Touching the spirit as a motivating factor for African American students to achieve academic excellence

E'leva D.H. Gibson

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TOUCHING THE SPIRIT AS A MOTIVATING FACTOR
FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS
TO ACHIEVE ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

A Dissertation Presented

to

The Faculty of the School of Education
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

by
E’leva D. H. Gibson
San Francisco
December 2007
This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Candidate,

Susan Katz

Chairperson,

Betty Jaylee

Patricia A. Mitchell

Date

11/26/07

12-7-07

11-26-07
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is an expression of the Creator’s spirit that has given me the strength to search, discover, and realize purpose from deep within.

This work is dedicated to the Ancestors who fought, struggled, and died for the future of others.

This work is dedicated to the enlightenment of the educational community in recognizing the significant contributions of Africans throughout the Diaspora.

This work is dedicated to my family who stressed the importance of education and held high expectations of success.

This work is dedicated to future generations who I pray will continue to carry the torch for enlightenment and upliftment of generations to come.

I thank Dr. Susan R. Katz for guiding me through the process from being a student teacher with high ideas to becoming a doctoral candidate with sensibility. I truly appreciate the encouragement to pursue a doctoral degree and the support during my times of personal evolvement. I thank Dr. Betty Taylor for showing me how education allows one to travel beyond to do great work and for providing an example of dedication to world relations. I thank Dr. Patricia Mitchell for showing me how sophistication and poise exemplifies leadership, and for providing an example of scholarly prestige. I thank you all for being role models of academic excellence.

I thank those ten participants who shared with me their thoughts and learning experiences so that their voices would be heard. I truly admire each and every student, and pray that our dialogues raised critical consciousness and planted seeds of spiritual growth in achieving academic excellence.
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CHAPTER I
THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Introduction

This participatory research study explores the inherent African spirit of African American students and investigates how incorporating cultural themes in the public school curriculum may encourage high scholastic achievement. By acknowledging the heritage of African American students and its link to Ancient Africa, students may become curious to research core-curriculum subjects (i.e., history, math, science, language arts, etc.). Perhaps it is the African spirit of students that allows them to be resilient over socioeconomic obstacles, heal from historical psychological effects, and be self-determined to achieve. Therefore, utilizing an African centered approach to learning and instruction may nurture the spirit of African American students and spark their senses of purpose and connectedness that could ultimately foster academic excellence.

As educators, it is imperative to highlight students’ strengths and convey affirmation in their abilities to overcome obstacles so that they may develop the skills to be successful. As a result, students may be empowered to set goals, challenged to solve problems, and inspired to increase scholastic achievement.

Statement of the Problem

Over the years, some African American students continue to underperform academically, thus widening the academic achievement gap between African Americans and other student groups (SFUSD, 2006). For example, African American students attending public schools in urban areas like San Francisco usually perform the lowest academically as compared to the overall student population. Comparing the percentage of students who scored at or above “Basic” level on the California Standards Test
between 2003 to 2005, 11th graders district-wide increased 4.5% in English-Language Arts while African American students decreased -1.3% over the two-year period (SFUSD, 2005). Researchers (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003) state that African American students obtain the lowest test scores, are placed in special education classes more than any other group of students, and are disproportionately expelled from school. “One out of three African American students in seventh through the twelfth grades (nationally) has been suspended or expelled...” (Smiley, 2006, p. 33). Being that this achievement gap is widening every year, school districts across the country are continuing to search for effective strategies in addressing the issue (California Department of Education, 2005; EdTrust-West, 2006). Based on research (Ani, 2004; Nobles 1986; Wilson, 1987) to progressively change the academic performance of African American students, educators need to use a holistic approach to encourage students to recognize their talents and potential.

**Background and Need for the Study**

The achievement gap is an indication of an educational problem that is plaguing our public school system. If this issue continues to worsen, then our society may lose a significant population of citizens that could meet future social, political, economic, and technical needs of society. Therefore, what might be the missing link in addressing the achievement gap is not necessarily African American students’ lack of interest to achieve, but incorporation of cultural relevancy in the public school curriculum to nurture the spirit of African American students to achieve academic excellence.

Public education is clearly not working for the majority of African American students. As a group, African American students fall below the norm on virtually every measure of academic excellence. A grievous injustice continues to obstruct the future: millions of African American children are ‘left behind or excluded, not
because they are incapable or undeserving, but because society’s embrace of their potential is still half-hearted, and educational programs that work are only reluctantly supported,” concluded the 1990 Education for Minorities Project (Nobles & Mann, 1994, p. 2).

The achievement gap can be identified by numerous measures such as standardized test scores, grade point averages, and dropout vs. graduation rates.

However, researchers (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Hilliard, 1997; Ogbu, 1986) suggest additional factors contribute greatly to the achievement gap, such as societal expectations, students’ backgrounds, school environments, socioeconomic circumstances, racism, and cultural differences. Research studies (Educational Research Service, 2001; http://www.ers.org/otsp/onsamepage3.pdf) note that the achievement gap is a deeply complex issue that, although fluctuating, continues to worsen over the years.

Efforts to close the achievement gap seemed to be paying off in the 1970s and 80s as the gap narrowed, especially between African American and White students. Between 1970 and 1988, the African American/White achievement gap decreased substantially in reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, as well as high school graduation, college attendance, and college completion rates.

Since 1988, however, the gap has been widening again. Minority students' achievement scores today are lower than minority students' scores were ten years ago. The reasons for this reversal are not clear, but the social and economic impact of the gap makes it a severe national problem. However, some districts have been successful in decreasing the gap (Educational Research Service, 2001, http://www.ers.org/otsp/onsamepage3.pdf).

Nonetheless, success stories do exist in public schools with high populations of African American students, such as Whitney Young High School in Chicago, Illinois, and Davidson Magnet School in Augusta, Georgia. These public schools have effectively educated African American students, as measured in high numbers in test scores and graduation rates. One similarity between these schools is the expectations for the students to succeed, thus tapping into African Americans' spirit of wanting to learn.
Although these institutions are prominent examples of empowering African American student achievement, unfortunately these are rare, and the achievement gap continues to widen throughout United States.

According to Educational Research Service (2001), a non-profit organization providing research and information for educators, the causes of the achievement gap are based on two primary factors: 1) students' experience, socioeconomic circumstances, cultural differences, and family background; and 2) students' school environments.

Socioeconomic conditions currently affecting African American students stem from a long history of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation (Hilliard, 1997) that have plagued the African American population. These conditions inevitably cause a likelihood of poverty rather than an abundance of wealth and resources for these students, which may hinder their academic focus.

Students living in persistent poverty are more likely than other students to suffer from many conditions that impede their learning, including: poor health care (including inadequate prenatal care for their mothers); frequent changes in residence, requiring transferring to new schools repeatedly; lack of books and other educational resources in the home; parents with lower levels of education; and unstable family structure (Educational Research Service, 2001, http://www.ers.org/otsp/onsamepage3.pdf).

Current cultural attitudes and stereotypes are also major factors of the achievement gap. Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard (2003), authors of the book, *Young, Gifted, and Black*, suggest that some African American students may not try in school since they believe their efforts will not be recognized anyway. These researchers address how African American children can succeed academically, despite the achievement gap. Perry (2003) mentions how students primarily begin to have low expectations of themselves because of the way society negatively perceives them. Since society views
African Americans as underachievers, what is the point of doing well in school?

However, she further argues that African Americans have always possessed the desire to achieve academically despite societal conditions and perceptions; therefore, examination of educational practices in schools is the point of emphasis— not the student.

African-American students will achieve in school environments that have a leveling culture, a culture of achievement that extends to all of its members and a strong sense of group membership, where the expectation that everyone achieve is explicit and is regularly communicated in public and group settings (p.107).

John Ogbu (1986) believes that African American students may maintain low levels of achievement purposely to avoid "acting white" and to gain the approval of their peers. He suggests that due to the experiences and adaptation in African Americans’ adult life, which limited social and economic opportunities (i.e., Anglo-American control of schooling, substandard schooling, and job ceilings), African American students develop survival strategies that include an ambivalent attitude about academic success.

Our main point... is that one major reason black students do poorly in school is that they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success. Why is this so, because white Americans subsequently begin to doubt their own intellectual ability; begin to define academic success as white people’s prerogative; and begin to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously from emulating white people in academic striving... many black students who are academically able do not put forth the necessary effort and perseverance in their schoolwork and do poorly in school (p. 176)

However, Perry (2003) argues that Ogbu’s theory is misconstrued, stating,

The achievement gap is attributed to a peer culture that doesn’t value achievement, and worse, one that associates school achievement with being white... The danger is that it will become yet another location for the recycling of the ideology of African American moral, cultural, and intellectual deficiency (p.8-9).

Perry (2003) challenges the perception that African American students may equate academic success with being Anglo-American because African Americans already have historically lived in a society that promoted success for Whites only. They found ways to
achieve despite societal barriers. Perry believes that African Americans have always desired the freedom for literacy and the yearning to obtain literacy for freedom. She also believes that the conversation about African American achievement fails to examine all aspects of the school system and how they contribute to the creation of underachievement.

Indeed, researchers (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Hilliard, 1997; Ogbu, 1986) suggest that African American students’ school environments contribute enormously to the achievement gap. Students already having to face socioeconomic circumstances and/or racial prejudice usually have to attend schools with inadequate funding, crowded classrooms, and teachers with their own perceptions of cultural differences. Since society perceives African Americans in a negative way, and schools are the training grounds for developing citizens of society, teachers’ low expectations of students influence these students to have low expectations of themselves.

However, among researchers (Ani, 1994; Nobles & Mann, 1994; Goggins, 1998) the most commonly discussed factor that is missing in the public school core curriculum is the lack of cultural relevancy. Specifically in African culture, spirituality guides an individual’s purpose; therefore, factoring this concept in the school curriculum may lead African American students to develop the desire to learn in order to fulfill that sense of purpose. Although Africa is a diverse continent, common themes (Ani, 1994; Nobles, 1994) are still found in its traditional culture, one of them being spirituality.

Spirituality is an understanding that there is a creative life force, which connects all phenomena and entities in the creation of one to another. This understanding stems from a belief that there is a spirit realm, which interacts with the natural. Spirituality is also a recognition that there are agendas, missions, purposes that the spirits are trying to fulfill in the natural world. And since humans are a part of
both the natural and spirit worlds, then each person has a mission to fulfill (Goggins, 1998, p. 25).

Educators Wade Nobles and Augusta Mann (1994), authors of *Achieving Educational and Cultural Excellence for African American Students*, believe that a new approach to learning in U.S. public schools, such as an African centered approach, may address not only the intellectual and vocational aspects of human development but also the cultural, physical, social, moral, aesthetic and creative aspects. This African centered approach, based upon traditional African values, teaches wholeness, connectedness, and purpose, which may resonate with African American students to learn and achieve academically.

A people’s indigenous culture anchors them to reality and must be the starting point for all learning. Culture is a vast structure of behaviors, ideas, attitudes, values, habits, beliefs, customs, language, rituals, ceremonies and practices peculiar to a particular group of people which provides them with a general design for living and patterns for interpreting reality (Nobles, 1976, p.31).

Nobles (1994) believes culture is a significant intellectual and pedagogical tool that can be used to enhance the process of learning and instruction for African American students (i.e., classroom management, curriculum, etc.). He believes that incorporating the student’s culture (i.e., African centered) will provide a context for opportunities that may foster educational excellence.

Unfortunately, an African centered approach to learning and instruction has been developed but not largely implemented in U.S. public schools. Although this pedagogy may prove to be effective in encouraging students to achieve, the concept is sometimes misunderstood as an attack on the current curriculum (i.e., Western civilization) as opposed to being recognized as a significant tool in bridging the achievement gap.

Centering the educational program in the culture of the African American
students (i.e., African centered) does not constitute an attack on Western Civilization; nor does such an approach negate the value of other cultures within our society. In fact, educators should be clear that we need to have a core curriculum that everybody should know, while allowing for different cultural integrities in the achievement of education (such as examples from history, books and real life situations that grounded in African American context (Nobles & Mann, 1994, p.5).

Unfortunately, our U.S. educational system is based on a belief in the homogeneity of American culture, which historically and currently does not often recognize the culture of African American students.

The culture of the school for the most part exemplifies a lack of understanding of the learning styles and life experiences of African American students (Nobles, 1992). Teachers training programs, most curriculum designs and instructional materials are Eurocentric. As such they reflect middle-class Anglo experiences, perspective, and value priorities (Gay, 1989). When children have been socialized in ways that inconsistent with school expectations and patterns, they have to make a difficult daily adjustment to the culture of the school and their teachers (Guild, 1994) (Nobles & Mann, 1994, p. 4-5).

There has been an attempt to provide a public school education that offers equitable opportunities; however, its cost is for African Americans and other students of color to adopt a Western philosophy and identity. Therefore, in this case, education is not about nurturing the inherent spirit to achieve, but rather the need to assimilate and be accepted. Jacob Carruthers (1999) states in *Intellectual Warfare*:

Defenders of Western civilization...Alan Bloom, Mortimer Adler, E.D. Hirsch, Jr.... advocate the return to a core curriculum of the values of Western civilization as it is defined in the tradition of the “great books.” They see Western culture as the only relevant culture. For them the best way to help people of non-Western heritage is to give them extra support in acquiring the skills and orientation which will make them culturally literate in this [particular] tradition. African [Americans] will, therefore, be able to benefit from the expanding equality of opportunity produced by the march toward the full achievement of the ideals of Western civilization (p. 88).

Although there have been progressive efforts to develop a culturally inclusive curriculum (Ravitch, 1990), the attempts to modify the U.S. school curriculum so that it
would include a multicultural approach (Carruthers, 1999) still fail to recognize the significant contributions of different cultures (i.e., Ancient Africa) to world history and global science that may be exciting for children of color (i.e., African American students) to learn. Instead, the multicultural approach to education seems to focus on assimilating into one culture which, unfortunately, showcases the negative historical relations of non-Western cultural groups to America: colonization of indigenous people or “American Indians”; enslavement of Africans, growing population of immigrants, etc. There is a belief that since the United States is a multicultural society, school textbooks should focus on the story in which people of many different backgrounds have joined together to become one nation, all Americans. 

With the passage of time, the United States has grown increasingly diverse in its social and cultural composition. Yet, even as our people have become increasingly diverse, there is broad recognition that we are one people. Whatever our origins, we are all Americans (Ravitch, 1990, p. 19).

However, what some educators fail to remember is that American culture and history were developed through invasion, conquest, colonization, settlement, and exploitation of multiple cultural groups (Carruthers, 1999).

Being that language and literacy are intrinsically tied to culture, standardized tests are utilized to detect acculturation. Standardized tests, which are promoted as tools to measure the intellectual capacity of students, are based on a homogenous American culture rooted in Anglo-Saxon language and identity. E.D. Hirsch (1988), author of Cultural Literacy, advocates the maintenance of traditional American culture founded on Eurocentric ideology and the English language to be the common base of knowledge for students. He believes that “it is the translinguistic knowledge on which linguistic literacy depends and that American students learning to read and write in English can only do so
through an understanding of a national culture” (p. 202). Hirsch admits the U.S. is large and basically heterogeneous, and that deciding upon a common literate culture within the curriculum that attempts to unite all sub-cultures is a political decision. It is indeed a political decision because the basis of cultural literacy, which Hirsch proposes, still maintains an Eurocentric perspective in education that excludes African centered pedagogy and other cultural inclusions.

The chief and decisive piece of evidence for... the decline in verbal SAT scores among the white middle class... takes into account the still greater lowering of scores caused by an increased proportion of poor and minority students taking the tests. Now scores on the verbal SAT show high correlation with reading and writing skills that been tested... So as rough index to the literacy levels of our students, the verbal SAT is a reliable guide... by a correlation between a rich vocabulary and high level of literacy... Knowledge of words is an adjunct to knowledge of cultural realities signified by words, and to whole domains of experience to which words refer (p. 196).

Just what are the words and phrases that our school graduates should know? Right now it seems to be decided by the makers of the SAT, which is... chiefly a vocabulary test. The educational technicians who choose the words that appear on the SAT are already the implicit makers of our national curriculum. Is then the Educational Testing Service our hidden National Board of Education? Does it sponsor our hidden national curriculum? If so, the ETS is rather to be praised than blamed. [Therefore] if we wish to raise our national level literacy, a hidden national curriculum is far better than no curriculum at all (p. 205).

Therefore, one may conclude that standardized tests, which are promoted as tools to measure the intellectual capacity of students, are only indicators of how African American students are acculturating into a homogenous American culture rooted in Anglo-Saxon language and identity. Maybe the underperformance of African American students academically is an indication of how the educational system is not nurturing the development of African American students, but instead excluding their natural tendency (spirit) to connect and have a purpose in learning the curriculum. If these students see no relevancy to their own culture, then obtaining a U.S. education is perceived as
condemning one’s own identity to obtain another that is completely different or foreign.

Regarding standardized test scores, Tanya Schevitz (2005) writes a web news article on the 2005 SAT I which reports that math scores have risen by a 3-point improvement over the last year. Although low, this apparently contributes to a nationwide upward trend, growing from 518 last year to 520 this year. Overall, math scores are said to have risen 14 points higher than 10 years ago. Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, states,

The growth accomplishes a parallel increase in students taking demanding courses such as pre-algebra, calculus and physics. It is important to remember that the best preparation for the SAT is the day-to-day work students do in schools (Schevitz, 2005).

However, although African Americans and other student groups in California, and the nation as a whole, improved their scores, African American students still remain well behind Anglo-American and Asian American students. According to Schevitz, officials believe “the disparity mirrors the disparity in the access to quality curriculum... The gap in education in this country, the unfairness of the schools, is one of the great unfairness in this society" (Schevitz, 2005).

In a California Department of Education press release, Hilary McLean (2006) writes that State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Jack O’Connell, announced at a southern California high school that an additional 819 students in the Class of 2006 passed the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) administered in July, as it was offered during the Class of 2006’s traditional senior year. O’Connell stated,

I am tremendously proud of these students for their hard work and persistence, and congratulate them for reaching this important milestone… Their hard work has made them more literate, better problem solvers, and more effective communicators. These are skills demanded by today’s challenging world. Now, with the traditional senior year of high school behind the Class of 2006, I think we
can say that the Exit Exam is working as it was intended (McLean, 2006). Although, O’Connell claims the CAHSEE is working and the Class of 2006 was the first graduating class required to pass the Exit Exam as a condition of graduation and had made achievement gains, passage rates among African American students are still significantly lower than other groups. See Table 1. The estimated total of students meeting the CAHSEE requirement from fall 2005 to July 2006; unfortunately, shows African American students representing low numbers of passing scores.

