore, provide data that might improve the theories and models available to educators and counselors. While it is important to understand the history of Blacks in America and their adaptive behaviors it is ultimately more important when working with Black females to: a) understand their history and the values they bring into a relationship, and b) for educators and counselors to understand the role or power they have in the relationship. This is all in part, because of the findings found in the data claiming that there are two types of Black girls that educators need to understand and recognize. They are categorized by their GPA and length of attendance in the district. Knowing these two facts will assist educators in recognizing and dealing with their self and environment expectations and comparisons, their challenges both academically and socially, and providing the appropriate supports for them.

By employing a grounded theory approach the experiences of this group were discovered through a constant comparative analysis of research data collected from the semi-structured interviews and the existing literature and research available. After the data analysis and findings were completed, I returned to the literature to compare and contrast the findings of other researchers. The results of the present study revealed complex experiences of Black girls who attend predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools. The Black girls' experience of the expectations and comparisons,

challenges, and the supports needed confirms what many have discovered or theorized in part and provides greater depth and understanding to this group to improve current theory and create a new model for clinical practice.

Much of public education's claim is to provide a comprehensive, non-biased, and free of judgment education; however, education curriculum, teachers, and professionals have been educated and subscribe to the White dominant standards in order to work in public education (Ogbu, 2003). It was important to understand the experiences of Black girls in a predominantly White school, in order to provide comprehensive theory, insight for future research, improved curriculum, better trained professional staff, and program interventions geared to make minority children sustain their cultural values and beliefs while not feeling or viewed as substandard. This chapter presents a summary of the study and conclusions drawn from the data presented in Chapter 4. It also provides a discussion of findings related to research question and findings that were unexpected; more importantly, it provides numerous implications for training, practice, theory, providing comprehensive school counseling programs in schools, and recommendations for future research.

#### Implications for Training, Practice, and Theory

After the close of the study, two participant's family members contacted me to begin a counseling relationship with their student, because the student had communicated that they felt understood and would like to engage in future counseling. These two requests spoke volumes in that it demonstrated that regardless of the situation or purpose Black girls want to be heard and understood. The importance of the counseling relationship and how a counselor might be able to enter into a more substantive

relationship with their student clients is important as concluded from the data; where school counselors were not mentioned as taking an active role in the lives of Black girls within their school. To this end I propose counselors look into how they enter into counseling situations with Black girls, because of their unique perspectives and challenges they face.

### *Point of Entry*

Point of entry has been described in school counseling and supervision literature as the clinical supervision of school counselors (Lemberger & Butler, In Review; Luke & Bernard, 2006). The point of entry is how a school counselor enters a therapeutic relationship and can be used in case conceptualization and intervention strategies. The school counselor would enter the relationship, meeting the student where she is at emotionally, socially, academically, and physically, taking into account the historical and cultural background the student brings into the relationship. In this approach the counselor can empower the student to build on their background (Lemberger & Butler).

Counselors can use the types of questions I asked from my interview protocol as a method of getting to know the student, as counselors will be provided with a large amount of background, future, and cultural information. A majority of the participants from this study sought me out after their interviews and communicated how they felt that I took the time to get to know them and felt like they were listened to, understood, and would want to work with me as their counselor in the future. The interview protocol can provide school counselors with the theoretical understanding of a Black girl's feelings of school connectedness, the relationships of connection and disconnection they have, and a way to empower the student to be successful. To assist with this assertion, a theoretical

model for understanding a Black girl's expectations, perspective of herself and the environment, challenges, and supports needed to perceive being successful could be useful for professional school counselors to engage in working effectively with Black girls in their school. Providing counselors with a point of entry tool could enhance counselor's therapeutic alliance skills and provide students with feeling of understanding and empathy to develop an empowering relationship. However, like any tool or model it's important to guide one's practice using theory. In order to effectively practice as a school counselor it is necessary to understand your client, their culture, and engage in a counseling relationship with some theoretical background. To do so effectively, in this case it would be important for school counselors working with Black girls who attend a predominantly White school to understand their possible experiences, feelings, and self-perspective first.

#### *Improving Theoretical Scope and Sequence*

To date there are no published study that have specifically focused on the Black female experiences at a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school; as a result, there is a need to improve existing theories that are geared for Black girls.

Utilizing the combined principles of RCT and school connectedness in this setting and with this subgroup would assist in developing an improved theory that fits this female experience. With its focus in relationships, specifically the growth and disconnections that occurs within them to understand how to assist girls in major developmental time period.