Table 1.  
Estimated Total Meeting the CAHSEE Requirement in Each Administration of CAHSEE through July 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Grade 10</th>
<th>Grade 11</th>
<th>Fall 2005</th>
<th>February 2006</th>
<th>March 2006</th>
<th>May 2006</th>
<th>Updated 2005-06</th>
<th>July 2006</th>
<th>Total Passed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>295,226</td>
<td>67,810</td>
<td>19,933</td>
<td>6,931</td>
<td>4,542</td>
<td>1,759</td>
<td>3,143</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>400,163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>150,818</td>
<td>32,268</td>
<td>9,475</td>
<td>3,444</td>
<td>2,579</td>
<td>1,031</td>
<td>1,436</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>201,405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>144,356</td>
<td>35,430</td>
<td>10,401</td>
<td>3,481</td>
<td>1,961</td>
<td>762</td>
<td>1,668</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>198,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>34,709</td>
<td>4,583</td>
<td>1,383</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>41,810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>92,362</td>
<td>33,249</td>
<td>10,292</td>
<td>4,653</td>
<td>2,833</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>1,511</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>145,626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>16,981</td>
<td>6,893</td>
<td>2,236</td>
<td>1,014</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>28,291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>133,650</td>
<td>18,921</td>
<td>4,786</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>851</td>
<td>919</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>160,270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantage</td>
<td>88,918</td>
<td>32,524</td>
<td>9,702</td>
<td>4,573</td>
<td>2,847</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>1,162</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>140,461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Learner</td>
<td>24,783</td>
<td>17,032</td>
<td>5,996</td>
<td>3,191</td>
<td>1,920</td>
<td>666</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>54,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>7,993</td>
<td>6675</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>14,668</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Additionally, the College Board, a not-for-profit membership association that administers the Advanced Placement Program (AP), states in their annual report that “all 50 states and the District of Columbia have achieved an increase in the percentage of high school students earning a grade of 3 or higher in college-level AP courses since 2000” (CollegeBoard.com, 2006, http://www.collegeboard.com/press/releases/50291.html).

Unfortunately, the same rhetoric regarding increased gains on the SAT and the
CAHSEE is again stated in the midst of celebrating another educational intervention, 

Despite increased diversity in the AP classroom, African American and Native American students remain significantly underrepresented in AP classrooms. Nationwide, African American students make up 13.4 percent of the student population, but only 6.4 percent of AP Exam takers... African American, Latino, and Native American students have been traditionally underrepresented in AP courses, and no state with large numbers of African American or Native American students has yet succeeded at providing AP opportunities that allow for equitable representation of these students (CollegeBoard.com, 2006, *AP Report to the Nation 2006*, p. 10.)

Regarding the 2006 California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program, the Education Trust-West, a national policy organization, also reports small gains in test scores and growing numbers in the achievement gap.

While all groups have improved over the past several years, achievement gaps between groups still loom large. Examining the percentage of each racial/ethnic subgroup performing at grade level, we can see that gaps have remain the same or grown over the past four years. Overall, in grades 2 through 11, African-American and Latino students still trail their White counterparts by over 30 percentage points on in English Language Arts (EdTrust-West, 2006, p. 5).

Since the mandate of the No Child Left Behind law and schools being held accountable for the annual progress of African American students, closing the achievement gap has now become a national priority (California Department of Education, 2005).

*Defining Academic Achievement*

Academic achievement may be defined in several ways, but for the purpose of this study, I compare and contrast how the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy (CA. Dept of Ed., 2005), and the African-centered ideology (Hilliard, 1997; Goggins, 1998; Nobles, 1986) define academic achievement.

According to the NCLB policy (CA. Dept of Ed., 2005), academic achievement is based on the achieved level of academic content standards that serve as benchmarks for
assessing students' academic skills. If a student meets academic content standards, then he or she is performing at basic level, which is also used as a cut-off point to determine low-performing students. If a student exceeds the academic content standards he or she has attained proficient or advance level in mastering academic skills. The following is from the Academic Standards, Academic Assessments, and Accountability section from the NCLB policy, which defines the challenging academic standards for public schools:

(A) IN GENERAL- Each State plan shall demonstrate that the State has adopted challenging academic content standards and challenging student academic achievement standards that will be used by the State, its local educational agencies, and its schools to carry out this part...

(B) SAME STANDARDS- The academic standards required by subparagraph (A) shall be the same academic standards that the State applies to all schools and children in the State.

(C) SUBJECTS- The State shall have such academic standards for all public elementary school and secondary school children, including children served under this part, in subjects determined by the State, but including at least mathematics, reading or language arts, and (beginning in the 2005-2006 school year) science, which shall include the same knowledge, skills, and levels of achievement expected of all children.

(D) CHALLENGING ACADEMIC STANDARDS- Standards under this paragraph shall include:

(i) challenging academic content standards in academic subjects that
   (I) specify what children are expected to know and be able to do;
   (II) contain coherent and rigorous content; and
   (III) encourage the teaching of advanced skills; and

(ii) challenging student academic achievement standards that —
   (I) are aligned with the State's academic content standards;
   (II) describe two levels of high achievement (proficient and advanced) that determine how well children are mastering the material in the State academic content standards; and
   (III) describe a third level of achievement (basic) to provide complete information about the progress of the lower-achieving children toward mastering the proficient and advanced levels of achievement (CA. Dept. of Education, 2005, pp. 1-2).

An African-centered approach to attaining academic achievement is based on the ancient Kemetic principles of MAAT- truth, justice, order, reciprocity, propriety,
harmony, and balance (Hilliard, 1997; Obenga, 1995; Nobles, 1986) as the primary foundation of education. Based on this cultural/spiritual belief system, African-centered education is founded on the beliefs that every child can learn and possesses the capability to master complex levels of knowledge and problem-solving strategies. Using these capabilities the child has a moral responsibility to address the issues of the community and society.

Lathardus Goggins II (1998), author of Bringing the Light into New Day: African Centered Rites of Passage, describes how the individual’s achievements contribute to the momentum or building of the whole group’s progress and success.

When a group of people builds upon the work and understandings of previous members, the group experiences momentum. Take scientists and inventors, specifically the Wright brothers, for example. They have been recognized as the first to have ‘documented’ mechanical flight. They used available technology to create the new technology, one of which was the concept of a self-lubricating engine, pioneered by Elijah McCoy. Another example, Alexander G. Bell’s telephone was a single line between two receivers. However, by using the innovations developed by Grandville T. Woods, telephones were networked together and eventually, computers too, thus the Internet. How productive can a scientist be if he or she had to invent every concept and technology used? It is because of historical and collective continuity, being able to access the understandings of other members that a Wright flyer and the space shuttle can exist just 70 years apart (p. 9).

Goggins (1998) also states how society, family and/or community are connected through the understandings and knowledge of its previous members, and how the collective wisdom of the society’s past experiences builds its future. This concept is based on the African-centered belief, Sankofa, a term derived from King Adinkera of the Akan people of West Africa (http://www.duboislc.net/SankofaMeaning.html, 2006). Written in the Akan language it is "se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki." Translated into English it literally means "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot".
According to the W.E.B. Du Bois Learning Center (2006),

"Sankofa" teaches us that we must go back to our roots in order to move forward. That is, we should reach back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us, so that we can achieve our full potential as we move forward. Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone or been stripped of, can be reclaimed, revived, preserved and perpetuated (http://www.duboislc.net/SankofaMeaning.html, 2006).

Haile Gerima (1993) has written, directed and produced the film “SANKOFA,” which is a powerful film about the Maafa (the African holocaust) which means “disaster” or “horror” in KiSwahili (Kamusi Project, 2006). The film’s message seeks to help heal and inspire African Americans to move forward regardless of past historical tragedies. Mutabaruka, a cast member in the film, interprets Sankofa as "We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we understand why and how we came to be who we are today" (www.ireggae.com/sankofa.htm, 2006).

See Figure 1. A visual depicts "Sankofa" symbolized as a bird that flies forward while looking backward with an egg (representing the future) in its mouth.

Figure 1. Sankofa Bird


Both the NCLB policy (CA. Dept of Ed., 2005) and the African-centered ideology (Goggins, 1998) consider a student accumulating high levels of knowledge as a base for academic achievement. However, the NCLB policy focuses on an individual’s achievement of reaching high levels of mastering academic skills whereas African-centered achievement focuses on the effectiveness of one’s knowledge, skills, and contributions to his or her community.
For the purpose of this study in defining academic achievement, I believe a student who learns to master academic skills in a learning-intensified environment and uses those abilities to empower, uplift, advance, and/or bring progress to society and/or community (e.g., organizing service learning projects), has achieved academic excellence. Not only has he or she obtained skills, but also put into practice those skills necessary to sustain society.

Purpose of the Study

This research study attempted to recognize the African heritage of African American students and to show how incorporating cultural principles and themes from that heritage into the public school curriculum may “touch the spirit” of these students and encourage high scholastic achievement. Through acknowledging the heritage of African American students and its link to ancient African civilization, students may be more curious to research core-curriculum subjects (i.e., math, science, history, language arts, etc.). As a result, African American students may become more engaged in school, potentially decreasing discipline issues in classrooms. In other words, possibly it is the spirit (motivation or excitement) of students that allows them to be resilient over obstacles that may hinder their focus in school, to heal from historical psychological effects, and to be self-determined to achieve academically.

Research Questions

1) How do students define the “spirit” (i.e., motivation or excitement) to learn?

2) How do students perceive teachers utilizing “spirit” (i.e., motivation or excitement) in their teaching?

3) How does a student’s “spirit” (i.e., motivation or excitement) encourage him or her to learn and be successful?
4) How do students view their own academic achievement? What suggestions do they have for improvement?

Theoretical Rationale/Framework

This study operated under the overarching theoretical framework of African centered educational praxis (Nobles & Goddard, 1990; Goggins, 1998). Further, the following theories of learning can be linked to African centered pedagogy: zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978), constructivist theory (Piaget, 1954), cognitive/learning styles (Kolb, 1984; McCarthy, 2006), and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993).

The African centered educational praxis (Nobles & Goddard, 1994) is the systematic process of developing and/or stimulating the knowledge, skill, ability, attitude and character necessary for student achievement. African centered education is meant to utilize the African and African American cultural principles, perceptions and experiences to reinforce the attainment of excellence as an educational process.

In terms of the African Centered educational praxis, it is suggested that the core philosophical principles are: Consubstantiation (ontological belief); Participatory Connectedness (cosmological assumption); and Harmony/Balance (axiological perception). The African philosophy of human beingness is in one form or another the Kemetic philosophy of Human Perfectibility. The eight cultural precepts, which emerge from this philosophical base are oneness, interdependence unicity/egalitarianism, collectivism, transformation, cooperation, humaneness, and synergy (Nobles & Goddard, 1990, p. 2).

Although the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights prohibits the instruction of religion in school, it should be noted that the recognition of cultural spiritual beliefs for the purpose of teaching is not. Therefore spirituality as an African cultural theme should be acknowledged for analyzing the cognitive development African American students. Jean Piaget (1954), who is known for the cognitive development theory, identifies schemes in which children use to learn the world. Like Piaget, Goggins (1998) identifies
the African centered praxis that notes the stages of development through spiritual transitions.

Piaget (1954) believes that thought process functions develop through socialization with others (or schema) that undergo change over time. As a result, there are differences between how infants, toddlers, adolescents, teens and adults think. Infants and toddlers develop in the scheme of habits while adults’ thinking evolves into thinking abstractly and drawing conclusions. The stages of development range from sensorimotor stage (birth to two years old) to the formal operational stage. Therefore, adulthood is categorized with the same cognitive development of an eleven year old. See Table 2. 

Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development illustrates the development as the gradual acquisitions of knowledge through experience.

Table 2. 
Piaget’s Stage of Cognitive Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensorimotor</td>
<td>Birth to two years</td>
<td>Develops schemes primarily through sense and motor activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preoperational</td>
<td>Two to seven years</td>
<td>Develops language skills and uses symbolic thinking; highly imaginative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete operational</td>
<td>Seven to eleven years</td>
<td>Develops the ability to sort out information and solve problems by generalizing and seeing things from others’ perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal operational</td>
<td>Eleven year to adult</td>
<td>Develops the ability to think abstractly, reason logically, and draw conclusions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Goggins (1998) believes that the African centered stages of development are based on the interrelated and interdependent phenomena through spiritual transitions.

Since there is an African centered belief that all life has purpose and that the sustenance
of family, community, and future generations is part of one’s purpose, then stages of
development are based on the socialization of the child.

Remember, rites of passage is a process which connects the beginning again.
This historical continuity is an understanding that past, present and future are
connected- that one cannot take place without the other. Life is a continuous
interrelated and interdependent phenomena. Life is not a series of isolated events,
but a series of prohetic moments, so that movement through these stages is a
matter of degrees, or becoming. For example, a person who is a parent at 25 has
more ‘eldership’ responsibilities than a 25 year old who is not a parent. However,
all people in the village and family, except among the youngest, have some kind
of eldership responsibilities to those younger or less experienced. In African
centered, family based, community liked rites if passage process, we are in a state
of becoming an elder... (Goggins, 1998, p. 72-73).

Thus, the evolvement of the child’s critical inquiry skills to the eldership of leadership
and guidance (even the honor of ancestorship) are indicators of spiritual growth. See

Table 3. The African Centered Rights of Passage (Goggins, 1998) illustrates how
transitions are benchmarks for development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Basic Challenge</th>
<th>Primary Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birth-11</td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Develop curiosity/critical inquiry skills; Develop imagination and interest; Develop communication and social skills; Develop talents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-14</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Clarifying values; Develop Life Strategies; Implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-25</td>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Stabilizing Resources; Focus Efforts; Advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Perfecting, Updating Skills and Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Establishment</td>
<td>Leadership, Guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-60</td>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-65</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66+</td>
<td>Eldership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Piaget (1954) organizes the stages of cognitive development through function, but
Goggins (1998) categorizes the African centered stages of development through the

spiritual transitions of achieving. This ultimately ties into the African centered understanding of accomplishing with purpose to sustain a sense of Oneness.

The theory of constructivism (Piaget, 1954) is the idea that students already possess great knowledge. It is through the processes of accommodation and building upon their own experiences that students construct new knowledge. Absorption of new knowledge occurs when students' experiences are aligned with their own perceptions of the world. Therefore, the new experience is incorporated into an already existing knowledge base.

Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of zone of proximal development is the idea that students should be challenged slightly above their current level of development with support so that by experiencing the success of completing difficult tasks, students gain confidence and motivation to take on more complex challenges independently. This theory addresses how teachers should maintain high expectations of students.

The theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) suggests that each person possesses distinct forms of intelligence on multiple levels. Gardner proposes seven primary forms: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, body-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Through the utilization of this theory, students are encouraged to use their preferred intelligence in learning, and teachers are urged to develop instructional activities to appeal to various forms of intelligence, as well as design assessments that measure the multiple forms of intelligence. Just like the theory of multiple intelligences, cognitive/learning styles (Kolb, 1984; McCarthy, 2006) can be used to predict what kind of instructional strategies or methods would be most effective for a student to learn skills.
I used the African centered approach theory (Nobles & Goddard, 1994) in relation to four other theories (Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky 1978; Gardner, 1993; Kolb, 1984; McCarthy, 2006) to examine African American students’ motivation to succeed and factors that contribute to their achievement of academic excellence. The theoretical framework helped to identify whether nurturing the “spirit” of African American students through an African centered approach (with the implication of multiple intelligence and cognitive/learning styles) influenced students to perform at higher levels (constructivism and zone of proximity), thus narrowing the achievement gap in the public school system.

Limitations of the Study

Demographics have drastically changed within the San Francisco Unified School District, resulting in a decrease within the African American student population (Ho v. SFUSD, Case No. C-94-2418-WHO; Consent Decree, Report #16-19, 1999). Due to this population shift and socioeconomic circumstances (Hilliard, 1997), the African American family structure has also shifted, causing students to have inconsistent spiritual practices or lack of a nurtured spiritual foundation. Some students had difficulty defining spirit or recognizing any spiritual practices within their family. So probing questions were asked that led to participants’ perceptions of spirit, which ultimately provided multiple interpretations.

Additionally, since participants were my students and had developed a rapport with me, they felt comfortable enough to share their insights. As the teacher-researcher, I had inside knowledge of my student-participants based on what I knew about their backgrounds, behavior over time in both academic and social settings, culture within the community both inside and outside of the school, and experiences within the classroom.
While this inside knowledge might put into question the generalizability of the study, I believe the findings and interpretations provide an in-depth understanding of a sample of students within the larger population. Therefore, perspectives within this study could contribute significant educational knowledge to other studies addressing issues that affect African American students. “We propose that teacher research, which we define as systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers, makes accessible some of the expertise of teachers and provides both university and school communities with unique perspectives on teaching and learning” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 5).

Significance of the Study

The findings from this study documented African American students’ voices of why they are or are not performing at their highest level of academic potential, and their suggestions and recommendations on what teachers can do to help guide the learning process. This study provided opportunities for students to partake in a research study that allowed them to research and analyze an educational problem that concerns them. It also allowed students to develop technology skills for today’s high tech industry by producing iMovies that showcased their suggestions for educational improvement. This study also allows educators to identify factors that might be contributing to the low academic achievement of African American students in the public school system. Additionally, this study may possibly guide teachers and administrators to develop methods of engaging African American students in the core curriculum in an effort to bridge the achievement gap between African American students and other groups.

This study attempted to go beyond the typical discussion about the achievement gap being based on the poor academic performance among African American students.
Instead this study explored the idea that there is a missing factor in the teaching and learning process within public schools, and provided recommendations to meet the need of a specific population of students to achieve academic success. Therefore, this study addressed an educational issue and offered significant educational knowledge that suggested practices to support a solution.

Definition of Terms

To bring clarity to this study, I define the following significant terms: achievement gap, connectedness, culture, cultural relevancy, cultural themes, holistic practices, purpose, spirit, and spirituality.

*Achievement Gap* refers to the educational measures of performance among student groups based on race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. According to Educational Research Service (2000), the achievement gap is defined in several different ways as the gap between: African American students and White students at all income levels; female and male students; and students of different cultures, primary languages, ethnicities, or socioeconomic status.