It is important to note that RCT has historically focused on individual relationships. This said, this theory might not fully account for the complexity of a

student's relationships or represent the individual experiences at one's school. RCT does not take into account numerous relationships to create an individual experiences, especially in a school environment where students can have relationships with numerous teachers, faculty, administration, staff, community members, and families. In addition, school connectedness focuses on the environment, but forgoes discussing individual relationships. A comprehensive theory does need both RCT and school connectedness and to take into account the resources, curriculum, technology, extracurricular activities, and ascetics that have been found in literature to be a mitigating factor to an overall positive experience and student success. Additionally, student success is also determined by a student's level of perceived worth and satisfaction. RCT or school connectedness does not investigate the individual's cognitive process that encourages or hinders a positive self-concept and equating success.

Both RCT and school connectedness can be used as the foundation for a theoretical model, that describes the experiences of Black girls in predominantly White schools. In particular, these models should be used to highlight the feelings of connection and importance of relationships, because such feelings were well represented in the data (e.g., participants described the characteristics of the peers and faculty, their involvement in extracurricular activities, feelings of wanting to fit it and being isolated). The available theories, however, do not explain the pressure they feel from living up to the academic expectations they feel are placed on them or account for their unawareness to need more support or more support to be provided. Black girls in this school were quietly going unnoticed and needing some serious intervention and support.

*New Application of Theory in Schools with Black Girls*

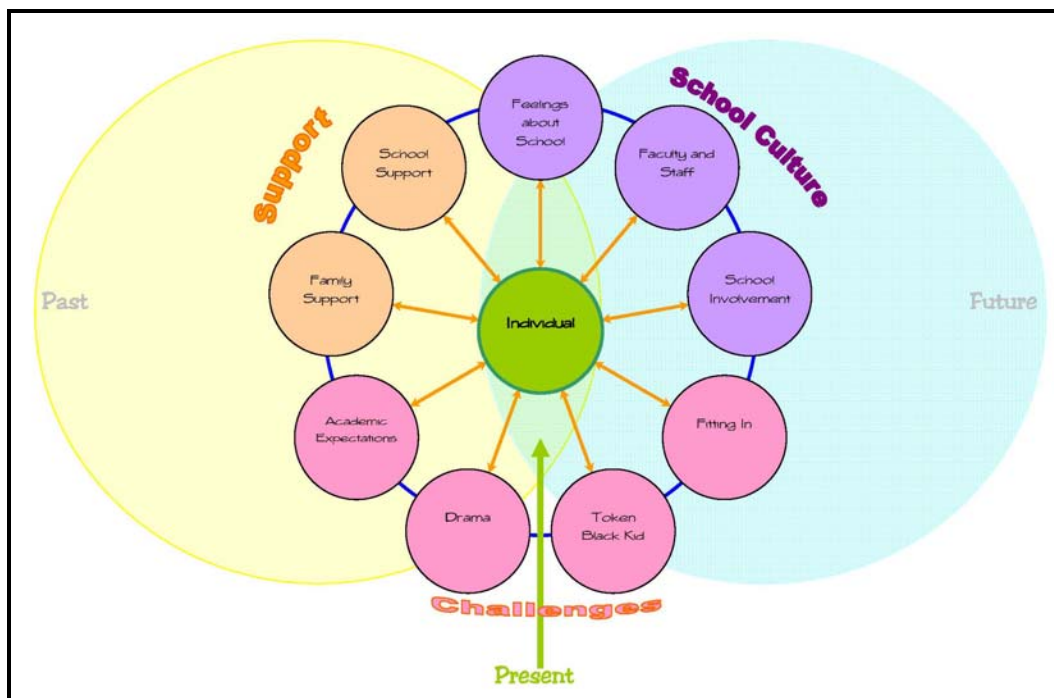
Although RCT and school connectedness seem to account for a number of the experiences of the participants in this study, as mentioned, there were other data points that did not seem to be fully described by these theories. Therefore, incorporating the major principles of school connectedness with concepts such as connection and disconnection from RCT can serve as the basis of a new theory that can better serve school officials, educators, and professional staff who work with Black girls. Similar theoretical models have been developed to demonstrate the importance of connectedness, especially as it relates to the relationship between the self identity of the student and their surrounding environment (e.g., Advocating Student within Environment [ASE]; Lemberger & Butler, In Review). This said, to date, this model has only been applied to Black male students and, therefore, might not describe the experiences of the Black female students in this study. Also, this new model proposed herein, The Flower Model (See Figure 2) provides more specific constructs that are only inferred or generally mentioned in previous theoretical models. As such, The Flower Model can be understood to be more specific to Black female students attending high achieving predominately White suburban schools while working within the tenets of other theories such as RCT and ASE.

The Flower Model provides grounding for each of the three major concepts described in the results of this study and includes an essential fourth component of the individual. The Flower Model depicts the three major assertions from the data: the school environment, challenges endured, supports provided, and adds the individual perception. These four assertions are organized by color categories. Within the assertions, the specific implications or petals are outlined (school environment, faculty



and peers, involvement, fitting in, isolation, drama, academic expectations, family support and school support) and placed around the individual student. An arrow between the petals and the individual student are based on the level of connection or disconnection. The Flower Model is not as static as depicted, but each petal could vary in size based on its connection or disconnection with the individual student. As found in the data, the importance of time is factored into this model unlike RCT and school connectedness, with attention drawn to the present, but the future and past considered.