*African-centered* refers to the following ancient Kemetic principles of MAAT- truth, justice, order, reciprocity, propriety, harmony, and balance (Hilliard, 1997; Obenga, 1995; Nobles, 1986) as the primary foundation of education. Several African-centered schools (Lee, 1992; Baruti, 2005) have also adopted the Nguzo Saba principles of Kwanzaa: Umoja- unity; Kujichagulia-self-determination; Ujima- collective work and responsibility; Ujamaa- cooperative economics; Kuumba- creativity; Nia- purpose; and
Imani- faith in one’s self, one family, and one’s people (Karenga, 1989), The Nguzo Saba principles are for promoting and supporting family and community relations.

*Connectedness* is a sense of one’s spirit related to all of nature (Mbiti, 1970; Nobles, 1973) and the existence with others as the “Oneness of Being” i.e., the family, which includes the living, the dead, and those yet-to-be born (Idowwu, 1961; Edwards & Mason, 1985, Ani, 1994; Karade, 1994).

*Culture* is a process that gives a people a general design for living and patterns for interpreting their reality. The model of culture consists of three levels: (1) cultural aspects (i.e., ideology, ethos, world-view; (2) cultural factors (i.e., ontology, cosmology, axiology; and (3) cultural manifestations (i.e., behavior, values, attitudes, etc) (Nobles, 1985).

*Cultural relevancy* is critical pedagogy that encourages teachers to build the curriculum upon the students’ foundational knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

*Cultural themes* are culturally consistent principles that have influenced, shaped, built and maintained societies throughout time.

The task of educating African American children, therefore, will require the understanding and utilization of cultural percepts to stimulate and reinforce the attainment of maximum educational achievement. In terms of African American people... [the] eight precepts can be identified as influencing the indigenous culture in the traditional African American community. These eight cultural precepts are operationalized as follows: Consuntantiation, interdependence, egalitarianism, collectivism, transformation, cooperation, humaneness, and synergism (Nobles & Mann, 1994, pp. 7-8).

*Holistic practices* are culturally inspired educational customs directed to align the mind, body, and the spirit to attain enlightenment. Being that the African worldview focuses on
the mind, body, and spirit as inseparable parts of the human, society, too, is inseparable with the individual. Therefore, the individual is part of a group, a collective; the individual and community are whole. (Hilliard, 1997). Holistic practices allow one to use their knowledge and wisdom to contribute back to his or her community.

*Purpose* is a spiritual link to ancient principles that focus on enlightenment and social responsibility (Ani, 1994; Goggins, 1998, Hilliard, 1997; Nobles & Mann, 1994).

*Spirit* is the excitement in wanting to discover, learn, and explore. It is the meaningful level of existence that is represented through resiliency. In this study I also define *spirit* as the universal energy, which fosters the resiliency that is noted in the history and heritage of African American students (Ani, 1994).

*Spirituality* is functioning through the spiritual belief that all phenomena and creation within the natural world are connected (Goggins, 1998).
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This review of the literature focuses on the underlying factors, such as the “spirit,” that contribute to the academic achievement of African American students in the public school system. The discussion begins with the ancient history of education and Africa’s contributions to civilization (Hilliard, 1997; Williams, 1987), and the background of ancestral practices within African heritage and culture (Diop, 1992; Clarke, 1988; Schwaller de Lubicz, 1978; Idowwu, 1961).

Next, the literature expands to the development of Western education and the involvement of capitalism and slavery (James, 1988; Hilliard, 1997; Browder, 1992; Carruthers, 1999). Then, the discussion moves on to discussing the psychological effects of slavery (Wilson, 1987; Nobles, 1986; Woodson, 1934) and its impact on the mental and spiritual practices of Africans in America (Baruti, 2005; Hilliard, 1997). In connection with the enslavement period and the Reconstruction era, the literature review examines desegregation (Shircliffe, 2003; Shujaa, 1994; Nobles, 1984) and how it influenced the underlying factors of the present-day educational system (Carruthers, 1999, Hilliard, 1997).

Then the literature analyzes the effects of an Afrocentric (African-centered) approach to schooling (Woodson, 1933; Nobles, 1986; Lee, 1992; Hilliard, 1997) examining independent Black institutions (Lee, 1992) and charter schools (Yancey, 2004). Since Hip Hop culture has such a powerful influence on African American youth (Watkins, 2005) and can be identified as an expression of African American youth’s
identity of spirit (Blackburn, 2004), the literature evaluates its impact. Finally, the review concludes with the importance of focusing on the “spirit” (Hilliard, 1997; Nobles & Mann, 1994; Nobles & Goddard, 1990) by providing culturally relevant curricula (Ladson-Billings, 2000) to educate African American students for success.

Ancient History of Education and Ancestral Practices

The ancient African thought of being is the concept of Oneness; that everything is connected through spirit. This ontological principle is what the ancients believed to be the primary code underlying universal laws of nature. Therefore, knowing that the essence of every action and living thing possesses spirit is the enlightenment and psychic nature of intelligence. As Wade Nobles (1986) states in *African Psychology*:

> Given the metaphysics of the Ancients... the African belief system understood that the nature of all things in the universe was the Ka of God or ‘force,’ or ‘spirit’ (cf. Tempels, 1959). It is logical, or at least consistent, therefore, that in believing that all things, including man, were endowed with the same Supreme Force [spirit] that one would also believe that all things are ‘essentially’ one or the same... it is understandable that if ontologically the African believes that the nature of all things is Force, then the African would, accordingly, view the variety of cosmic beings as quantitative alterations of the same Supreme Energy [spirit] (p. 57).

Ancient education was based on seeking information and identifying its relation to one’s own existence. Education was about learning how natural disasters or supernatural events were in direct correlation to the actions of oneself, community, and ancestors. Therefore, education was about elevating to a higher capacity of understanding how the world evolves and how one’s actions can contribute to the balance of the world. Overall, literature on African beliefs emphasizes the African thought of reciprocity and the concept that for every action there is a reaction (cause and effect), thus connecting every living thing through spirit.
An understanding of the relationship between ancient Egyptian thought and African psychology requires first and foremost the recognition that the ancient African world was a world of symbolism and that much of what is meaningful in African psychology today has gone unrecognized and misunderstood because of our inability to understand the role of symbolism in the African mind- both ancient and modern (Nobles, 1986, p. 37).

In this sense, symbolism is the representation of something else as a metaphoric device. In terms of ancient African thought and education, symbolism was used to interpret unexplained events in which one was meant to decipher its deeper meaning to gain wisdom.

Through the use of symbols and symbolism, the ancients’ intuitive vision approached the world of knowing with an attitude which perceived all the phenomena of nature as symbolic writing, capable of revealing the forces and laws governing the material and spiritual aspects of the universe (Nobles, 1986 p.38).

As a student, one’s duty was to tap into the spirit from within to understand the laws of nature and how he or she was related to the ocean, trees, animals, community and so on. Therefore, a student was to “recognize” his or her place or destiny in being part of the whole, Oneness.

In ancient Africa, for example, the symbol of an animal was worshipped as an act of consecration to the vital function, which the animal (was) incarnated... Through the use of symbols and the symbolic, one can understand in this regard that so-called primitive animal worship was not in reality the worship on animals, but a method used to identify and clarify the essential function or law of nature embodied in the particular animal (Nobles, 1986, p. 38).

Through Ancestral worship, belief systems and customs were preserved and honored. According to Nobles (1986), the symbolic attitude of the Ancestors was about cultivating the intellect to the degree that one could perceive all the phenomena of nature as symbolism, which ultimately reveals the forces governing the universe. An African
culture that exemplified this concept of developing esoteric wisdom through a connectedness with nature is the Yoruba.

**Yoruba: An Ancestral African Culture**

In order to study the culture and belief system of the Yoruba, it is important to be knowledgeable about the historical circumstances that created them. All through history the Yoruba have amazingly been able to preserve their rich cultural traditions that continue to expand throughout the African Diaspora. Even through periods of migration within Africa to the enslavement era and during the Triangular Slave Trade in the Americas, the Yoruba have upheld their African identity. Through examining the Yoruba cultural belief systems and traditions (Idowwu, 1961; Edwards & Mason, 1985, Karade, 1994), we can detect the African heritage, or spirit, that has been resilient against cultural genocide throughout time.

According to Idowwu (1961) author of *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, the Yoruba were significant contributors to ancient civilization and religion throughout the African Diaspora and world,

The Yoruba history begins with the migration of an East African population across the trans-African route leading from the mid-Nile River area to the mid-Niger. Basil Davidson writes, ‘migrating peoples undoubtedly used this (route)... two thousands years ago when more the climate and vegetation would have treated trans-African travelers in a gentler way than they do now... they came this way from the earliest of time; their beliefs and their inventions came with them.’

Archeologist M. Omoleya informs us that the Nigerian region was inhabited more than forty thousand years ago, or as far back as 65,000 B.C (Omoleya, Michael, pp. 15, Certificate History of Nigeria). This civilization has been deemed, in part, the Nok culture. The Nok was visited by the Yoruba group, between 2000 and 500 B.C. The group was led, according to Yoruba historical accounts, by King Odudua, who settled somewhat peacefully in the already established Ile-Ife, the sacred city of the indigenous people. This time period is known as the Bronze Age, indicating that the civilization of both groups were at relatively high levels (Karade, 1994, pp.1-2).
According to certain scholars (Diop, 1955; Idowwu, 1961) “the Yoruba, during antiquity, lived in ancient Egypt before migrating to the Atlantic coast... the similarity or identity of languages, religious beliefs, customs and names of persons, places and things” (Karade, 1994, p. 2) between groups were evident throughout this time in history.

According to tradition, in the history of West Africa A.D. 1000-1800, Oduduwa was the chief ancestor and first king of the Yoruba who settled at the sacred city of Ile-Ife (Onwubiko). From them on, his descendents became the kings and queens of Yoruba territories. According to Onwubiko, “the greatest of Oduduwa’s descenents was Oranmiyan... ruler of the Oyo state... around 1400 A.D. Oramiyan’s armies marched across the Southern Sudan... laying the foundations of the Yoruba Empire. It was during this great era that Yoruba people reestablished Ile-Ife, the sacred-spiritual capital, and Oyo as the government seat (Karade, 1994, p. 2).

With evolvement of African culture, the Yoruba have grown throughout the African Diaspora under many names. African culture through Yoruba spirituality has evolved in the Americas as Santeria in Puerto Rico, Lucumi in Cuba, Candomble and Kongo in Brazil, Vodoun in Haiti, and Orisha worship in the United States. By examining these cultural traditions and religious practices, one can detect the manifestation of Yoruba existence, or African spirit.

The Yoruba Belief System

In order to identify the spirit of African descendants around the world, we will examine the belief system of the Yoruba from which they all stem from. As Edwards & Mason (1984) document in Black Gods: Orisha Study in the New World, the scholars provide a synopsis of how the Yoruba view themselves as being part of the whole universal being through spirit.

The Yoruba religion is a complex combination of theology and ritual. The Yoruba have been referred to as nature worshippers who give reverence to the Divine Force that exists in the One Universe. The Yoruba believe that nature, as
the total manifestation of God, is the Supreme Being. The Supreme Being is Olodumare, also known as Olofin and Olorun. They believe that since Olodumare has to rule such a vast universe, S/He has no time to directly involve Him/Herself in the affairs of men. “We believe He rules in absentia, that He relinquished his role to Obatala, giving him the authority to govern in his absence, and Olofin (the Law Giver) divided the rest of His powers among the other deities who are called Orisa (Selected Heads)” (Edwards & Mason, 1985, p.1).

The Orisa (also spelled Orishas) are deities in the Yoruba religious pantheon, which are specific forces, or parts of the Creator, existing within the Creator to govern numerous parts of the Universe. The deities are connected with the forces of nature like the ocean, thunder and lightning, the wind, and the river. “These deities were given names and are respected for their powers... this is the basic thought underlying the belief in the Orisa. The Orisa are specialized forms of the one Supreme God, and there are an infinite number of Orisa” (Edwards & Mason, 1984, p. 1). The Yoruba believe that they exist in the universe that is ruled by Olodumare (the Supreme Being), the Orishas (deities), the Ancestors, and countless other spiritual powers.

Listed are ten basic components of Yoruba religious beliefs and practice (Edwards & Mason, 1994, pp. 3-4):

1. The Yoruba believe that there is one God who created and controls the universe and all that is contained therein;
2. The Yoruba believe that there are selected forces of nature (Orisa [parts of God]) which deal with the affairs of mankind on earth and govern the universe in general;
3. The Yoruba believe that the spirit of man lives on after death and can reincarnate back into the world of men;
4. The Yoruba believe that ancestral spirits have power over those who remain on earth, and so must be remembered, appeased, honored, and consulted by the living;
5. The Yoruba believe in divination. They believe that with the correct knowledge, investigation, implementation, and sacrifice, the means to solve problems and sure all ills are within our grasps;
6. The Yoruba believe in the use of offerings and blood sacrifice to elevate their prayers to the Orisa and ancestors;
7. The Yoruba believe in magic. They believe that magic occurs when we use our heads and our abilities to become dazzling so that we can counter or frustrate evil. Thus illuminating the source of the problem. Magic is the ability to transform things (i.e., “negativeness” into goodness);
8. The Yoruba believe in magical and medicinal use of herbs;
9. The Yoruba believe that ritual song and dance are mandatory in the worship of God; and
10. The Yoruba believe that mankind can commune with God through the vehicle of trance-possession.

The Yoruba believe that God is too great to simply comprehend. Therefore, they choose a part of God, an Orisha, to interpret, and through understanding that part of God’s manifestation they gain knowledge of the one Supreme Being. For example, when a Yoruba goes to a river and gives an offering of fruit, that person is not worshipping the river itself, but is making an offering to the spirit within the river. The Orisha of the river is that part of God which the river exemplifies. In the Yoruba sense, God is too distant to pray directly to, so the Orisha are seen as middlemen. “The orisa are his/her emissaries and are the workers who take care of business for him. The orisa are greater than man but less than God” (Edwards & Mason, 1984, p. 4).

Although the Yoruba are referred to as nature worshippers, they do not necessarily pray to rocks, rivers, or trees. The Yoruba worship the essence of the Creator as parts of Nature. Their philosophy is that the Creator has left something in that part of nature for them to take from and to use for the betterment of their lives. A spiritual force lies in these parts of nature that are manifestations of the Creator, whether a command, a warning, or a compliment.

The Yoruba believe that nature will guide them if they are aware of all there is around them. In the same sense as the Ten Commandments guided the Israelites, the Yoruba (believe)... that if we use nature’s signs and forces properly, God will help us thrive... The Yoruba religion is the science of allowing God to flow through you, thus transforming your whole life into prayer, so that as god breathes, you breathe (Edwards & Mason, 1984, p. 4).
Family and Community Structure

The Yoruba belief system is centered on the pantheon of deities, Orishas. When a child is born, a diviner, or babalawo, is consulted to determine which Orisha the child should follow. As adults, the Yoruba begin to honor several of the Orisha including the Ancestors. According to oral tradition, the Supreme Creator, Olodumare, asked Orishala to descend from the Heavens to create Ile-Ife. Orishala was delayed so his brother, Oduduwa accomplished the task instead. Later, sixteen other Orishas came down from heaven to create human beings and live on earth with him. The descendents of these deities are said to have spread Yoruba culture and religious principles throughout the rest of Yoruba land, which was preserved by the Ancestors.

The structuring of the individual according to Yoruba ancestors is totally intertwined with the structuring of the community or tribal nation. The tribe or band becomes the focal point of identification. It provides the individual with a center for his or her sense of belonging, education in the ways of the world, and methods of transcendence beyond the worlds (Karade, 1994, p. 77).

See Figure 2. A visual of the traditional life-stages of the Yoruba culture shows the order in which those stages occur.

![Figure 2. Traditional Life-Stages of the Yoruba Culture](image)

It is the Ancestors who have interpreted and revealed the words of the universal construct. They actualized the ashe' (meaning all is what it is supposed to be) in regards to psychological and cultural existence. The Ancestors provide the ethics
and worldviews of the tradition. Adherents to the tradition abide by the ancestral wisdom in order to develop themselves and the culture (Karade, 1994, p. 74).

Therefore, through Ancestral worship, belief systems and customs were preserved and honored. The life stages from birth-death-rebirth were symbolic of humans’ perceptions in the phenomena of nature and how it revealed forces and laws governing the universe through spirit (Nobles, 1986). The Yoruba exemplified this concept of connectedness with nature: the Supreme Being, the Orishas, and the Ancestors. Through the Ancestors, the code of conduct and cultural evolvement were sustained.

Ways of behavior to ensure a good life are primarily ancestral statements among the Yoruba. It is sustaining a good life, which leads to a good death; a death, which leads beyond the gate and is ever-lasting life. The Yoruba ancestors provide examples of right living. The Alaashe’ provides examples of right living as handed down by Yoruba ancestors:

1. Ifarable: Composure
2. Owo: Respect
3. Suuru: Patience
4. Eso: Caution
5. Imo: Knowledge
6. Ogbon: Wisdom

The development of “self” or spirit in Yoruba philosophy stems through the concept of being connected to all that exists and the responsibility to maintain good character. Thirteen guidelines were also listed for Yoruba self-development that were passed down through Yoruba ancestors to promote righteous living. They are as follows:

1. There is to be No Practice of Wickedness
   “Those who sow the seeds of wickedness plant them upon the heads of their children.”
   “Verily, ashes fly back into the face of he who throws them.”

2. There is to be No Stealing
   “Even if man does not see; Olodumare sees.”

3. There is to be No Selfishness
   “Those who are selfish will come to bare their loads alone.”
4. There is to be No Covenant Breaking for Falsehood
   “The covenant breakers will be carried away by the Earth.”
   “The sacrifices of covenant breakers and liars are not accepted.”
   “Do not lie against companions. Do not break a covenant with an associate. Such acts verily bring about our sleeping.”

5. There is to be No Hypocrisy

6. There is to be No Acts of Atrocity Committed Against One’s Neighbor

7. There is to be Honor and Respect to the Elders
   “The relationship of service between Elders and youth is to be strength continuously.”

8. There is to be Protection of the Women
   “Women are the flowers of the garden; Men are the fence around them.”

9. There is to be Truthfulness and Up-righteousness
   “Those who are truthful and upright have the blessings of the divinities.”

10. There is to be Kindness and Generosity
    “Kindness begets Kindness.”

11. There is to be Sensitivity in Respect to Person-to-Person Relationships

12. There is to be Chastity in respect to vows of mates.
    “Man, do not seduce another man’s wife; Women, do not seduce another woman’s husband.”