Figure Two: Flower Model



In working with individuals it is important to understand their past history and future aspirations to clearly understand their present status. As the data, demonstrated it is important for school counselors to learn about the girls and where they are coming from and what expectations, challenges, and aspirations they bring into the counseling relationship and where a counselor can support them, because it dictates where they are at presently. The “flower” lays over the intersection of the past and future to depict the

current individual standing. In many schools, professional school counselors are given access to information about a student's past and their future goals.

Within the Flower Model, school counselors play an integral part in working to empower Black girls to feel connected in their environment, develop empowering relationships, and to be academically successful. How school counselors go about developing that initial empowering relationship with Black girls is critical.

#### Comprehensive School Counselors

As Black girls failed to mention the role of school counselors in their lives as a support, it is essential to recommend school counselors to not only use the flower model and a interview protocol, but to adhere and subscribe to the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) National Model for counseling practice, understand how to incorporate theory into practice, be accountable, and culturally competent.

With the achievement gap, drop out rate, suspension rate, and at-risk behavior rates of Black girls increasing, it is imperative to provide Black girls appropriate supports, interventions, and programs in predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools. To assist Black girls with school success and personal development it is imperative to have skilled professionals who understand the unique environment, school connectedness, and relationship development for each individual student. School counselors are skilled professionals whose function is to provide personal social/emotional, career, and academic support to all students.

The connections Black girls have should be of interest to school counselors working with this population. The ethical initiatives set forth by professional counseling associations direct school counselors to work with this population, be knowledgeable

about their cultural history and provide interventions and supports that will have an impact on their education and future. Effectively working with Black girls requires school counselors to adhere to the American School Counselor Association guidelines, to be culturally competent, and to receive appropriate professional development and education/training in their counselor education programs. In this section recommendations will be made for school counselors working with Black girls at predominantly White, high achieving suburban schools to provide a Comprehensive School Counseling Program (CSCP).

#### *Comprehensive School Counseling Program*

Under the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model (ASCA, 2006), school counselors are to be held accountable for their position in preventative and responsive action to aid in the reduction of the achievement gap. This mandate is extended to school counselors for the entire student body; however, it does not have direct implications for just Black females. These guidelines are composed of individual and group counseling, classroom guidance lessons, and school wide activities. However, it is imperative that school counselors incorporate and use some form of governing body of their practice individually and in their school counseling program. The accountability to not only the profession, the students, but to counselor's abilities is important to maintain. Review of programs, structures, needs, training, and resources are a necessity in providing comprehensive counseling services to the school.

The ASCA National Model reflects Themes (leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change), Elements (foundation, delivery system, management system, and accountability), and Flow (directionality of the elements and the manner in which

feedback moves through the program elements to ensure the highest efficacy of the school counselor's work). According to the ASCA National Model (2006) the foundation of a CSCP includes beliefs, philosophies, mission statements, and ASCA national standards for student academic, career, and personal/social development.

To aid in the personal/social, academic, and career domains of all students the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2006) provides school counselors with a framework to develop a CSCP. School counselors across the nation, subscribing to ASCA standards and following the prescribed direction of the National Model (2006), use a variety of response methods in working with students to decrease problematic behavior or to build prosocial behaviors. To target these goals school counselors run individual and small group counseling for students, individual counseling for parents, consultations with teachers, administrators, and other professionals, teach guidance lessons, implement violence prevention programs, and assess and/or refer students and their families to outside professionals in the community.

School counselors are expected to apply their professional training in schools in order to support student success. Through CSCP of developmental, preventative, remedial, and responsive services, school counselors address academic development, career development, and personal/social development of students. Major functions of a school counselor are: a) Management of a CSCP; b) Delivery of a CSCP; and c) Accountability.

*Management.* The manager of a CSCP plans and maintains a CSCP by discussing the CSCP with school administration, developing and maintaining written plans for effective delivery, communicating the goals of the school counseling program to

education stakeholders, maintaining current and appropriate resources, and providing direct services (guidance curriculum, individual student planning, and preventative and responsive services, program management, system support, and accountability).

*Delivery.* The delivery of a CSCP involves providing leadership and collaboration with other educators in an effort to integrate guidance curriculum within other courses of study, implementing appropriate and prevention-oriented group activities. Individual student planning occurs by school counselors assisting all students individually and in groups, accurately interpreting and utilizing student data, and collaborating with parents/guardians and educators with assisting students in education and career planning. Preventative and response services provide individual and group counseling to students with identified concerns and needs. This is achieved by consulting and collaborating with parents/guardians, teachers, administrators and other educational/community resources, implementing an effective referral and follow up process, and appropriately using assessment procedures for determining and structuring counseling services. For system support counselors should provide appropriate information to staff, assist other education stakeholders in interpreting student data, participate in professional development, use technology to enhance CSCP, and adhere to laws, policies, procedures, and ethical standards of school counseling.

*Accountability.* To demonstrate the effectiveness of the school counseling program in measurable terms, professional school counselors report on immediate, intermediate and long-range results showing how students are different as a result of the school counseling program. Professional school counselors use data to show how school counseling program impact school improvement and student achievement. Professional

school counselors conduct school counseling program audits to guide future action and improve future results for all students. The performance of the professional school counselor is evaluated on basic standards of practice expected of professional school counselors, implementing a school counseling program. In order to be accountable, school counselors should conduct yearly program evaluations, collect and analyze data to guide the CSCP direction, measure and share results of the SCP, and monitor student academic performance, behavior and attendance, and assist with appropriate interventions.

### *DAP Model*

Being a school counselor involves being both a skilled practitioner and teacher. Not only are school counselors supposed to be knowledgeable and be able to apply the information, but they are also supposed to transmit the information. Colette Dollarhide developed the Domain Activities Partners (DAP) Model (Dollarhide & Sagniak, 2003) [see figure 2] to guide school counselors in their role and functions under the ASCA National Model and to provide comprehensive services to the students and their families. The DAP Model (Dollarhide) is a model that is a system and systematic way of thinking about a school counselor's role and function with an organizing strategy for a CSCP. The model outlines the domains of student competencies that focus on the work of the counselor and the program, the activities in which the school counselor engages to facilitate the student's success in those competencies and the partnerships that are crucial to the success of the students, programs, and schools.

Figure 2 DAP Model

Domains/Activities/Partners Model (Dollarhide, 2003)						
	DOMAINS					
	Academic Development	Career Development	Personal/Social Development			
<b>Counseling</b>	Academic counseling with students	Career counseling with students	Personal/social counseling with students	Counseling with parents and caregivers, as appropriate, then referrals	Counseling with colleagues in schools, as appropriate, then referrals	Counseling with colleagues in the community, as appropriate, then referrals
<b>Educating and Advocacy</b>	Educating students about academic issues (developmental guidance) and advocating academic excellence with students	Educating students about career issues and advocating pursuit of career dreams	Educating students about personal/social issues and advocating personal/social excellence	Educating parents and caregivers about developmental issues of students and advocating on behalf of students and schools	Educating colleagues in schools about developmental issues of students and advocating on behalf of students and schools	Educating colleagues in the community about developmental issues of students and advocating on behalf of students and schools.
<b>Consulting</b>	Consulting with students about academic issues (i.e. how to work with certain teachers)	Consulting with students about career issues (i.e. how to get along better with authority figures, employers)	Consulting with students about personal/social issues (i.e. how to get along better with family members)	Consulting with parents and caregivers about problems with students or the school	Consulting with colleagues in schools about developmental issues of students or the family.	Consulting with colleagues in the community about developmental issues of students, the school, or the family.
<b>Leadership and Coordination</b>	Leading and coordinating academic events for students (i.e., study skills workshops or presentations)	Leading and coordinating career activities for students (i.e. career fairs, school-to-work programs)	Leading and coordinating personal/social activities for students (i.e., serving as the advisor of a student group)	Leadership in making the school a respectful place for parents and coordinating services for parents as appropriate (i.e., assisting with a parent resource room)	Leadership in making the school a respectful place for students and coordinating information for the school and district administrators about the school counseling program; administrative task as appropriate.	Leadership in making others aware of the needs of the school community and coordinating efforts of the community colleagues who support the school (i.e., coordinating the mental health staffing for students who are in therapy in the community).
	Students			Parents and Caregivers	Colleagues in School	Colleagues in Community
	<b>PARTNERS IN THE PROCESS</b>					

Original table created based upon Dollarhide's DAP Model (Dollarhide, 2007)

### *School Counselor's Functions*

The need for school counselors to be proactively available to Black girls was an essential assertion found in the data. To assist in facilitating better and understanding of Black girls experiences it is necessary to expand the school counselor's role and function to increase their ability to provide appropriate services to students of color. Six key functions for school counselors working in schools that are not culturally diverse were defined by Holcomb-McCoy (2008). Those six key functions are: *Counseling*, *Consultation*, *Connection*, *Collecting*, *Challenging*, and *Coordinating*. To be more culturally responsive, school counselors engaging in *counseling* a student or their families should acknowledge and integrate a student's cultural and family issues through individual and group counseling and interventions. When school counselors work with

parents/guardians and teachers to influence change in the school system, they should *consult* with these education stakeholders and understand their values and cultural needs before imposing changes that could be normed for a majority student body. School counselors need to *connect* with parents and the community to improve services, provide education on diversity, and work together to promote an understanding of the impact of oppression. It is essential for school counselors to *collect* and analyze data to make informed decisions related to inequalities that exist in schools and to monitor the interventions provided by counselors. Lastly, school counselors *coordinate* support services for students to encourage and enhance their learning as well as providing guidance in assisting students in taking academically challenging courses.