13. There is to be Hospitable Directives (Karade, 1994, pp. 74-75).

As Nobles (1986) states in *African Psychology*, a sense of connectedness through spirit is the underlying factor for righteous living.

Psychologically, or in terms of social life, individual consciousness becomes such, that the family or people-hood constituted the reference point whereupon one’s existence of all else. The individual was an integral part of the collective unity, i.e. the family. In recognition of this kind of awareness, it has been noted (Mbiti, 1970; Nobles, 1973) that the traditional African view of ‘self’ is contingent upon the existence of an interconnectedness with others (The Oneness of Being)... The family, which includes the living, the dead, and those yet-to-be born, is the center. It is the focal point wherein the essence of the community is kept alive (cf. Busia, 1954) (Nobles, pp. 56-57)
The relationship between ancient Egyptian thought and African psychology is the recognition that the ancient African world understood the role of symbolism to gain deeper knowledge (Nobles, 1986) and the concept of spirit as the connection to being part of the whole, Oneness. Ancient Egyptians are credited with developing the methods of astronomy, astrology, and agriculture (Browder, 1992; Diop, 1974; Nobles, 1986; James, 1988; Hilliard, 1997; Clarke, 1988; Williams, 1987). The study of mapping the stars and developing the horoscope, the architectural design of the pyramids, and the metaphysical studies of the mystery schools can be traced to the Nile Valley ancient Africa known as Upper Kemet.

The universe was viewed as the omnipotent expression of one great Supreme Being, which manifested itself within all of the functions and principles that govern the universe and maintain balance and harmony. These facets of the one supreme God were referred to collectively as Netcherw and individually as Netcher. Each manifestation of a Netcher was associated with a divine aspect of God, and was represented by a specific symbol. As time passed, the Netcherw became known as the many forces of nature, for example, the God of water, the God of air, the God of earth, etc. (Browder, 1992, p. 83).

Just as the concept of symbolism was found in Yoruba belief, the ancient Egyptian astronomers and priests searched for the “secrets of the universe” (Browder, 1992, p. 82) by interpreting the relationship between the phases and influence of nature, humans, animals, herbs, and planets, thus, as being part of the whole.

Many of the writings on the pyramid walls were found and published as the Book of the Dead. Also, carvings were interpreted as notes for righteous living as handed down through the Ancestors. Several of the teachings included the Declaration of Innocence or Ambitions of MAAT, and the Netcher Djhuiti (Browder, 1992).

Egyptian civilization (Browder 1992; Diop, 1992; Nobles, 1986; James, 1988; Hilliard, 1997; Clarke, 1988; Williams, 1987) detected the similarities in concepts of
historic cultural and educational texts. The Declaration of Innocence, or Ambitions of MAAT, was found to precede Moses’ Ten Commandments, which was developed 1,500 years later (Browder, 1992; Williams, 1987; Clarke, 1988), just as the story of Heru (ca. 3200 B.C.E.) in comparison to Jesus (ca. 1 A.C.E) (Browder, 1992).

In terms of educational history and foundation, scholars have found similarities in characteristics among Egyptian and Greco-Roman significant figures in mythology. For example, Djhuiti, the Necther of science, writing, measurement, speech, and medicine is symbolized as a man with a bird head holding two staffs with entwined snakes (Browder, 1992). Hermes, a Greek god, is seen as an equivalent to Djhuiti. He is shown as a man carrying a staff with two entwined snakes. Mercury, another Greek/Roman interpretation of Djhuiti is often shown as carrying a staff, which is currently the universal symbol of medicine. Just as these symbols have been traced to the ancient Egyptians, scholars have traced the development of mathematics, science, religion, philosophy, and astronomy (Browder, 1992; Diop, 1992; Nobles, 1986; Hilliard, 1997; Clarke, 1988; Williams, 1987), literature, writing, and speech of the Romans (114 A.C.E.) back to the Kemetic people of ancient Egypt (3200 B.C.E.).

African Influence on Western Philosophy and Reverse Psychology

One of the great ironies of history is the complete reversal of the fame African education. For more than 4000 years, of the 5000-year historical time period, African education was considered by most educated persons to occupy an exemplary status. It has actually been only about 250 years that the opposite opinion has been current (Carruthers, 1995, p.1).

Just as any civilization, the rise and fall of a nation are often due to wars and expansion. Ancient Egypt was not immune to this, leading to the invasions and
imitations of the mystery schools by the Greeks, Romans, French (i.e., Napoleon), helped over time to build the foundation of the Western educational curriculum.

The law... in Egypt... is marvelous, even in the telling... [This state of things is] worthy in the highest degree of a stateman and legislator... To effect this would be the task of a god or a godlike man (Plato, 1960, p. 101).

When Herodotus visited it, Egypt had already lost its independence a century earlier. Conquered by the Persians in 525, from then on was continually dominated by the foreigner: after the Persians came the Macedonians under Alexander (333 B.C.), the Roman under Julius Caesar (50 B.C.), the Arabs in the seventh century, the Turks in the sixteenth century, the French with Napoleon, then the English at the end of the nineteenth century (Diop, 1974, p. 10).

Ruined by all these successive invasions, Egypt, the cradle of civilization for 10,000 years... would no longer play a political role. Nevertheless, it would long continue to initiate the younger Mediterranean people (Greeks and Romans, among others) into enlightenment of civilization (Diop, 1974, p. 10).

Over time, Western education was only accessible to the elite, thus contributing to the development of European secret societies. “One of the most enduring aspects of Nile Valley [Ancient Egypt] civilization was the proliferation of its scientific and philosophical thought which became known outside of Kemet as the ‘Mystery Schools’ or the ‘Hermetic Sciences” (Browder, 1992, p. 193). These schools were based on Nile Valley principles (Browder, 1992), which were about gaining knowledge of self.

This concept of knowledge conflicted with the Christian teachings that man was conceived in sin and that salvation could only be gained through Jesus Christ. Browder (1992) refers to the story of St Patrick and the Druids of Ireland who were the priests of the secret knowledge.

Druid in Old Irish meant “he who knows.” Julius Caesar, our earliest source on the subject, considered the Druids highly educated and well organized. In De Bello Gallico he commented: ‘It is especially the object of the Druids to inculcate this- that souls do not perish, but after death pass into other bodies, and they consider that by this belief more than anything else men may be led to cast away the fear of death, and to become courageous. They discuss many points
concerning the heavenly bodies and their motion the extent of the universe and the world, the nature of things, the influence and ability of immortal gods; and they instruct the youth in these things (p. 193).

In 432 A.C.E., through the expansion of Christianity, Pope Celestine I sent a formerly enslaved British man named Patrick to convert the masses (Browder, 1986). Scholars document that Patrick’s army killed thousands of Irishmen, built over 300 churches, and converted more than 120,000 people. Many converted Christian cultures among the masses celebrate St. Patrick’s Day to commemorate Patrick for driving out the Druids.

According to scholars (Browder 1992; Diop, 1992; Clarke, 1988; Williams, 1987) the Protestants were interested in ancient Egypt and the Hermetic sciences. During the seventeenth century (Browder, 1992; Diop, 1992; Carruthers, 1995; James, 1988) the Rosicrucians of Germany, France, and England, supported a concept of education reserved for the enlightened elite, thus creating secret educational organizations like the mystery schools of ancient Egypt.

One of the greatest known European scholars from the seventeenth century was Isaac Newton. Newton was an English scientist and mathematician who is credited with inventing integral and differential calculus, introducing the laws of gravity and developing profound theories on light and color. The Rosicrucians identified him as one of their most learned members (Carruthers, 1995). Newton believed that Egypt was the fountain of knowledge in the ancient world as referenced in his writings Principia.

The Egyptians were the earliest observers of the heavens... From them it was the Greeks, a people more addicted to the study of philosophy than of nature, derived their first as well as their soundest notions of philosophy; and in the Vestal ceremonies we can recognize the spirit of the Egyptians, who concealed mysteries that were above the capacity on the common heard under the veil of religious rites and hieroglyphic symbols (Newton, 1960) (Carruthers, 1995, p. 3).
Therefore, many Western concepts of education and schooling can be traced back to ancient Kemet where the underlying message is everything is a part of the one universe through the spirit.

The transitions of elite education and ancient African presence in the United States were not necessarily through the enslavement of African people after the 1400s, but possibly through America’s Founding Fathers membership to the Masonic Lodge. Several historical events in the U.S. can be traced to Masonic involvement including the Boston Tea Party raid, the Revolutionary War, the Declaration of Independence, the signing of the Constitution, and the design of Great Seal on U.S. currency (Browder, 1992). Being that Masonry initiates its members through the teachings or enlightenment and spirit modeled after the “mystery schools” of Kemet, one may conclude that the Nile Valley of Ancient Africa played a significant role in the development of Western education.

Unfortunately, over time, the “discovery” of America led to the perceived concept of the inferiority of Africans to justify slavery and the economic development of the United States. So with an evaluation of the Enslavement period, the teaching of Negro inferiority and the breaking of the spirit was used to rationalize a maintenance of a permanent labor force. According to scholars (Browder, 1992; Carruthers 1995), in Ruins of Nations (1890), French historian Francis Volney documented the shift in intellectual praise of ancient Africans during the Enslavement period stating,

A people, now forgotten, discovered while others were yet barbarians, the elements of the arts and sciences. A race of men now rejected from society for their subtle skin and frizzled hair, founded... those civil and religious systems, which still govern the universe (Volney, 1890).
Apparently, British editors omitted several lines of the text from pages 15-17 in the American edition of *Ruins of Nations* due to the American attitude towards people of African descent during that time (Browder, 1992).

**Psychological Effects of Slavery and the Teaching of Negro Inferiority**

When in 1492 Columbus, representing the Spanish monarchy, discovered the New World, he set in train the long and bitter international rivalry over colonial possessions for which, after four and a half centuries, no solution has yet been found (Williams, 1994, p. 3).

Throughout the years of slavery, the breaking of the spirit was necessary to maintain the enslavement of Africans. According to numerous Pan-African liberation groups and intellectuals throughout the Diaspora, in Virginia on 1712, a British slave owner in the West Indies, named Willie Lynch, delivered a speech to other slave owners about his method of enslavement. This document has been recopied and redistributed to countless descendants of enslaved Africans as a strategy to raise consciousness in the way they perceive themselves, each other, and the socio-economic system itself (Hassan-El, 1999; Spann, 1970). The speech focuses on dividing the masses of enslaved Africans as a strategy to destroy unity and connectedness.

I have outlined a number of differences among slaves; and I take these differences and make them bigger. I use fear, distrust, and envy for control purposes. The Black slaves after receiving this indoctrination shall carry on and will become self-refueling and self-generating for hundreds of years, maybe thousand (Spann, 1970; http://homepages.nyu.edu/~ih2/bb.html).

It is rumored that Frederick Douglass informed numerous African Americans of Lynch’s methods, in a packet entitled, *Let Us Make a Slave* (1970). Also noted was Kenneth T. Spann (1970) of The Black Arcade Liberation Library who believed to have recompiled and reedited the document. This was a study of the scientific process of breaking the spirit to enslave the mind. The following are excerpts from the document that
emphasize breaking the spirit and the will to resist by taking an enslaved person out of the natural state into a submissive one for the purposes of economics

For fear that our future Generations may not understand the principles of breaking both of the beast together, the n-word and the horse. We understand that short range planning economics results in periodic economic chaos; so that to avoid turmoil in the economy, it requires us to have breath and depth in long range comprehensive planning, articulating both skill sharp perceptions. We lay down the following principles for long range comprehensive economic planning. Both horse and n-words is no good to the economy in the wild or natural state. Both must be broken and tied together for orderly production

Neither principle alone will suffice for good economics. All principles must be employed for orderly good of the nation. Accordingly, both a wild horse and a wild or nature n-word is dangerous even if captured, for they will have the tendency to seek their customary freedom, and in doing so, might kill you in your sleep. You cannot rest. They sleep while you are awake, and are awake while you are asleep. They are dangerous near the family house and it requires too much labor to watch them away from the house. Above all, you cannot get them to work in this natural state. Hence both the horse and the n-word must be broken; that is breaking them from one form of mental life to another. Keep the body and take the mind! In other words break the will to resist (Spann, 1970).

Since this information has been passed down to numerous Africans in the Americas for so many years, it is important to recognize the intent to “free” the minds and raise consciousness of African American students so that they may think freely with a sense of self worth and confidence.

In the reprint edition of George M. James’s *Stolen Legacy* (1988), Asa Hilliard wrote the introduction, which states

Mental bondage is invisible violence. Formal physical slavery has ended in the United States. Mental slavery continues to this present day. This slavery affects the minds of all people and, in one way, it is worse than physical slavery alone. That is, the person who is on mental bondage will be “self-contained.” Not only will that person fail to challenge beliefs and patterns of thought which control him, he will defend and protect those beliefs and patterns of thought virtually with his last dying effort (James, 1988, Introduction to Reprint Edition).

Therefore, through the attempt to legitimize colonization and justify the slave trade, Black identity and the coined term “Negro” (Carruthers, 1999) became synonymous with an inferior humanity in historical texts.
Today, science education ignores the fact that the ancient Egyptians were considered by individuals such as Aristotle and Francis Bacon to be the founders of mathematics and certain sciences. Ignoring the Egyptian mathematical and medical texts, while still explaining the impact of Euclid and Pythagoras on geometry, is... unacceptable... The taking of ancient Egypt out of Africa and Africans out of ancient Egypt is at the heart of [injustice]... This feat of intellectual falsification must be repudiated before any true multicultural curriculum can be developed (Carruthers, 1999, p. 97).

Currently, there has been an attempt to provide a public school education that offers equitable opportunities, but with the cost for students of color to adapt a Western philosophy and identity. Therefore, in this case, education is not an enlightenment of knowledge of self, but reflects the need to assimilate and be accepted. As Jacob Carruthers (1999) states in *Intellectual Warfare*:

Defenders of Western civilization...Alan Bloom, Mortimer Adler, E.D. Hirsch, Jr.... advocate the return to a core curriculum of the values of Western civilization as it is defined in the tradition of the “great books.” They see Western culture as the only relevant culture. For them the best way to help people of non-Western heritage is to give them extra support in acquiring the skills and orientation which will make them culturally literate in this tradition. African will, therefore, be able to benefit from the expanding equality of opportunity produced by the march toward the full achievement of the ideals of Western civilization. (Carruthers, 1999, p. 88)

Even though U.S. public schools have made efforts to develop multicultural curricula, they fail to recognize the significant contributions of different cultures to world history and global science that could be exciting for children of color to learn about (Carruthers, 1999). Instead, the multicultural approach to education seems to focus on assimilating into one dominant culture which, unfortunately, showcases the negative historical relations of non-Western cultural groups to America: indigenous people or “American Indians”; enslavement of Africans, immigrants, etc.. There is a belief that since the United States is a multicultural society, school textbooks should focus on the stories of people representing different backgrounds but have joined together to become
one nation as Americans (Ravitch, 1990). However, what some educators fail to remember is that American culture and history were developed through invasion, conquest, colonization, and exploitation (Carruthers, 1999) of multiple cultural groups.

[In regards]...to restore the truth about Africa to the world... is good for everybody. Once ancient Egypt is placed back in Africa, we can begin to examine the reciprocal cultural connections among the people of tri-continental antiquity (Africa-Asia-Europe). We can compare their literature, cosmologies, and languages and examine their influences on their respective continental neighbors (Carruthers, 1999, p. 99).

Unfortunately, in today’s public school curriculum, learning about the multicultural contributions to global education is not often taught or required. In comparison to the “mystery schools” of the ancient Egyptians, secret societies of Europe, and the Masonic lodges of Western culture, it seems that the elite and wealthy are provided an opportunity to gain such knowledge while the masses maintain a sense of ignorance and servitude.

The memory of the recent slavery to which the Black race has been subjected, cleverly kept alive in men’s minds and especially in Black minds, often affects Black consciousness negatively. From that recent slavery an attempt has been made to construct- despite all historical truth- a legend that Black has always been reduced to slavery by the superior White race with which he has lived, wherever it may have been. This enables Whites easily to justify the presence of Negroes in Egypt or in Mesopotamia or Arabia, by decreeing that they were enslaved. Although such affirmation is nothing but dogma designed to falsify history- those who advance it are fully aware that it is erroneous- it nonetheless contributes to alienating Black consciousness (Diop, 1974, p. 26).

Re-awakening of the African Mind

Teaching about Africa must go further, beyond history and social science. When the engineering in books about construction projects of ancient Egypt and Kush is treated with the same respect as the Greek projects in engineering book; when the architectural styles and techniques of Timbuktu and Axum are afforded parity in the books of architecture; when Egyptian and Yoruba medicine are given a place of import in the history of science, we will be on the road to recovery (Carruthers, 1999, p. 70).
Therefore, if African American students are to possibly succeed, then a return to their African heritage and concept of spirit may be the motivating factor to achieving academic success.

Nobles and Mann (1994) have designed curriculum and instruction that draw upon the communal traditions of African culture using five African and African American teaching and learning patterns.

The five African and African American Teaching and Learning Patterns (5 R’s) include:
1. Ritual (such as affirmations and/or performances)
2. Rhythm (in the form of music, speech, and movement)
3. Recitation (oral performances, memorization)
4. Repetition (such that it enhances meaningfulness)
5. Relationships (love, respect, belonging, recognizing ties between humans and nature, making connections between school work and student’s life experiences).

These learning and teaching patterns are meant to engage students in the curriculum. Just by making the effort to incorporate these learning patterns and styles is an attempt to engage African American students through a cultural context of African heritage.

In terms of the African Centered educational praxis, it is suggested that the core philosophical principles are: Consubstantiation (ontological belief); Participatory Connectedness (cosmological assumption); and Harmony/Balance (axiological perception). The African philosophy of human beingness is in one form or another the Kemetic philosophy of Human Perfectibility. The eight cultural precepts, which emerge from this philosophical base are oneness, interdependence unity/egalitarianism, collectivism, transformation, cooperation, humaneness, and synergy (Nobles & Goddard, 1990, p. 2).

Nobles (1990) believes that placing African American students within the context of familiar cultural and social references from their own historical heritage is key to fostering an environment for African American students to be disciplined and engaged in school. Therefore, Nobles (1994) suggests incorporating the eight cultural precepts and implications for effective learning and instruction: 1) Consubstantiation;
2) Interdependence; 3) Egalitarianism; 4) Collectivism; 5) Transformation; 6) Cooperation; 7) Humaneness; and 8) Synergism.