Therefore, it is critical that the role and function that school counselors and school counseling programs demonstrate a comprehensive program to not only systemically enhance school culture, but to provide Black girls with the needed support to be academically successful. Integrating The Flower Model with the six school counselor duties could provide Black girls feelings of increased connection and give school counselors a model to assist them in understanding what may be going on for their students academically, socially, and emotionally.

Black girls who are affirmed positively and respected in their schools tend to have self-confidence and engage in appropriate school behavior (Spencer, 2005). School counselors can make unique contributions to student's behavior by providing direct services such as classroom guidance activities, small group counseling, individual intervention, and teacher and parent consultation (Brigman & Campbell, 2003). Therefore, it is a natural proposition that the direct service mechanisms that are



customary to comprehensive school counseling programs now extant in modern schools (American School Counselor Association, 2006; Campbell & Dahir, 1997) lend to the specific needs of students and education communities.

A lack in a school counseling program or a misperception by a school counselor could result in not effectively empowering Black girls to engage in achievement; instead, they could become disinterested in school, achievement, and begin to lose self-esteem and act out in an aggressive manner (Holcomb-McCoy, 2008). This lack could result in the continuation of aggressive behaviors and the creation of future problems. For example, not only will there be tension within the school, but other issues like bullying, weapons being carried to school, lower attendance rates, lower achievement scores, stress, financial constraints, and lack of community support could result (Cotten et al., 1994). School counselors are a vital part in the academic success and social/emotional stability of all students; they are in a position to help students achieve all that they want both academically and socially.

Through a comprehensive school counseling program, school counselors can help provide an internal and community respect for Black girls and, in turn, reduce their need to become visible and allow them to focus on their academics and future success. A school counselor's response, strategies, interventions, and understanding of Black girls, is fueled by their multicultural worldview and is displayed through their comprehensive school counseling program. When equipped with the means and training to facilitate these services, school counselors are in a unique position to facilitate pro-social school behavior through their work with students and teachers.

School counselors are an invaluable asset to Black girls in predominantly white high schools. They are able to provide support and understanding by assisting Black girls in being themselves, viewed positively, connected to their school environment, promoting the school community to connect with Black girls, and implementing school system supports.

*School Counselor Action Research and Accountability*

Since the inception of the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), school counselors have accepted the responsibility to support academic achievement, school accountability, and advocate for student success. It is imperative that school counselors demonstrate their accountability by examining their practice and communicating how their contributions impact student achievement.

Determining how policies and practices affect issues of equity, school counselors can use demographic and performance data (e.g. annual school report cards publicize critical data elements such as attendance, demographics, graduation and postsecondary planning rates, and standardized testing results). Data focused school counselors are able to positively manage their CSCP and demonstrate a strong commitment to student success.

Dahir and Stone (2003) developed MEASURE, an accountability process for school counselors to identify and positively impact the critical data elements that are the important gauges of student success. MEASURE is an acronym representing:

Mission: connect your program to the mission of your school and to the goals of your annual school improvement plan.

Elements: identify the critical data elements that are important to the internal and external stakeholders.

Analyze: carefully discuss which elements need to be aggregated or disaggregated and why.

Stakeholders – Unite: determine which stakeholders need to be involved in addressing this school improvement issue and unite to develop strategies.  
Reanalyze: rethink and refine your strategies; refocus your efforts as needed and reflect on your success.  
Educate: show the positive impact the school counseling program has on student achievement and on the goals of your school’s improvement plan. (p. 216)

MEASURE (Dahir & Stone, 2003) was designed to support the accountability of school counselors according to the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2006) and contribute to student achievement by transitioning school counselors from a “counting tasks” system to aligning with the CSCP. This process allows school counselors to create a climate where access and support for quality and rigor is the norm, rather than what the findings depicted the norm to be White standards. This accountability would provide the additional support needed by the Black girls who are minorities in their school environment and make school counselors available, visible, and proactively involved in the lives of Black girls.

### *Multicultural Counseling*

As the United States is becoming increasingly composed of racial, ethnic, and culturally diverse individuals, it is imperative that counselors possess competence in working effectively with a range of culturally diverse students and clients. Such competence is referred to as the multicultural counseling competence. Multicultural competence as defined in the literature describes the practitioner’s attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and skills in working with individuals from a wide range of cultural groups. The majority of the literature suggests focusing on the broad goals of cultural competence, by working from an awareness, knowledge, and skill model (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992).