Consubstantiation refers to the notion that pervades the African ethos that all elements of the universe are of one substance; i.e., Spirit, and that all matter whether animate or inanimate are merely different manifestations of the Godforce (Spirit) (p. 12).

Within traditional classroom practice, schools have designed curricula that consist of disconnected subjects that promote memorization of facts and remote learning that may not be relevant to students’ prior knowledge. However, through the implication of consubstantiation as part of the African centered approach, students are respected because they bring to the classroom their prior knowledge, experiences, and perceptions that are of value within a learning environment.

Interdependence assumes that everything in the universe is connected... Given that everything in the universe is of one substance and therefore connected, everything in the universe is inextricably interdependent upon and with one another (Nobles & Mann, 1994, p.13).

In a traditional classroom environment, there is a power structure that fosters competitive individualism. Usually the teacher dictates rules, regulations, and the curriculum to students. However, through the implication of interdependence as part of the African centered approach, knowledge is defined as an understanding of universal relationships and students learn how they are connected to what is being taught in the classroom.

Egalitarianism reflects the view that the correct relationship between people is one of harmony and balance. The universe is made of complementary yet opposite principles and life at its best is a creative synthesis of opposites in fruitful harmony... This notion of harmonious twinnness is woven deep within the cultural structure of African people. It is out of this understanding that the concept of MAAT (truth, justice, balance, righteousness, harmony, propriety, and order) finds its provenance (Nobles & Mann, 1994, p. 13).
Within traditional classroom practice teachers are viewed as the source of all knowledge; however, through the implication of egalitarianism as part of the African centered approach, learning and instruction are viewed as a cooperative and mutual process. Both the students and teacher are respected within a reciprocal relationship.

Collectivism describes the principle that individual effort is a reflection and/or instrument of communal or collective survival and enhancement... [it is] the maintenance and survival of the community. ‘Whatever happens to the individual, happens to the group; whatever happens to the group, happens to the individual’ (Nobles & Mann, 1994, p. 14).

In a traditional classroom environment, students are pressured to individually outperform and be independent of one another. Yet through the implication of collectivism as part of the African centered approach, students are encouraged to work with each other and make contributions to their community as a whole.

Transformation incorporates the notion that everything has the potential to function at a continually higher level. It conceives of change as movement towards higher level functioning—the concept of Being and Becoming (Nobles & Mann, 1994, p. 14).

Within traditional classroom practice, students’ achievement is based on passing standardized tests as opposed to critical thinking and problem solving. However, through the implication of transformation as part of the African centered approach, students are building their character through a mastery of concepts and skills that foster challenging and higher levels of thinking.

Cooperation assumes that the optimal way of functioning is with mutual respect and encouragement. The concept of survival is predicated on the peoples’ communalistic and collectivistic nature. Life is highly cooperative, the idea being that the total sum of collective efforts of a few that are harmoniously balanced are greater than the divergent individual efforts of many (Nobles & Mann, 1994, p.15).

In traditional classroom environments, students are often given individualized assignments that influence students to compete with each other. However, through the
implication of cooperation as part of the African centered approach, teachers assign
group projects that allow students to express creativity through teamwork.

Humaneness describes the African view that the whole world is vitalistic (alive)...this vitality is grounded in a sense of goodness (Nobles & Mann, 1994, p. 16).

Within traditional classroom practice, students are often bored with classes that
are not exciting or engaging. Therefore, through the implication of humaneness as part of
the African centered approach, students are stimulated to learn because the class is lively
and energetic, and the teacher has made a conscious effort to develop lessons that spark
curiosity and attention to exploring the world.

Synergism assumes that the performance outcome of cooperative effort will be
greater than the sum total of individual effort. Children will become skilled in
working together as they grow up experiencing collaboration in tasks and artistic
cultural activities as the norm. ‘Two heads are better than one’ is understood and
operationalized in every day activities (Nobles & Mann, 1994, p. 17).

In traditional classroom environments, both teachers and students work
independently without any collaboration with their peers or colleagues. However,
through the implication of synergism as part of the African centered approach, all
stakeholders (administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the community) work
together to improve the quality of education for students.

Although an African centered approach to learning and instruction has been
developed and promoted, it is not commonly implemented in U.S. public schools. While
this pedagogy may prove to be effective in encouraging students to achieve, it still seeks
acceptance as a new approach to bridging the achievement gap among African Americans
and other student groups.
History of Eurocentric Education of African Americans

Carter G. Woodson (1933), author of *The Mis-education of the Negro*, writes his critique on the education of African American students in the United States. He advocates for African Americans to discover the world through their own perspective rather than being interpreted by others, and analyzes the effect of how African Americans’ mis-education becomes a detriment to their community and an insignificance to society.

Herein, however, lies no argument for the oft-heard contention that education for the White man should mean one thing and for the Negro a different thing. The element of race does not enter here, it is merely a matter of exercising common sense in approaching people through their environment in order to deal with conditions as they are rather than as you would like to see them or imagine that they are. There may be a difference in method of attack, but the principle remains the same (Woodson, 1933, p. xi).

Woodson (1933) mentions that the “highly educated” within the African American community usually stir away from any sort of education that seems different than that of European Americans. Based on this viewpoint, being that African-centered education has a different approach than Eurocentric perspectives, Woodson would argue that some African Americans feel that such an approach would seem like segregation or discrimination. Therefore, the African Americans Woodson refers to advocate to “have everything the white man has even if it is harmful” (p. xi). In this case, to continue to provide an education that may not address the needs of African American students, that does not highlight the contributions of Africans throughout history, nor nurture the African spirit of African American students, will create mentally enslaved and subservient people (Woodson, 1933; Spann, 1970).

When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his
“proper place” and stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary (Woodson, 1933, p. xiii).

Jacob H Carruthers, author of *Intellectual Warfare* (1999), writes about the history of Eurocentric education’s effects on African Americans. He dates back to 1481 when the Portuguese arrived at Congo-Ngola and initiated the “process of mis-education of blacks as an instrument of exploitation” (p. 255). According to Carruthers, when selective Africans were sent to Portugal to receive an European education, they returned with a mentality of servitude that contributed to the enslavement of other Africans.

In the eighteenth century, an African was given the European name of Jaques Elisa Jean Captein, and a degree in theology. He wrote his thesis in defense of slavery and spent his life as a priest to those who had been kidnapped and locked up in a slave factory awaiting shipment to the Western Hemisphere as chattel (p. 255).

Carruthers (1999) goes on to argue that within the history of education for African Americans in United States, education was used to pacify rather than to truly encourage African American students to be significant contributors to society. In relation to Woodson’s point-of-view, there was an expectation that African Americans would be educated based on their success in the assimilation of Eurocentric values.

The only question, which concerns us here is whether these educated persons are actually equipped to face the ordeal before they unconsciously contribute to their own undoing... When a Negro has finished his education in our schools, then, he has been equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized White man... Even if Negroes do successfully imitate the Whites, nothing new has thereby been accomplished. You simply have a larger number of persons doing what others have been doing. The unusual gifts of the [African] race have not thereby been developed... therefore [one] continues to wonder what the Negro is good for (Woodson, 1933, pp. xi-7).

According to scholars (Woodson, 1933; Carruthers, 1999), the history of education for African Americans provided by the United States has proven to be a
disservice to the uplift of American American children. Therefore, American schools making the effort to include Afrocentric models for educating African American students would demonstrate its commitment to educating all of its children as future leaders of society.

*African-centered Education*

In U.S. history, desegregation of our schools presented many educational opportunities for African Americans; however, in examining the achievement gap between African American students and other groups, one may question the benefits of desegregation today (Educational Research Service, 2001). Researcher Barbara Shircliff (2003) in her analysis of desegregation and the Black community notes that desegregation caused disproportionate numbers of African American children to be bussed out their communities causing African American schools to either degrade or close; African American students to experience racism, and a decline in discipline, community, and religious familiarity. Consequently, several scholars (Woodson, 1933; Nobles, 1986; Lee, 1992; Hilliard, 1997) have advocated the Afrocentric approach to schooling through independent Black institutions to address educational issues concerning African American students.

Molefi Kete Asante (1991) defines *Afrocentricity* as “a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person” (p. 171). He believes that the Afrocentric approach connects to the central part of every African person (Asante, 1991). Therefore, when African American students are in classrooms where the curriculum is based solely on Eurocentric perspectives, African American students are often felt as outsiders.
The little African American child who sits in a classroom and is taught to accept as heroes and heroines individuals who defamed African people, is being actively de-centered, dislocated, and made to into a nonperson, one whose aim in life might be to one day to shed that “badge of inferiority”: his or her Blackness. In Afrocentric educational settings, however, teachers do not marginalize African American children by causing them to question their own self-worth... By seeing themselves as the subjects rather than the objects of education- be the discipline biology, medicine, literature, or social studies- African American students come to see themselves not merely as seekers of knowledge but as integral participants in it (Asante, 1991, p. 171).

As a result, promoting African-centered education has been an attempt to address the concerns of parents and educators who want to improve the education of African American students.

According to researcher Kofi Lomotey (1992), African-centered education allows African American students to see the world with Africa as the center, which ultimately allows them to see themselves as descendents of significant contributors to civilization. In turn, such a curriculum would demand that teachers of African American students see them as promising leaders of society instead of as problematic.

...an African-centered curriculum stresses that the educators encourage African American children to look at the world through an African-centered set of lenses that provides them with vision that is more focused, has a wider periphery, and more depth... It involves more than mere textbooks and other curricular materials; it also encompasses a supportive, understanding, and encouraging school climate as the culture surrounding the curriculum... an African-centered curriculum demands that teachers look at African American children differently. That is, it demands that these children be viewed as educable and as descendents of a long line of scholars (p. 456-457).

Lomotey (1992) believes that the disenfranchisement of African American students in public schools within the United States has been constant and disproportionate. However, the desire and quality of education among African Americans have always been priorities. Consequently, independent Black institutions (IBI) have been established since the 1700s in which African Americans took
responsibility for educating their own children. Lomotey (1992) argues that IBIs are progressive models for public schools in educating African American students.

The IBI model is a useful one that provides inspiration for parents and teachers in the public schools because (1) demonstrates that African Americans can effectively educate their own children, (2) illustrates African American institutional development and financial independence, and (3) provides a training ground for tomorrow’s African American leadership (p. 460).

Therefore, Lomotey (1992) suggests that if the public school system uses an African-centered approach to teach African American students, they can encourage academic achievement. By placing an emphasis on the contributions of Africans in the American school curriculum will “provide an opportunity for all students to accept and acknowledge their own dignity and worth and that of others (p. 460).

Carol D. Lee (1992) calls certain America’s latest reform efforts “quick-fixes” (p. 160), because schools often incorporate isolated interventions. An example is incorporating African American history in the curriculum to showcase achievement but not changing the school’s climate in promoting high expectations of African American students. She believes that an accumulation of strategies must be holistically applied and not isolated or else they are nothing but incomplete remedies. Lee believes that there needs to be a combination of instructional strategies that include African American history in the curriculum; a fostering of a school climate of higher expectations; and a development of critical thinking skills to problem-solve. She writes that using one of these quick fixes alone is incomplete and may not prove to be effective. Lee (1992) also raises the question of whether there is a correlation between African American students learning their cultural history and having the self-esteem to achieve.

Researchers on self-concept among African American youth indicates that a distinction must be made between personal self-esteem and group concept. That
is, the personal self-concept of individual African American youth is likely to be high, while his or her understanding of the way in which Black people... are valued in the society may be reflective of low self-esteem (Cross, 1995; Spencer, 1988). Additionally, Fine’s (1991) research indicated that African American high school dropouts may have quite high self-esteem... (p. 161)

Lee (1992) argues that African American students enter school with the desire to do well in school. However, learning about the negative experiences of African Americans in U.S. history affects their self-worth unless discussed with a critical perspective. African American students may feel embarrassed or ashamed about society’s perceptions of African American people (e.g. drug-dealers, thugs, etc).

However, teaching students about the origin of their cultural African heritage and its contributions to civilization may provide a historical context that goes beyond slavery and ghetto-life, thus celebrating centuries of resiliency and achievements to be proud of. Therefore, African-centered education fosters the belief for African Americans to be self-reliant, productive, self-defining, and family/community oriented. This kind of education promotes students to recognize their purpose in life and their connectedness with others.

According to Lee (1992) African-centered education can provide instructive models of development for public schools. In addition to providing a cross-cultural curriculum, African-centered education models how to effectively involve family and community in shared-decision making regarding school operations.

The dismal failure of public education for African American students clearly indicates the need for alternative influences... In light of the expressed needs for culturally responsive and comprehensive reform, the evolution and example of independent, African-centered, community-based schools such as NCDC [New Concept Development Center in Chicago] are highly relevant to the larger issues of public education in the United States (p. 162).

According to several researchers (Lee, 1992; Shujaa, 1990) African-centered pedagogy may fulfill the following aims:
(1) Legitimize African stores of knowledge;
(2) Positively exploit and scaffold productive community and cultural practices;
(3) Extend and build upon the indigenous language;
(4) Reinforce community ties and idealize [the concept] service to one’s family, community, nation, race and world;
(5) Promote positive social relationships;
(6) Impart a world view that idealizes a positive, self-sufficient future for one’s people without denying the self-worth and right to self-determination of theirs;
(7) Support cultural continuity while promoting critical consciousness;
(8) Promote the vision of individuals and communities as producers rather than as simply consumers (p. 165)

Asa Hilliard (1997) explains in *SBA: Re-awakening of the African Mind*, that many African cultures of the past (and present) believed the purpose of education itself was to be more like the Creator (God) and strive for human perfectibility.

Thus, they produced an educational system that had to be directed at the mind, body, and the spirit- inseparable parts of our human, individual and community whole. The African worldview does not emphasize individuals. The individual is part of a group, an ethnic group, a collective. The individual is bonded through the education process (p. 101).

Therefore, the belief is that the entire group strove to become godlike or in alignment with the spirit of the Creator specifically following the principles of MAAT-truth, justice, order, reciprocity, propriety, harmony, and balance (Obenga, 1995; Nobles, 1986). Based on this cultural/spiritual belief system, African-centered education is founded on the beliefs that every child can learn and possess within themselves the capability to master complex levels of knowledge and problem-solving strategies.

Nonetheless, it is with these gifted capabilities that the child has a moral responsibility to address the issues of the community and maintain the health of society.

Reflective of the Kemetic proposition that moral social practice is essential to human development (Karenga, 1990), these aims unite academic excellence and positive character development as co-partners in the education of youth. African centered pedagogy thus requires a total environment in which all social relationships strive to achieve reciprocity or interdependence (Lee, 1992, p. 166).
Maulana Karenga (1989), the originator of the African American celebration Kwanzaa, has developed the Nguzo Saba principles for promoting and supporting family and community relations. Several African-centered schools (Lee, 1992; Baruti, 2005) have adopted the Nguzo Saba principles: Umoja- unity; Kujichagulia-self-determination; Ujima- collective work and responsibility; Ujamaa- cooperative economics; Kuumba-creativity; Nia- purpose; and Imani- faith (in one’s self, one family, and one’s people).

How can any of this be a part of our current education system? Well, African-centered education may serve as a model for administrative servant leadership, student achievement, parent involvement, community outreach, and school accountability. For example, the New Concept Development Center (NCDC) in Chicago, Illinois, has been successful in developing African-centered educational institutions founded on the Nguzo Saba principles. NCDC (Lee, 1992) believes that linking content knowledge in core subject areas to the philosophical and social principles is a critical element of African-centered pedagogy.

One of NCDC’s founders, Mama Soyini Walton, developed a curriculum on the conception of science that is consistent with African philosophical systems. She has designed lessons on how “all human, animal, and plant life as well as organic and inorganic matter exist within the universe of symbolically linked relationships, patterns, and orders” (Lee, 1992, p. 168). Being that one of the Nguzo Saba principles is unity, teaching that there is unity in the processes of scientific investigation allows the student to identify the patterns and relationships in nature as well as identify a model for the patterns and relationships in family and community.
Some have argued that teaching American schoolchildren about numeration [or scientific] systems from other parts of the world is a waste of valuable instructional time because they will not be required to use such notation systems in today’s world (Ravitch, 1990). Others contend that adapting mathematics to multicultural contexts can have positive intellectual consequences (Zaslavsky, 1990). African-centered schools maintain that considering why different groups of people at different time periods developed distinct counting systems, for example, helps students to understand that mathematics serves real world functions and is not an artifact of the classroom, and that it is not a finite or static science (Lee, 1992, p. 171).

Lee (1992) states that a survey (Rattery, 1989) on results of standardized achievement tests of students from independent schools, including NCDC, found that children from these schools often achieve at or above grade level. Based on these figures, it raises questions of why African American children are succeeding in African-centered schools like NCDC as opposed to public schools where African American children are often identified as low-performing students.

**Comparing African-centered Schools and the Public School System**

In comparing African-centered schools and public schools, it is necessary to recognize their distinctions. For example, based on the African-centered school, NCDC, class sizes are usually small which allows for more opportunities for individualized attention. Also, student enrollment is usually a selective process rather than an open-admission process, and there are no contract unions to retain ineffective teachers.

Many will argue that these expectations are not realistic for public education. Perhaps so! However, the problems faced by African Americans as a group, and especially by poor African Americans, are so monumental that only monumental solutions will correct them... Whether it is realistic to expect public schools, even those that serve completely African American populations, to adopt an African-centered pedagogy is questionable... the principles that have inspired the pedagogy and cultural environment of NCDC... are human and humane, stimulating and inspirational, [and] a worthy model for others to follow (Lee, 1992, p. 175).

In 1998, co-founders of the NCDC, Haki Madhubuti and his wife Carol D. Lee
(also known as Safisha Madhubuti), started the Betty Shabazz International Charter School in Chicago. For the development of this institution, they used an African-centered curriculum that was geared to African American students using culturally relevant materials. They referenced the contributions Africans and African Americans in the core subject areas of science, math, reading, language arts, and social studies. As a result, African American students at the Shabazz School showed significant gains in academic performance on standardized test scores compared to other public schools.

Based on the Illinois State Board of Education (Finkel, 2007) data shows that Shabazz students outperformed other students in public schools on the 2006 Illinois Standards Achievement Test.

With nearly 67 percent of students meeting state standards, Shabazz ranked first in composite test scores among 10 public schools in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood, where Shabazz is the only charter. The school ranked ninth in composite score among 11 charter elementary schools in Chicago that took the test in 2006 (Finkel, 2007, http://www.chicagoreporter.com/index.php/c/Cover_Stories/d/African_Ed).

In addition to test scores, Shabazz’s success has been based on students’ behavior and social development, in addition to the school’s climate. In an interview for The Chicago Reporter (Finkel, 2007) Lee emphasizes how the Shabazz school measures student progress through character development.

We are also assessing the development of values, the development of self-discipline, the monitoring of the kinds of goals the kids develop for what they want to do in the future, and who those goals would be important, not only for themselves but for their families, for their communities (Finkel, 2007).

Case Studies of Predominately African American Charter Schools

Patty Yancey (2004) wrote “Independent Black schools and the charter school movement” and researched the impact of charter schools with high percentages of
African American students. She focused on how such schools were organized and on their successes in using effective strategies that can be linked to an African-centered approach. Yancey’s research discussed how these charter schools were developed in response to public schools’ under-service of African American students and included field research and case studies. She found that a shared vision within the school community played a significant role in the success of African American students.

Rationale

According to Yancey (2004), 60% of charter schools identify that the vision, whether serving a specific population or addressing a particular educational need, is the most important reason for their establishment. Being that some charter schools have been found to serve larger numbers of students in a particular group (ethnic, racial, special needs, etc.), such schools have been able to concentrate on meeting the needs of those students. Yancey mentioned that some states have tried to discourage charter schools from serving just one race. Yet because advocates argue that public schools are already racially and socio-economically segregated, charter schools are effective because they have an advantage in addressing the needs of specific groups of students that public schools failed to meet. According to Yancey, African American students have the highest numbers among students served in charter schools. She found that within fifteen states, not only did they have a greater percentage of African American students in charter schools (about 85-100% Black in a given school) but some of those schools also promoted an Afrocentric philosophy and curriculum. In accordance with researchers (Lee, 1992; Hilliard, 1997), these predominately African American schools were created “in response to the underachievement, over-crowding, and lack of accountability
experienced in traditional public school” (Yancey, 2004, p. 126). Proponents view these African American charter schools as responsive systems of school accountability; opponents see them as acts of segregation.

Method

Yancey (2004) conducted qualitative research on the effectiveness of charter schools servicing predominately African American students. From 1997-1998, Yancey conducted field research at three schools including Umoja Charter School, Michigan; Clarkville Elementary, Florida; and Denton College Preparatory, Arizona. Through case studies, she focused on investigating reasons for the schools’ development, organizational structure, philosophies, financial and informational support system, parent involvement, and effectiveness of teaching and learning approaches.

Umoja Charter School

At Umoja Charter School, which initially was a K-2nd Saturday program that evolved into a Pre-K-8th grade charter school, the school had to address conflicts with parents and students about the school’s value system during the first year as a charter. Eventually, the school was able to connect with its growing population and developed an African-centered educational program that integrated the core educational requirements for the state of Michigan. Based on Yancey’s observations, Umoja’s curriculum focused on addressing core subjects such as math and science through an Afrocentric lens. Additionally, a rites of passage program that focused on character and social development was provided for grades 4-12 on Saturdays during the spring semester.

According to Yancey (2004), Umoja’s teaching staff had to receive professional development and support from CIBI (the Council of Independent Black Institutions) due
to the integration of students whose families were not used to an Afrocentric approach to schooling. However, over time Umoja’s school community grew stronger as families bought into the philosophy and vision of the school. Umoja’s school mission was based on the Afrocentric philosophy of Oneness (Nobles & Goddard, 1990), which ultimately encouraged parent and community involvement.

In a focus group with students in upper grades, Yancey (2004) found that some students initially had a difficult time adjusting to the philosophical operation of the school because of its Afrocentric approach. Being that students were not used to an Afrocentric approach to schooling, they were initially resistant. According to Yancey, students changed their opinions and shared that they liked the sense of familyhood and the school’s culture, which was promoted through an Afrocentric pedagogy.

Clarkville Charter School

Yancey’s research (2004) also included case studies at Clarkville Charter School. In contrast to Umoja, these schools used alternative approaches to addressing their high percentage population of African American students. Clarkville was founded by a “prominent African American community leader and a White conservative Republican politician” (p. 139) who chose a 16-year veteran teacher as principal for the school. As a community, they refurbished the school’s facility and was able to open within a couple of months to a population of 60 children grades K-2 with 99% African American. Overtime, the school grew to grades K-4 housing 189 students. The classroom curriculum was based on traditional state standards and focused on language arts, math, and science with an emphasis on critical thinking and problem solving. According to Yancey (2004), improving performance on standardized tests was a school-wide mission.
and much of the classroom instruction was based on content from workbooks and pre-tests. As a result, Clarkville improved their scores and ranked higher than other elementary schools with similar demographics.

In discussions among the school’s community, Yancey (2004) found that relationships were the most important aspect of the school’s culture. Although the teaching staff did not reflect the ethnic population of students (two African Americans, one White, the rest Latino), the majority of the support staff and all of the teacher aides did, a shared vision was still evident. Through Yancey’s dialogues with teachers, one commented about the relationships established among staff stating, “when you walk on campus, you feel the love we have for each other and for our children” (p. 143).

Analysis

In Yancey’s (2004) analysis of the three charter schools, she found that although they all had a different educational approach, they were all founded in response to traditional public schools’ under-serving of African American students. However, Umoja provided a better foundation for academic success. Due to its history within the Black community and its African-centered approach to connecting family, community, and school, Umoja fostered an effective learning school environment. In regards to Clarkville, Yancey (2004) found that the school made significant gains in improved test scores due to its shared vision and “everyone holds everyone accountable” (p. 144) philosophy.

Yancey (2004) concluded that buy-in from the school’s community among all three schools played a significant role in their success or downfall. Being that Umoja and Clarkville promoted a collaborative approach to school accountability and Denton did
not, those two schools were able to flourish while Denton eventually closed down. Based on Yancey’s research (2004), the African-centered approach that fosters Oneness (Nobles & Goddard, 1990) and familyhood within the school environment can be adopted within the public school system. Therefore establishing a shared vision within the school community can prove to be an effective strategy in promoting high academic achievement among African American students.

Based on research of African American student achievement in U.S. public schools (SFUSD, 2006; ERS, 2000), finding alternative strategies to address the issue are necessary. Having African American students performing at record lows on standardized tests, being underrepresented in advanced placement and honor classes, and overrepresented in suspension/expulsion and dropout rates all place our American educational system in a state of emergency. Re-awakening the African mind (Hilliard, 1997) by incorporating African-centered pedagogy in our public school system may touch the spirit of African American students to achieve academic excellence. Additionally, identifying the African spirit expressed in African American youth’s pop culture may help educators develop instructional strategies to engage and inspire students.

Contemporary Pop Culture’s Effects on African American Students

A contemporary popular culture among African American youth is Hip Hop. Hip Hop is a culture consisting of music, dance, graffiti, art, fashion, speech, and lifestyle. It is derived from the streets of the Bronx, NY during the late 1970s but is an extension of Black culture stemming from music to politics and the struggle for liberation. Hip Hop originally represented the voice of African American youth, yet has been co-opted into an
international culture of global capitalism based on Black exploitation (Blackburn, 2004; Watkins, 2005).


Over the course of its career hip-hop has developed a notorious and even self-perpetuating reputation as a spectacular cultural movement committed to defying the cultural and political mainstream. But as the borders of the hip-hop nation continue to expand, its biggest and most important battle is shaping up to be the one it is having with itself. Behind the explosive record sales, trendsetting cachet, and burgeoning economy is an intense struggle for the soul [spirit] of the hip-hop movement (p. 5).

Watkins (2005) views Hip Hop, particularly rap music, as “a prominent trendsetter and cultural sign of the times” (p. 52). He believes that Hip Hop culture connects with young people by creating “a voice and a vehicle for the young and the dispossessed, giving them both hope and inspiration” (p.7).

Hip Hop never asked to change the world. But in its own noisy and stylish way it has done just that. Imagine pop music today without the inventions inspired by Hip Hop. Imagine the demeanor of youth without the irreverent spirit of Hip Hop... Gone are the discussions about whether Hip Hop matters; they have been replaced instead by the key issues of who and what kinds of values will define how Hip Hop matters (p.6).

Although Watkins documents young African American youth’s praises for Hip Hop culture, he also acknowledges Hip Hop’s negative influences on young people.
Ghetto Deathstyle

Watkins (2005) examines the development of Hip Hop culture in the late 1970s by tracing how it reflected the youth’s political response to socioeconomic conditions, particularly “ghetto” life in the Bronx, NY, of multiple African Americans. Hip Hop was an art form that allowed young people to speak about their realities and aspirations despite hardships. Unfortunately over a period of time, what has been a creative expression of a marginalized group is currently a weapon of demise for many African American youth.

It was, without question, one of the cruelest ironies in the rise and transformation of Hip Hop: the fact that its livelihood- indeed its very survival as a pop culture juggernaut- rested almost entirely on its ability to sell black death. The embrace of guns, gangsterism, and ghetto authenticity brought an aura of celebrity and glamour to the grim yet fabulously hyped portraits of ghetto life (Watkins, 2005, pp. 2-3).

Watkins (2005) provides an example of how young African American Hip Hop rappers, no matter how wealthy, suffer from maintaining a ghetto lifestyle. He mentions a broadcasted discussion between rapper Ja Rule and Minister Louis Farrakhan about Rule’s conflict with rapper 50 Cent. In the discussion, Ja Rule expresses his feelings of pressure to “keep it real” (Nobles, 2001) by maintaining a thug persona in fighting back against those who disrespect him. Using a tough guy image Ja Rule admits, “They [Hip Hop followers] want you to stay hood”, and feels that he has to be devoted to the thug life at any cost to represent the Hip Hop generation (Watkins, 2005, p.4). Watkins states that rappers feel they must represent the streets and hoods of Hip Hop followers, even if they as wealthy rappers live in mansions and gated communities.

What comes to mind when Watkins (2005) writes about how rappers struggle to maintain a ghetto mentality despite their wealthy lifestyle is Wade Nobles’ (2001)
definition of the cultural theme, realness. Nobles identifies nine recurring cultural themes linked to traditional African heritage that are central in the lives of large numbers of African American people, and can be expressed in the Hip Hop culture of youth. The nine cultural themes are spirituality, resilience, humanism, communalism, oral and verbal expressiveness, personal style and uniqueness, realness, emotional vitality, and musical/rhythm. Nobles notes,

Realness refers to the need to face life the way it is without pretense... [Its] a contempt for artificiality and falseness in human conduct, an aversion to formality and standardization, frankness of manner, and casualness in social transactions’ (Pasteur and Toldson, 1982) (Nobles, 1995, p. 25).

It seems that rappers like Ja Rule hunger for the success of leaving poverty behind but feel pressure to live the thug life that they rap about in their records. Young rappers may not want to disappoint the youth they claim to represent, so they feel that rapping about the socioeconomic realities of marginalized youth is realness.

Nobles (2004) believes that it is African-centered to feel connectedness and to be part of the community, but for African American youth within Westernized culture, it is ideal to be individually rich. Therefore, young rappers may speak about wealth but can’t leave the ghetto mentality. Since Watkins (2005) argues that Hip Hop culture has such a powerful impact on the actions of African American youth, the idea of keeping it real (realness) regardless of conduct, is clearly an expression of African American youth’s identity of spirit even if it is misguided. However, a positive aspect of “realness” found in Hip Hop is the lyrical content written by socially conscious artists (e.g., Tupac Shakur, The Outlaws, Kanye West, Common) who choose to tell stories from their experiences as lessons for improvement and reflection in others.
Another way the spirit is evident within today’s African American youth may be identified through the political actions of community organizations, thus the cultural theme of connectness (Nobles, 1994). Watkins (2005) interviewed Van Jones of the Ella Baker Center (EBC) in Oakland to share how Jones’ organization utilizes Hip Hop culture to engage young people to take action in addressing political issues. The Ella Baker Center consists of several lawyers and activists who encourage young people to address criminal justice reform, schooling, and basic human rights issues. In Watkins’ interview with the EBC co-founder, Jones argues that the youth today are not necessarily less political or serious about civil rights as were the previous generations, but rather live in a distinct period of time when young people must fight against different social ills. Jones states,

Politics of liberation in the new century that [exists], in terms of integration vs. segregation, is anachronistic. It has little to do with what’s happening today. So we raise new slogans: ‘schools, not jails’; ‘books, not bars’; ‘jobs, not jails’... The people we see on a daily basis, when they go to high school the police cars are already there, because they are stationed there. If they get into a push-and-shove match in the hallway, they don’t go to the principal’s office; they go to the precinct in handcuffs. That’s the reality we’re dealing with: over-policing, over-incarceration (Watkins, 2005, p. 180).

According to Watkins (2005) Jones believes that the issues facing youth during the civil rights era are distinctly different compared to African American youth dealing with the threat of going to prison as opposed to receiving educational opportunities. He states, “It’s a very different fight. At the same time it’s a continuation of the fight that started years ago” (p. 180). Watkins (2005) praises EBC for their efforts to utilize Hip Hop to engage African American youth in addressing socioeconomic issues.

At rallies, forums, teach-ins, and other planned events, Hip Hop serves as the all-important drawing card energizing young people as it strives to enlist their support in local and state causes... It is also the medium through which they
articulate a vision of their world that is insightful, optimistic, and tenaciously
critical of the institutions and circumstances that restrict their ability to impact the
world around them (p. 181).

Therefore, through African American youth’s contemporary culture (Hip Hop), we may
identify the African spirit of connectedness within their actions to heal, protect, and
empower their communities and society as a whole.

African American Youth within the Juvenile Justice System

Indeed, the conditions of living for African American youth have drastically
changed since the Brown v Board of Education decision of 1954. According to The
Sentencing Project, an organization for research and advocacy reform,

...unprecedented growth in the prison system has produced record numbers of
Americans in prison and jail, and has had a disproportionate effect on African
Americans... there are now nine times as many African Americans in prison or
jail as on the day of the Brown decision. An estimated 98,000 blacks were
incarcerated in 1954, a figure that has risen to 884,500 today” (Mauer & King,

Consequently, the prison system impacts African American youth as well. According to
Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report by the National Criminal Justice
Reference Service administered by the U.S. Department of Justice,

The delinquency case rate rose from 1985 to 2002 for all races, but the rate for
blacks remained well above the rates for other groups... Case rate trends varied
across race and offense, but in all offense categories from 1985 through 2002, the
rates for black youth were substantially higher than the rates for other youth
(Snyder & Sickmund, 2006, pp. 163-164).

According to the Center of Juvenile and Criminal Justice (CJCJ), “nationwide
African-Americans represent 15% of the population, 26% of juvenile arrests, 44% of
youth who are detained, 46% of the youth who are judicially waived to criminal court,
and 58% of the youth admitted to state prisons” (Center for Juvenile Justice and Criminal
most populous counties in California which is 75% of the state’s population, in 2000 African American youth were 9% of the population, 43% of arrests, and 35% of the CYA population” (http://www.cjcj.org/jjic/race_jj.php).

With the rise of juvenile arrests and incarceration, African American youth are faced with the likelihood of going to prison rather than receiving an opportunity to attend college. With that in mind, our society may be communicating to African American youth that we expect for them to go prison rather than achieve academically. One may question whether there is a correlation between the academic achievement gap among African American students who underperform and the disproportionate over-representation of those incarcerated. If African American students do not succeed academically then what options do they have to survive in this society? Therefore, African American youth may have more distractions than ever before to deter them from survival and less support to nurture their spirit.

*History of Hip Hop’s Impact on African American Youth*

While struggle for survival has always taken place in the history of African Americans within the United States (Bennett, 1993), circumstances have changed and African American youth respond in a different way, now through Hip Hop culture. Yet no matter the upbringing of an African American child, somehow he or she still maintains the African spirit of resiliency to deal with disappointments and tragedies (Nobles, 1995).

For example, veteran Hip Hop rapper KRS One once rapped about the ghetto and criminal life. Yet when his musical partner/friend died, KRS One began to rap socially conscious lyrics. “The tragedy forced him to take stock of his own mortality as well as
his artistic, professional, and spiritual well-being” (Watkins, 2005, p. 240). KRS One felt that he had a responsibility to educate African American youth about the social ills of society and the need to succeed in life. Since Hip Hop culture excited young people with its mesmerizing beats, style, and rhythm, socially conscious rappers like KRS One and others (i.e., Public Enemy, X-Clan, Paris, and Sista Souljah) spoke from their experiences to empower and educate African American youth. KRS One felt that he had a responsibility to educate young people since he believed the public school system was not succeeding. In a New York Times interview (1989), KRS One stated, “While no single cause accounts for the problems of inner-city kids, much of what black youth is missing- self esteem, creative opportunity, outlook, goals- can be traced to what we’re not learning in schools” (Watkins, 2005, p. 241).

Since then, KRS One has taken on the persona of a teacher working to raise the consciousness of African American youth. KRS One had created the Temple of Hip Hop, an organization with the purpose “to promote, preserve, and protect Hiphop as a strategy toward Health, Love, Awareness and Wealth for all who declare ‘Hiphop’ their lifestyle” (Watkins, 2005, p.242). Later he went on to produce an album entitled, Spiritual Minded. Nevertheless, with KRS One being a representative of Hip Hop culture, the African spirit of resiliency is evident even in the contemporary culture of African American youth.

A history of Hip Hop’s impact on African American youth may be linked to the battles for cultural identity since the 1800s (Blackburn, 2004). Regina Naasirah Blackburn (2004) in her article, Binary Visions, Black Consciousness, and Bling Bling, wrote about the evolvement of Hip Hop culture and how it is an extension of verbal battles for identity dating back to the 1800s. After slavery was abolished in 1863,
cultural identity became a major issue due to the on-going effects of the slave-mentality and the loss of many Africans in United States not knowing their African heritage (Span, 1970; Hassan, 1999). Therefore, fighting for identity became an underlying factor of verbal battles among African American leaders who struggled over being classified as second-class American citizens (up to the late 1960s) versus identifying as Africans born in America (i.e., Crummel vs. Du Bois; Marcus vs. Washington; Malcolm vs. Martin). This struggle for identity has now evolved into contemporary African American youth Hip Hop culture. However, the “battles” in the past were about fighting, as a people, for the identity to achieve freedom, liberation, education, and opportunities (Bennett, 1993). Whereas, in Hip Hop culture, today’s “battles” for identity is about individual wealth and fame (Blackburn, 2004). Unfortunately, this questions whether today’s lack of African heritage awareness among African American youth is indication of the African “spirit” gradually fading from existence or just another continuous phase of spiritual evolvement.