Counseling and teaching is embedded in social relational processes – that is, within processes of obtaining self-awareness through experiencing one’s self and experiencing others (Pedersen, 1991). Understanding cultural issues within these social and relational processes can enhance the delivery of services for culturally diverse students who educators teach (Hill, 2004). It is imperative that school counselors must fully understand the historical backgrounds, customs, attitudes, morals, and worldviews of culturally diverse students/clients and of themselves.

*Knowledge.* Knowledge is the ability for counselors to have the needed knowledge, which addresses the counselors understanding of the worldviews of culturally different clients (Sue et al., 1992). This knowledge is vital for counselors to make connections with their clients, perceive behaviors appropriately, and provide interventions and response services that are culturally effective. Counselors need to possess a knowledge and understanding about how oppression, racism, discrimination, and stereotyping may affect them personally and in their work. Not only are multicultural competent counselors responsible for knowledge surrounding race and culture, but the effects of socioeconomic status, ability, gender, religions, and etc.

*Awareness.* For counselors, a key component is to know thy self. Before counselors can make therapeutic change they need to first know their own biases, assumptions, values, and cultural beliefs (Sue et al., 1992). It is also important that counselors understand their own product of cultural conditioning and how it influences psychological processes. Culturally competent counselors need to recognize the limits of their competence and expertise. It is extremely important that counselors are comfortable

with differences that exist between themselves and their students in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and beliefs.

*Skill.* One of the hardest components of multicultural competence is the ability to apply multicultural competence skills. The skills deal with the process of actively developing and practicing appropriate intervention strategies needed for working with cultural diverse clients (Sue et al., 1992). Counselors need to actively engage in understanding themselves as racial and cultural beings, while also actively engaging in a non-racist identity.

It is essential in CSCP, that school counselors are culturally competent especially when working with Black females. To be culturally competent will result in an increase in cultural continuity, allowing Black girls to feel understood and visible in predominately white schools. This can be achieved by school counselors doing the following: 1) Developing a better understanding of others; 2) Promoting greater harmony among individuals in any setting; 3) Being able to interact with diverse individuals; 4) Being receptive to different cultures, traditions, experience, beliefs, and ideas; 5) Having the ability to listen and respond non-judgmentally to others; and 6) Having the capacity to avoid generalizing when viewpoints and experiences differ from your own.

#### Future Research Recommendations

This study investigated the general experiences of Black girls at a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school, but more research on this topic still needs to be done. An increase in the body of research, scholarly work, and assessments on racial and ethnic populations, school success and academic achievement, and gender issues is

necessary to the advancement of standards, procedures, policies, practices, and the education of students of color and the staff that works with them.

To begin, it is recommended that theory driven research be conducted to investigate what we need to know or the constructs, rather than what instruments are available to do research. Although it is simple to build studies designed around instruments it would not adequately add to the body of literature available, because as society and culture change the theories of human development that those instruments were based on become obsolete and less accurate. Additionally, replication of this study could focus on other minority groups such as Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, Latino(a)s, Arab Americans, etc., within the same school environment, different school environments, and in different parts of the country. It would also be important to expand this study and investigate the male experience within a predominantly White, high achieving suburban school. The investigation could also expand to look at Black girls who attend predominantly Black schools and compare the experiences of the two. Increasing the focus spent on analyzing minority experiences in schools across the country thus would increase practices, policies, improved academic achievement, decrease at-risk behaviors, and greater long term success for the United States economy.

Also, researchers could begin to analyze the implications of using the point of entry interview tool and its effectiveness in building empowering relationships with students from a variety of cultural backgrounds from a variety of school environments. The Flower Model could also be analyzed for its effectiveness in understanding the experiences of Black girls in schools and its usefulness and theoretical application for school counselors working with all students. There are also opportunities for The Flower

Model to be built and utilized in counselor education courses, such as supervision, foundations, multicultural, and school counseling seminars, as a counseling training tool in working with minorities and women to supplement traditional theoretical approaches that are predominantly White male focused.

### Summary

This chapter presented a summary of the study and conclusions drawn from the data presented, in addition, it provided a discussion of the findings related to the research question, implications for training and practice and recommendations for future research. The understanding of Black girls and their experiences in a predominantly White school of the overall environment, self-concept, academic expectations, and levels of support provided recommendations to create a theoretical model, the Flower, that would align specifically for this sub group, promotion of utilizing professional school counselors subscribing to the ASCA National Model (2006), their roles and functions, accountability procedures, adhering to the multicultural counseling competencies, conducting future research, improving counselor education curriculum, providing better trained professional staff, and the ability to provide program interventions based on student data.

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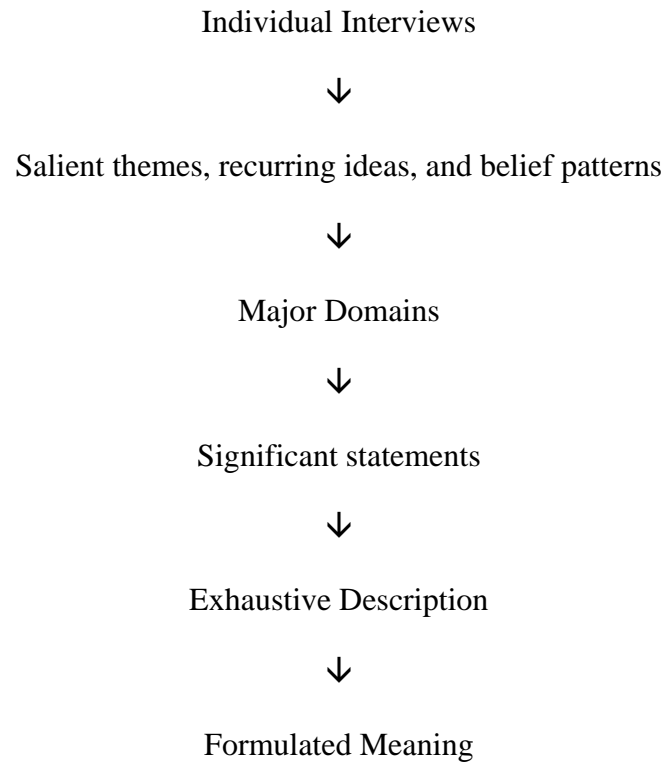
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Figure 1 Flow Chart of Data Analysis (Berg, 2004)





## YOU'RE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE!

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Ms. Nash in the Guidance Department. The study is looking for Black or African American female students in grades 10 – 12, who are willing to be interviewed about their experiences attending a predominantly White high school.

The goal of this research is to understand the experiences and provide educators with tools and information to work better with Black female students. Your opinions count and your voice needs to be heard!

This study involves two interviews with Ms. Nash in the Guidance Department. The first interview will take about 60 – 90 minutes and the second will take about 15 – 30 minutes.

There is unlikely to be any direct benefit or significant risk to you from being in this study. The primary benefit is to gain new knowledge. If you take part in this study, you may help others in the future. If you are not interested it is not a problem and will not be held against you.

However, if you are interested in participating, please fill out the attached Interest Survey and leave it in Ms. Nash's mailbox either in the main office or the Guidance Department by April 15, 2009.

Hurry and don't delay... space is limited and only 18 girls will be selected to participate. If selected, Ms. Nash will contact you to give you an information packet.

If you have any questions, please see Ms. Nash. Thanks for your consideration!!!

Sincerely,

Ms. Nash

Appendix B: Interest Survey

Are you interested in participating in a study about Black girls attending a predominantly white high school?

Yes

No

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you attended any other high school  Yes  No

If so, please list the school(s) you have attended and the grade(s) you attended:

\_\_\_\_\_

**What types of school activities (clubs, sports, organizations, etc.) do you participate in?**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**What types of community activities (clubs, sports, organizations, etc.) do you participate in?**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Have you or do you participate in any of the following classes/programs?**

AP classes. Please list classes \_\_\_\_\_

Advanced College Credit Program. Please list classes \_\_\_\_\_

Honors Classes. Please list classes \_\_\_\_\_

*Please return completed form to Ms. Nash in the Counseling Department by April 15, 2009*

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about yourself. (Clarify student name, age, year in school, etc. Probe for racial, class, other identity markers that they use, and where they come from or where they live.)
2. Tell me about your family. (Probe for: head of household, family members in the home, special situations, and family values)
3. Tell me about the schools you have attended before your current school. (Probe for: neighborhood, racial composition, academics, activities, supports, counselors)
  - Elementary
  - Middle/Jr. High
  - Transfer
4. Tell me about your high school (atmosphere, students, experiences, etc.)? (Probe for: What is it like to be “Black” and at this school?)
5. Tell me about an experience outside of high school that has influenced your personal growth?
6. Tell about some of the common issues/challenges you see in your school? (probe for: Racial disconnection; lacks in support, understanding, interventions; being a female in school)
7. How would you compare yourself academically to other students in your classes?
8. What do you think about your high school record?
9. If you had a relative from another state or somewhere else and they didn’t know anything about your school, what would you tell them in order to do well here? (Probe for: Academic rigor, issues in being a minority at predominantly white school; female)
10. Tell me about the different types of supports that are available to help you. Please explain what happened, who/what they used or received as support, and its effect on them.
  - At school?
  - At Home?
  - Elsewhere?
11. Tell me about the different types of supports that are available to help you socially/emotionally. Please explain what happened, who/what they used or received as support, and its effect on them.
  - At school?
  - At Home?
  - Elsewhere?
12. How do you view yourself? How do you think people in the school view you? How do you think people in the community view you? (Probe for: If people don’t view you how you want them to, what should they know about you?)
13. Have you heard the phrase “acting white” What do you think about the idea of “acting white”? Have you ever been told you were “acting white” or have you ever told someone else that s/he was? [Probe for specific details about situation.]
14. Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 10 years?
15. If you could improve one thing at your school, what would it be?