Battles for African Spirit in African American Youth’s Identity

Maulana Karenga’s (1993), Introduction to Black Studies acknowledges rap music as creating “a space for independent Black artists and companies” that has “rebuilt an eroding sense of community among Black youth, [and] spoke to them in a special way” (Karenga as cited in Blackburn, 2004, p.79). Additionally, Blackburn (2004) states that wealthy rappers like Russell Simmons, Sean “P Diddy” Combs and Jay-Z feel that they are spokespersons for the people who have little and therefore, represent Hip Hop culture. However, their idea of representing may conflict with the African American community’s idea of what is being represented. Blackburn raises questions on how are these wealthy Hip Hop artists speaking for the people.
Thuggism is classy today. The Hip Hop ‘Talented Tenth’ finally have the resources to do something, and many of them do a ‘little something, something,’ but not only could they do much more; the direction that they are leading the youth--chanting empty slogans--has devalued the morals and unity of African people (p.79).

Blackburn (2004) argues that Black consciousness that is rooted in struggle, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism is now in a battle with the perspectives of the Hip Hop lifestyle.

Those activists of the '60s and '70s, who waged college sit-ins and marches and wore naturals and African clothing on special occasions, are the parents of the Hip Hoppers. The "vision" generation is now on the eve of retirement. Today, Blackness is a commodity, as it was in slavery days. Mental slavery affords the dominant group opportunity, again, to steal and market Black-inspired ideas. Even Ebonics flows into marketing. To a great extent Blackamericans are the spokespeople on sports, drinks, cars, clothing, furnishing--the advertising world has seized the opportunity since there is an offer of self-exploitation to make money. The question is, who gets the money and why. And at what cost to the masses? The mall-mentality is youth reality” (p.79).

Blackburn (2004) and Karenga (1993) argue that a rescue and reconstruction of Black culture must happen if African Americans are to truly liberate themselves. “Black talent use will determine future environment realities and benefits. The communication gap must be dissolved, for that was one of the 20th-century blunders. Soul empowerment [spirit] will enable the race” (Karenga as cited in Blackburn, 2004, p.79).

As an African American woman who has witnessed and experienced the impact of Hip Hop in my community, I have a sense of how Hip Hop influences African American youth. In my observation “keeping it ghetto is keeping real.” That is why some wealthy rappers continue to rap about the ghetto life. They may be having difficulty with accepting their advancement out of the hood and wanting to feel a part of the struggling Black community. According to T’Shaka (1995), African American youth
will continue to struggle within themselves, no matter the case, if they are not attuned with their spirit.

Oba T’Shaka (1995) writes in *Return to the African Principle of Male and Female Equality* about the struggle of harmonizing warring souls within African Americans. T’Shaka argues that according to Ancient African culture, life’s crises were meant to teach lessons that enabled one to rise to a higher self. Despite one’s circumstances and hardships, it was the building of character to overcome and be enlightened that allowed one not to become bitter. Therefore, “For these wise ancients the aim of life, the aim of education was the achievement of self-knowledge, so that one would not only know his or her cultural identity, but most importantly remember her or his divine identity” (p. 130). T’Shaka argues that the African spirit of principles and beliefs continue to live within African Americans but the continuous conflict of adopting Western values in America contradicts traditional African values.

The western world-view has departed from this noble conception that the purpose of life is to become one with the good, the just or the god within each of us. The dominant trend in western thought is the deification of material, and the alienation from the spiritual (p.131).

Based on T’Shaka’s (1995) argument, African American youth through their contemporary pop Hip Hop culture which glorifies thug life, maintains the ghetto mentality, and worships material possessions may be creating their own spiritual death. However, since the African-centered belief is that every living thing possesses both positive and negative energy and never dies but rather changes its form (Edwards & Mason, 1994; Karade, 1994; Nobles, 1986) the African spirit in African American may indeed survive the social ills of today.
The supreme good… the state is achieved only after many reincarnations where the person is perfected through freeing himself or herself from the lower earthly passions of greed, hatred, violence, power, fear and oppression… to ascend to the divine ideal which is achieved on earth through love and service to humanity (T’Shaka, 1995, p. 130).

In other words, T’Shaka (1995) argues that once African American youth are attuned with their African spirit and learn from an African-centered perspective, they shall achieve. Therefore, the public school may want to incorporate African-centered cultural themes in educating African American students to encourage achievement.

Summary

Research (Nobles & Mann, 1994; Hilliard, 1997) suggests that in order to bridge the achievement gap, the educational system must address the needs of African American students by incorporating culturally relevant curricula (Ladson-Billings, 2000) and using African-centered pedagogy (Nobles & Goddard, 1990). Therefore, schools should 1) provide for teachers professional development on cultural competency; 2) develop engaging curricula to incite curiosity and high expectations; and 3) establish a community that promotes a shared vision for academic success amongst all students (Yancey, 2004). If teachers incorporate cultural themes (Nobles & Goddard 1990; Nobles & Mann, 1994) and acknowledge African contributions to Ancient Civilization within the school curriculum (Carruthers, 1999) then African American students would be more engaged in school. Accordingly, utilizing an African-centered approach to learning and instruction that nurtures the spirit of African American students may spark their sense of purpose and connectedness that ultimately foster academic excellence (Nobles & Goddard 1990; Nobles & Mann, 1994; Hilliard, 1997).

In order to research the problem of low academic achievement among African American students, it is imperative to first acknowledge the achievements of Ancient
Africa and its contributions to the foundation of global education (Browder, 1992; Diop, 1992; Schwaller de Lubicz, 1978; Hilliard, 1997; Idowwu, 1961). Then it is necessary to investigate the ancient world history of education, examine global communication, and analyze the historical psychological issues and societal constraints that continue to plague the African American community (Carruthers, 1999; Clarke, 1988; James, 1988). Finally, investigating successful schools that serve high percentages of African American students and analyzing their effective educational strategies provide an outlook on what can be useful in promoting academic achievement.

As noted by educators (Nobles & Mann, 1994; Nobles & Goddard, 1990; Hilliard, 1997), cultural themes among African American students can be utilized to help them achieve excellence. These themes may be traced to ancient African thought of spirit and the philosophy of Oneness as being part of the whole. By examining the Yoruba culture in which a high population of enslaved Africans in the Americas may trace their ethnic origin, one may detect the resiliency and survival of African traditional practices and ancestral importance (Idowwu, 1961; Edwards & Mason, 1985, Karade, 1994). By examining the rise and fall of ancient Egypt as the cradle of civilization, one may detect how the transferring of information and knowledge evolved over time, and the attempts to destroy the history of African people by teaching Negro inferiority was a way to justify slavery for good economics. In analyzing the psychological effects of slavery, one may see the desire for the mental liberation of African Americans and the need for re-awakening of the African mind as an attempt to regain the concept of Oneness and the spirit of enlightenment within African American students (Nobles & Goddard, 1990; Hilliard, 1997).
Even with its educational opportunities, desegregation caused disproportionate amounts of African American children to be bussed out of their communities causing African American schools to either degrade or close. Therefore, African American students experienced racism, and a decline in discipline, community, and religious familiarity (Shircliffe, 2003). Lee (1992) argues that African American students enter school with the desire to do well but learning about the negative experiences of African Americans in U.S. history begins to affect their self-worth unless discussed with a critical perspective (Perry, Steele, Hilliard, 2003).

Consequently, several scholars (Nobles, 1986; Lee, 1992; Hilliard, 1997; Woodson, 1933) have advocated the need for an Afrocentric (African-centered) approach to schooling through independent Black institutions to address educational issues concerning African American students. African-centered education is found on the beliefs that every child can learn and posses within his or herself the capability to master complex levels of knowledge and problem-solving strategies. Independent schools, like the New Concept Development Center (Lee, 1992) that uses an African-centered approach, as well as some charter schools (Yancey, 2004) that utilize a collaborative approach, are successful in improving student academic achievement.

Since African American students make the choice to do well or improve their performance in school, it is important to analyze influences that affect their choices. Being that Hip Hop culture has such a powerful impact on the actions of African American youth (Watkins, 2005) and is an expression of African American youth’s identity of spirit (Blackburn, 2004), it is necessary to evaluate its effects. Unfortunately, since the Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954, conditions of living for African
American youth have drastically changed (Hilliard, 1997). African American students are faced with new challenges leading one to question whether there is a correlation between the academic achievement gap among African American students who underperform and the disproportionate over-representation of those incarcerated (Mauer & King, 2004; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

However, despite historical obstacles and circumstances, African American youth have been resilient and have created ways in searching for liberation. As evidence of the resilient spirit, Hip Hop culture may be linked to historical battles for cultural identity and the search for liberation (Blackburn, 2004). And so, returning to ancient African principles to reawake the African mind and spirit of African American students, by providing culturally relevant curricula and operating on an African-centered approach, may be key in encouraging academic excellence (Ani, 2004; Baruti, 2005; Hilliard, 1997; Nobles & Mann, 1994; Nobles & Goddard, 1990; Woodson, 1933).

As a way to encourage high academic achievement among African American students, several organizations are producing positive results. NCDC, Ile Omode, Ankoben House, Umoja, Shabazz, I. R.I.S.E. (Infusing Responsibility For Intellectual and Scholastic Excellence), High Tech High, and the KIPP Academy (see Appendix D.) are just a few educational institutions that utilize the principles of connectedness, spirit, and social responsibility, thus producing successful African American students. Overall, one may conclude that the ancestral teachings of connectedness, principles, and the underlying spirit of Oneness are the keys to education that may motivate African American students to achieve academic excellence.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

As the teacher-researcher, I used a participatory research design that focused on identifying factors that inspire African American students to learn and achieve academically. Encouraging students through an African centered approach resonates with their sense of purpose and connectedness, which may ultimately fosters academic excellence. Therefore, through African centered implications of consubstantiation, cooperation, egalitarianism, transformation, and interdependence (Nobles & Mann, 1994) students are viewed as collaborators of a mutual learning process. Both the teachers and students are respected within a reciprocal relationship because they all bring to the classroom their prior knowledge, experiences, and perceptions that are of value within the learning environment. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to use the participatory research method, because the teacher-researcher worked collectively with student-participants to develop effective strategies in addressing educational issues. As a result, students were connected to what was being taught in the classroom and would take action to support authentic change.

Participatory research (Maguire, 1987) is a systematic approach to social transformation that is based on an alternative, yet holistic, worldview. It is a process represented by:

1. A method of social investigation of problems, involving participation of the people the problem affects and try to solve;

2. An educational process for both the researcher and participants, who analyze causes of the problems through collective efforts;
3. A strategy for researchers and participants to join together in taking action to make social change.

Using this method of qualitative research provided an additive framework of “spirit” used to resolve the academic achievement gap among African American students and other groups. Since the philosophical bases of the African centered praxis include oneness as all living things being interdependent and purpose as an obligation to communal growth and development, participatory research serves as a natural or holistic approach to research that is aligned with African centered principles.

As participants, ten African American students (two to three each from four of my language arts classes) at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Academic Middle School located in San Francisco participated in dialogues with the teacher-researcher. Students representing a range of performance indicators on standardized tests (i.e., far below basic, below basic, basic, proficient, advanced) were invited to participate. Selecting students from a wide range of performance levels provided multiple perspectives on how spirit (i.e., motivation or excitement) affected the learning process.

During the 2006-2007 school year, all students (about 120) were provided a curriculum focusing on cultural history, journal reflections, and an audiovisual project. During the fall semester, all students learned about ancient African contributions to civilization and other cultural themes as a connectedness to identity.

During the spring semester, only the 10 participants who met specific academic performance levels and had a willingness to participate in the study, dialogued with me about what instruction they felt were helpful to their learning process and were given an audiovisual project, or iMovie, that allowed them to use technology to present ideas and express their emotions about learning, or the “spirit” of academic excellence. Only the 10
student-participants’ dialogues and iMovies were analyzed for the purpose of this research study.

Research Setting

For this study, 10 participants who met specific academic performance levels and had a willingness to participate were invited from my 7th grade language arts classes at Dr. Martin Luther Ling, Jr. Academic Middle School (MLK). MLK is a public middle school located between the Portola and BayView/Hunter’s Point districts in San Francisco. Additionally, students come from the Excelsior, Mission, and Visitacion Valley districts as well as Sunnydale and Double Rock housing developments. Concerning socioeconomic indication, MLK is a Title I school consisting of several students who underperform on standardized tests and qualify for free/reduced lunch.

Regarding changes in MLK’s African American student population, during the schoolyear 2000-2001, the middle schools of the San Francisco Unified School District (Middle Schools, SFUSD, 2006) combined had an African American population of 16.4%. Due to the San Francisco Unified School District’s student enrollment numbers for middle schools district-wide, a shift occurred resulting in the 20005-2006 African American population becoming only 14% (Middle Schools, SFUSD, 2006). This was a decrease of 2.4%. See Figure 3. The pie chart shows the entire SFUSD student enrollment based on ethnic representation for the schoolyear 2005.

Figure 3. SFUSD 2005 Student Enrollment

Source: SFUSD CBEDS 2005, Prepared by Research, Planning and Accountability Department
Population Shift

During the 2000-2001 schoolyear at MLK, the African American population was the largest group with 34.6% (MLK Profile, 2000). However, based on the 2005-2006 schoolyear (MLK, SFUSD, 2006), the African American population decreased to 21.0%. Thus comparing numbers from MLK’s opening in 1989 to 2006 shows a significant decrease in population for African American students as compared to an increase of Asian students. In 1989, African American students (MLK, SFUSD, 2006) made up about 40% of the population while Asian students consisted of only 9%. Yet in the 2005-2006 schoolyear, African American students currently make up 21.0% while Asian students, now the largest group, make up 33.5% of the student population.

This shift has affected the MLK’s culture, moving from a focus on maintaining academic achievement among African American students through curriculum intervention and enrichment programs, to primarily addressing Asian students by focusing on English Language Learners’ (ELL) needs by modifying instructional practices. In the school year 2000-2001, ELL (or LEP/NEP) students were 13.7% (about 71 students) of the school population while in the school year 2005-2006 the population doubled to 26.4% (about 141 students) (MLK, SFUSD, 2006).

Additionally, the ethnic representation of teachers at MLK during 2006-2007 consisted of only two African Americans out of 27 classroom teachers and a predominate population of White educators. Whereas, in 2000-2001 African Americans represented about 28% of certificated staff consisting about 8 classroom teachers. This fact might have an effect on the cultural relations of teachers working with students of color who represent 99% of a 534 student-population. Within the shift away from African
American staff members, students lost several special people who helped to nurture and identified with them. This change may also have impacted dropout rates. Based on school year 2000-2001 dropout and suspension rates, the dropout rate was 0.4% while 0 students were reported suspended. In the following school year 2001-2002, the dropout rate was 0.0% with 32 students suspended. However, in 2005-2006 the dropout rate rose to 4.3% while 76 students were suspended (MLK, SFUSD, 2006, http://orb.sfusd.edu/schdata/hist/hist-710.htm). It is important to note that during this time a change in MLK’s administration occurred when the African American principal retired and an Asian American principal replaced him. Due to this change, there was a shift in the school’s philosophy in addressing student issues like the suspension and dropout rate of African American students. Previously, there were Saturday programs facilitated by community members to promote academic achievement of African American students. Now there are only weekend programs held on campus that offer additional education services for Asian students.

*History of SFUSD Consent Decree*

To analyze the population shift in the research setting, it should be noted that MLK was one of the six “Phase One” schools in the 1983 Consent Decree. The “Phase One” schools were the first to be targeted at the beginning of the Consent Decree in an effort to reform schools and improve student academic achievement. The “Phase One” schools included George Washington Carver, Charles Drew, and Malcolm X (formerly Sir Francis Drake) elementary schools; MLK and Horace Mann Middle Schools; and Phillip & Sala Burton High School. MLK and Burton were new schools created by the Consent Decree, but the other four schools were reconstituted. It was significant for
MLK to be a “Phase One” school because it was part of a reform initiative to address historical education issues (e.g. segregation) in San Francisco.

After World War II, many African Americans moved from the southern regions of the United States to San Francisco for employment and housing opportunities (In Motion: The African American Migration Experience, 2006). During this time, the Civil Rights movement was taking place, resulting in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Being that desegregation was considered synonymous with equal opportunity, African Americans highly desired the diversity and multiculturalism within the San Francisco public schools.

However in 1978, the San Francisco NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) sued the San Francisco Unified School District alleging racial discrimination in its public schools (San Francisco NAACP v. SFUSD et al, No. C-78 1445 WHA). During the lawsuit, the school district agreed that there was existing segregation and that significant numbers of African American students were not succeeding in schools throughout the district. The majority of these schools consisted of high percentages of African American students from Bayview/Hunters Point district areas (SFUSD, Special Plan for Bayview/Hunters Point Schools, 1983).

Consequently in 1983, the court issued the Consent Decree and ordered the SFUSD to desegregate its schools, “A major goal . . . shall be to eliminate racial and ethnic segregation or identifiability in an SFUSD school...” (SFGov.org, Consent Decree SFUSD, 2006, p. 5). The Decree stated that, "No school shall have fewer than four racial/ethnic groups" and "that no racial/ethnic group shall constitute more than 45 percent of the student enrollment of any regular school" (pp. 3-4). The Decree identified
the nine racial/ethnic groups, as follows: Spanish surname; African American, American Indian; Chinese; Filipino; Japanese; Korean; other non-White; and other White.

According to the court document the ultimate purpose of the Consent Decree was to promote academic excellence:

39. The parties agree that the overall goal of this Consent Decree will require continued efforts to achieve academic excellence throughout the SFUSD. The SFUSD shall evaluate student academic progress for... determining the curricula... most responsible for any improved test scores and learning... [and] are available to students of all racial/ethnic groups. The SFUSD shall adopt any additional curricula and programs necessary to promote equal educational opportunity (p. 5).

While there was much focus on the achievement gap and efforts to promote school accountability, in 1994 Brian Ho and other Asian students filed a lawsuit against SFUSD. The lawsuit alleged that the implementations of specific provisions within the Consent Decree constituted racial discrimination, a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Ho v. SFUSD, Case No. C-94-2418-WHO, 1999). In response Judge Orrick decided to eliminate the racial caps of the Consent Decree and end all provisions of the Decree by 2002. This settlement strongly affected resources and opportunities for African American students in the district (SFGov.org, 2006).