Table 2 Demographic and Background Information of Participants

Name	Age	Grade	GPA	Lives in District	# of years in the district	# of Honors or Advanced Level Courses	Free/Reduce Lunch Program	Special Notes
Janae	17	Junior	4.1	Yes	12	Gifted Program – 8 Honors classes	No	One of four kids. Mother and father have been married now for twenty four years.
Jezzel	18	Senior	3.5	Yes	13	4 Honor classes & 1 advanced	Yes	Only Child. Her mother is currently going to school at night and working during the day. Her father was abusive and when her mother was pregnant she left him.
Geena	17	Senior	3.4	Yes	2	4 Honor classes & 1 advanced	No	Her mother passed away when she was nine. She currently lives with her father and stepmom who is Caucasian who has been in her life since she was two. She has three sisters and they are all half sisters and one a step sister. She and her younger sister had the same mother but don't live together and she hasn't seen her in three years.
Linda	18	Senior	3.3	Yes	13	6 Honor classes & 1 advanced	No	She has two older brothers and a mother. Her father left when she was five and he passed away when she was thirteen. He wasn't part of her life and her brothers have kind of stepped into that father figure role.
Tanisha	18	Senior	3.3	No	4	4 Honor classes	Yes	She transferred her freshman year from a more predominantly Black school district. She currently lives with her father and has eight siblings. Her father does not get along with her mother and as a result has alienated herself away from her. She has future aspirations to go into the military.
Catherine	17	Junior	3.2	Yes	3	3 Honor Classes	No	She is half White and half Black. Although she identifies with being Black she does not celebrate being Black, because of the abuse she experiences as a child. Her mother, who is White, and father, who is Black, were never married or in a relationship while she was growing up. Up till the age of 12 her mother was in a relationship with another Black man who was physically abusive towards her. Her godparents took her in

									and have help to raise her and she hopes that when she's 18 they will adopt her. She has a half brother that lives with her mother and she views herself as the "black sheep in the family." Prior to high school she went to school in a predominantly Black school district and was qualified as being gifted to where she was able to participate in a transfer program and attend high school at her current school. She plays lacrosse.
Alexandra	17	Senior	3.0	Yes	2	4 Honor Classes	Yes	Yes	Wants to be a storyboard artist and is a musician. She currently lives in the district and transferred in her junior year. She has attended 3 high schools in her career. She participates in the marching band and art club. She lives with her mother, a younger brother who's 10, and 4 months old sister. Her mother and father never got married and he's off somewhere in the United States with his four other children. She currently has a stepfather who her mother is currently going through a divorce with.
Alexia	18	Senior	2.7	Yes	4	None	Yes	Yes	Plans to attend college in the fall. She is originally from California. She currently lives with her father, stepmother and 3 siblings within the school district. Her mother still lives in California. During K - 7 <sup>th</sup> grade she lived with her grandmother and attended school in another district that was located in an upper class county suburb. In 8 <sup>th</sup> grade she transferred to her current school district and participated in a college prep program through one of the local colleges that is geared towards Black students. She is currently on the dance team.
Danielle	18	Senior	2.6	Yes	4	None	Yes	Yes	Has attended all of high school at the study site through a voluntary transfer program, because she lived outside of the district boundaries her 9 <sup>th</sup> grade year in an impoverished neighborhood. She did move quite a bit during high school when her family experienced financial troubles and has at times lived with her grandmother. She has plans to attend college in the fall and major in pre-med. She lives with her mother, grandmother, and sister. Her sister is a junior at the school and her mother works as a home care aid. When she was one her father committed suicide and doesn't really associate with his side of the family as much as she used to. She currently runs track.



Zoe	18	Senior	2.5	Yes	3	None	Yes	Her mother and father got divorced a long time ago. Her mother got remarried and just got divorced again from her second husband recently. She has attended school in 3 different districts during K-9 <sup>th</sup> grade before coming to her current school three years ago. All of which were predominantly Black schools. At her previous schools she stated her grades were bad and she got into a lot of trouble, but since attending her current school she has changed as a student. Currently she participates on the track and dance team.
Aundrea	16	Sophomore	2.2	Yes	11	None	No	From a big family who lives with her mother in the school district. Her mother and father, who has a history of schizophrenia, never got married and before she was born her father left her mother.
Ciara	18	Junior	2.0	Yes	2	None	No	Transferred to her school sophomore year from another school that she viewed as constantly having drama. She enjoys the drama especially watching or participating in arguments and fights. She lives in the district with her grandmother, because her father is serving in the military overseas in Iraq and mother lives in another school district where she was getting into a lot of trouble. She has five brothers and sisters. Ciara is into sports and is currently in a lesbian relationship.