Unfortunately during 1999-2000, the removal of race-based priorities resulted in resegregation of certain schools throughout SFUSD. It should be noted that several schools in the Bayview/Hunter’s Point area that consisted of large populations of African American students, were considered low-performing schools (SFGov.org, 2006).

Although the SFUSD continues to struggle with the widening of the achievement gap between African Americans and other student groups, there are surviving initiatives such as the Young Scholars Program, Students & Teachers Achieving Results (STAR) Schools and the Secondary School Redesign Initiative (SSRI) school programs, and the
Dream Schools that aim to increase student academic achievement, particularly African American students. For example, in 2004 Superintendent Arlene Ackerman developed the Dream Schools, which are based on the Lorraine Monroe model successfully implemented at several schools in Harlem, New York. Dream Schools are expected to provide a more structured system for low-performing schools and better opportunities in improvement for low-performing students. Particularly, these targeted schools are located in the Bayview/ Hunter’s Point area where large populations of African Americans reside. The concept of the Dream Schools is to build relationships between the schools and their communities in addition to obtaining loyal teachers who would take an oath to maintain the Lorraine Monroe Model (Monroe, 2006). However, if schools did not meet the expectations, then a reconstitution of those schools would come into effect, a process similar to that of the original Consent Decree which involved MLK.

The Achievement Gap at MLK

Although the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy has mandated all schools to close the achievement gap, like many schools and educational programs across the nation, MLK is struggling to address the issue. See Table 4. The Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) chart, which includes Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs), indicates which subgroups scored “At or Above Proficient” in English-Languages Arts and Mathematics during 2006.
Table 4.
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Academic Middle School
2006 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Percent Proficient - Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs)</th>
<th>Mathematics Target 26.5%</th>
<th>Met all percent proficient rate criteria?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Valid Scores</td>
<td>Number At or Above Proficient</td>
<td>Percent At or Above Proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schoolwide</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American or Black (not of Hispanic origin)</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native Asian</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>57.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (not of Hispanic origin)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomically Disadvantaged English Learners Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>232</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>79</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Academic Performance Index - Additional Indicator for AYP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2005 API Base</th>
<th>2006 API Growth</th>
<th>2005-06 Growth</th>
<th>Met 2006 API Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>695</td>
<td>725</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2006 API Criteria for meeting federal AYP: A minimum “2006 API Growth” score of 590 OR “2004-05 API Growth” of at least one point.

Source: California Department of Education, 2006 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Report

Although, MLK school-wide has met the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Criteria for 2006, African American students did not meet the AYP criteria of scoring “At or Above Proficient” in English-Languages Arts with 17.6% and in Mathematics with 9.8%. With comparison to Asian students scoring “At or Above Proficient” in English-Languages Arts with 57.1% and in Mathematics with 67.7%, there evidently is an achievement gap at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Academic Middle School.

Unfortunately, this has been a recurring trend for MLK where progress to close the achievement gap has been ineffective, resulting in slow progress. Based on the SFUSD 2004 Academic Plan for Student Achievement at MLK (MLK Academic Plan,
SFUSD, 2004), the district provided AYP data conclusions and corrective actions for MLK that are still currently relevant,

Conclusions indicate improving API scores, including each student subgroups. [However] the AYP shows that African American students... did not meet required proficiency goals in language arts and mathematics... MLK needs to implement effective intervention programs to insure that this achievement gap is remedied. Improved curriculum pacing and more consistent use of selected instructional strategies are also needed (MLK Academic Plan, SFUSD, 2004,p.5).

Research Participants

Ten 7th grade African American students from my 2006-2007 language arts class list, who represented four different levels of academic performance indication, participated in this study. Two to three students (both female and male) from each performance indication (i.e., “Below Basic,” “Basic,” and “Advanced”) participated.

According to the California Standards Tests (CSTs): Percent of Students Who Scored at or above the Proficient Performance Level, California uses five performance levels to report student achievement on the CSTs:

- Advanced performance is a scaled score of $\geq 394$
- Proficient performance is a scaled score of 350-393
- Basic performance is a scaled score of 300-349
- Below Basic performance is a scaled score of 268-299
- Far Below Basic performance is a scaled score of $\leq 267$

Selecting students from a wide range of performance levels provided multiple perspectives on how spirit (i.e., motivation or excitement) affects the learning process and insight on the effectiveness of my instruction to meet educational standards.
Data Collection

For this study, all of my students (about 120) received a standards-based curriculum so that the 10 student-participants would not lose any instructional time. I analyzed only the 10 participants’ responses for the purpose of this study. The process of data collection took about five months during the 2006-2007 schoolyear and occurred in three phases.

The first phase of three months included daily student-teacher interactions. During this phase, I identified 10 students based on their academic performance and willingness to participate in the study.

The second phase of two months included audio-recorded dialogues with the 10 participants that were transcribed, analyzed, referred back to the participants for discussion, and interpreted. During this phase, students were to meet and dialogue for two 50-minute sessions in my classroom. These meetings allowed me to introduce the study and its expectations, and synthesize participants’ responses.

The third phase of one month included an audiovisual project using Microsoft iMovie for participants to present their views on what motivates them to achieve academically. During this phase students wrote about an exciting learning experience in their life and produced the story into an iMovie project. They met for three 25-minute sessions held during lunchtime in the computer lab to work on their iMovies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Teaching Activities</th>
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<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Instruction begins</td>
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<td>2006</td>
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<td>Multicultural Connection (novels)</td>
<td>Interactions</td>
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<td>Art of War (Ancient Asian)</td>
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<td>1st Dialogue</td>
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<td>Transcribe &amp; Analyze</td>
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<td>Spirit of Learning iMovie Projects</td>
<td>Active Research</td>
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<td>May</td>
<td>Transcribe &amp; Analyze</td>
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**Questions to Guide the Initial Dialogues**

The questions I asked to guide initial dialogue are as follows:

1. **How do students define the “spirit” (i.e., motivation or excitement) to learn?**
   a. Do you look forward to going to any of your classes? Which classes?
   b. What do you like about those class(es)?
   c. Are there times when you are really excited about learning something?
   d. How do you describe that feeling?
   e. Do you think that feeling has to do with your spirit?
   f. How do you define the “spirit” (i.e., motivation or excitement) to learn?

2. **How do students perceive teachers utilizing “spirit” (i.e., motivation or excitement) in their teaching?**
   a. What are some ways your teachers make lessons exciting?
   b. Do you think your teachers are excited about teaching you?
   c. Do you think there is any importance to what you are learning?
   d. How do those lessons relate to what is happening in your life?
   e. Would you like to learn about your culture and heritage as part of the current school curriculum? Why?
   f. What makes it so interesting to learn about it?
   g. What else would you like to learn more about in school? Why?
3. How does a student’s “spirit” (i.e., motivation or excitement) encourage him or her to learn and be successful?
   a) Do you feel that others have a high expectation of you to succeed?
   b) Do you have high expectations for yourself?
   c) How do you define success?
   d) How do you describe a successful student?

4. How do students assess their academic achievement? What suggestions do they have for improvement?
   a. How well do you think you perform in school academically?
   b. Do you think you perform at your highest level or potential?
   c. What or who influences you to do well?
   d. What suggestions do you have for improvement?

Data Analysis

I used the participatory research method to examine the research topic and guide dialogues with participants. The procedures I used to process data were analyzing and interpreting responses from dialogues and the audiovisual project. The participants and I identified the generative themes within the data results to make connections with educational theories and suggestions for improvement.

To analyze dialogues, I used a dialogic retrospective method. Charles Kieffer (1981) writes about the “dialogic retrospective” method as consisting of five separate but cohesive parts to comprehending participants’ responses: 1) Recruiting participants and developing entry into the community; 2) Collecting data and dialogic interviews; 3) Analysis of data... Transcription of recorded dialogues into text and discussions of that text with participants, leading to the search for generative themes; 4) Reflecting on the emancipatory nature of the dialogues with the participants; and 5) Constructing meaning through an integrative analysis (p. 14). Kieffer states, “…understandings are constructed as tentative interpretations through the research process and are consistently referred back to the participants for responses and refinement” (p. 14). To analyze journal reflections, I
examined the texts to identify generative themes and made connections with transcriptions from dialogues, and again, constructed meaning through an integrative analysis.

The audiovisual projects, or iMovies, documented the voices of participants as they shared their perspectives and experiences about their learning processes. These projects provided authentic data in which the participants themselves were actively involved in all phases of the research process. Participants identified the problems they faced in education, reflected on their experiences as students, analyzed effective strategies to encourage academic achievement, and made recommendations for action. Ultimately, these iMovie projects documented participants’ insights on effective instructional practices.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

I had the approval of both the San Francisco Unified School District as well as the University of San Francisco Human Subjects approval in December 2006, to conduct the research study. While initial anticipation that some questions may have made participants feel uncomfortable, participants were free to decline to answer any questions they deemed necessary or discontinue their participation in the study at any time. As I projected there were no known risks or discomfort associated with this study.

Although participation in research may mean a loss of confidentiality, study records were kept as confidential as possible. No individual identities were used in any reports or publications resulting from this study, instead I used pseudonyms to protect student-participants’ identities. Study information was coded and kept in locked files at all times. Only I, the teacher-researcher, had access to the files. Once the research was completed, all records were destroyed.
There was no direct benefit for participating in this study; however, the perceived benefit was that participants documented their voices as they shared their perspectives and experiences about their learning processes. Participants were actively involved in a research study that focused on their suggestions for effective instructional practices. As a result, teaching strategies that may encourage academic achievement among African American students were identified to close the achievement gap.

While there was no cost to participants nor any reimbursements as a result of taking part in this study, participants were given a copy of their iMovie projects which they could show to parents and others as they wished. However, these iMovie projects were not confidential because many participants could show their iMovie projects to other students or to researchers. Since students included photos of themselves in their iMovie projects, parental approval was mandated. Once the research was completed, all records were destroyed.

Background of the Researcher

As a teacher witnessing factors that widen the achievement gap and seeing African American students falling victim to outside negative influences, I feel an obligation to address these educational issues. Being that I am an African American woman who is a product of San Francisco schools (from preschool to post-graduate), I am familiar with the challenges African American students face today.

As a life-long learner, I have always been blessed with positive people in my life who have given me guidance and encouragement as a way to nurture my “spirit” in achieving academic excellence. However, being born and raised in the city of San Francisco has also exposed me to many social ills that have challenged my drive to achieve. Yet through my cultural heritage and spirituality, I have continued to endure.
Due to the principles and values that were instilled in me as a child, I have developed a purpose to excel. Within the micro-system of my family while I was growing up, there was always a high expectation for me to achieve. Being that I am the eldest child, I had to help raise my baby brother and sister while my mother went back to finish school for her degree and my father worked the night shift. As a result, I have developed a pressure to highly achieve and a sense of responsibility for others’ well being. This is one reason why I chose to be an educator. Therefore, it is the spirit through connectedness that has inspired me to achieve.

Although some may consider me bi-cultural, both African American and Filipino, I identify as African or African American because of my cultural experiences and socialization. Although my father migrated from the Philippines, he was part of the Negrito from Cebu. These people have African features and are considered the indigenous people of that particular Pacific region. My mother is from Akron, Ohio, where the racial population is predominately White with a large population of African Americans. During the 1970s, my parents met in San Francisco and vowed to raise their children with cultural pride. Being that my father identified himself as Afro-Filipino and my mother as Black, I was socialized into the heritage of the African American community. As an African American woman, I have been taught that culture, spirituality, and resiliency are important values that are necessary for survival in this country.

However, just as social issues have plagued the African American community, they have affected my family. After the passing of my father several years ago my mother was left to support the family alone. Now my brother is in jail fighting for freedom against a crime he did not commit, and several of my family members suffer
from substance abuse and street violence. Yet what has sustained me to keep moving forward academically and strive for excellence is spirituality. It is the African centered praxis of connectedness and living with a purpose that has inspired me to achieve. Just as those who came before me struggled and fought for the opportunities I possess today, I must work to resolve issues and open doors for those of tomorrow. Through this self-actualization derived my dissertation topic.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, the researcher summarizes the background of each participant to provide a better understanding for the findings and interpretations of the data from the participatory dialogues and iMovie projects. Every participant shares his or her perspective about learning, experiences in school, and suggestions for meeting the needs of African American students. Finally, this chapter interprets the meaning of participants’ responses in regards to whether public schools are nurturing the African spirit in African American students to learn and achieve academic excellence.

Profiles of Participants

In the following profiles of participants, pseudonyms were used to protect student-participants’ identities:

The first participant, Dedra, is 13 years old and hopes to one day be a lawyer. She is raised in a single-parent home and lives with her mother and 5 year-old brother. Although Dedra was born when her mother was only 16, she has been afforded a stable home due to her grandmother owning several properties in the Bayview/Hunter’s Point area. Dedra has been tracked as a High Potential student within the SFUSD school system, has scored at basic level in Reading/Language Arts on the California Standards Test (CST), and maintains 2.50 grade point average (GPA). Yet Dedra has a strong, frank personality that usually clashes with certain teachers, often misses or is tardy to her classes, and has earned three unsatisfactory (U) citizenship marks, one F and two D grades for the spring semester.

The second participant, Jordan, is 13 years old and hopes to be seen as a positive person in society one day. He lives with his mother, step-father, and nine other siblings
in the housing projects of Hunter’s Point. Jordan is the middle child with several responsibilities and often has to take care of his younger siblings and a nephew. His mother has suffered from two heart attacks within the last year and their home has been shot up in recent years. Jordan misses school often, usually attends only his morning classes because he cuts his afternoon classes, and sometimes falls asleep due to restless nights. He has been in multiple fights throughout the school year and has accumulated several referrals to the counseling office for discipline issues. Jordan scored Below Basic level on the CST, maintains a 0.83 GPA, and has earned three Us, three Fs and one D during the spring semester.

The third participant, Tasha, is 12 years old and plans to be a therapist one day. She lives with her father and mother who had her at 17 years old, a younger brother, and a supportive grandmother. She acknowledges her Native American heritage but knows very little information about her ancestry and loves to read urban novels. Although she is an avid reader, Tasha scored Far Below Basic in English/Language Arts on the CST, and has maintained a 1.33 GPA. Based on spring semester grades, Tasha earned two Us and three Fs in her classes.

The fourth participant, Darren, is 12 years old and plans to be an engineer in the future. He is one of five children through his father’s side. He lives with his father, step-mother, and younger brother. His biological mother was previously addicted to drugs, he has an older sister who dropped out of school, an older brother who is a preacher, and an elder brother is currently in prison. Fortunately, Darren’s parents actively monitor his academic performance by visiting the school consistently. Darren scored Basic level on the CST and earned no Us, Fs, nor Ds during the spring semester.
The fifth participant, Donovan, is 13 years old and hopes to be a graphic illustrator one day. He lives with his father and step-mother, but his biological mother is very involved in his upbringing. His parents actively monitor his academic performance by visiting the school often to meet with his teachers. Donovan scored Basic level on the CST for English/Language Arts and earned no Us, Fs, nor Ds during the spring semester.

The sixth participant, Shauna, is 12 years old and wants to go to college to get a high-paying job one day. She lives in a single-parent home with her mother and is the only child but her father’s second child. Shauna enjoys R&B, Hip Hop, and alternative music and is knowledgeable of pop culture. She scored Far Below Basic on the CST, maintains a 1.17 GPA, and earned one U, two Fs and two Ds during the spring semester.

The seventh participant, Renee, is 12 years old and plans to attend the University of Hawaii and be a singer. She lives with her mother, father, and older brother who will attend Morehouse College in the fall. Renee is an avid reader and loves pop culture, particularly Disney teen celebrities and teen magazines. Suspiciously, a representative from the Special Education department wants to provide services for Renee even though she has no learning disabilities or need to receive services. Recently, the special education representative, held a meeting with Renee’s mother, teachers, several social workers, the school psychologist, the vice principal, and counselor to discuss her behavior and academic performance. The meeting’s outcome was that Renee did not qualify to receive special education services and that she performed well in certain classes where she felt most comfortable. Renee scored Basic on the CST for English/Language Arts and maintains a 2.00 GPA. She earned one U, one F, and two D grades for the spring semester.
The eighth participant, Keisha, is 12 years old and is a reserved person. She lives in a single-parent home with her father and younger brother. Keisha’s mother is not a part of the family structure and has little communication with her. Keisha acknowledges her Italian heritage but has no knowledge of the culture; therefore she identifies primarily as African American. She scored Basic level on the CST and received no Us, Fs, or Ds this spring.

The ninth participant, Maceo, is 12 years old and is an insightful young man. He lives with his mother and has three adult siblings. Unfortunately, his father was killed in a car accident less than a year ago, which has had a profound effect on Maceo and his family. Maceo’s mother visits the school to monitor his academic progress almost everyday. Although Maceo is labeled and tracked as a GATE student through the school district, he receives special education services. The school’s counseling department believes that Maceo needs academic and emotional support because he has experienced trauma that may have affected his learning abilities and performance. Maceo scored Below Basic level on the CST, maintains a 1.50 GPA, and earned one U, one F, and one D during the spring semester.

The tenth participant, Justin, is 12 years old and is popular among his peers. Tragically, his father was murdered a few years ago leaving him with his mother and younger sibling. Although Justin is tracked as a GATE student and scored Advanced on the CST, the school administration forced his mother to transfer him out of the district because his mother resides in Oakland even though she works in San Francisco. Justin maintained a 2.00 GPA and earned one U and one D grade for the spring semester.
See Table 5. Portrait of Participants At a Glance provides a thorough description of participants by listing their age, performance levels on the 2006 STAR assessment, grade point averages, citizenship marks during the spring semester, and indications of academic achievement tracked by the SFUSD.

Table 5. Portrait of Participants At a Glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>STAR</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>BEHAVIOR</th>
<th>COMMENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>DEDRA</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>3-U/1-F/2-D</td>
<td>High Potential</td>
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<tr>
<td>JORDAN</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>0.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>TASHA</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Far Below Basic</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>2-U/3-F/0-D</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARREN</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No U/F/D</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DONOVAN</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No U/F/D</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHAUNA</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Far Below Basic</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1-U/2-F/2-D</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RENEE</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1-U/1-F/2-D</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEISHA</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No U/F/D</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACEO</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1-U/1-F/1-D</td>
<td>GATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUSTIN</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1-U/0-F/1-D</td>
<td>GATE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students representing a range of performance indicators on standardized tests (i.e., far below basic, below basic, basic, proficient, advanced) were invited to participate, but no participant who performed at proficient level participated.

Findings and Interpretation

The findings and interpretation of the data in this study are organized according to the four research questions presented in Chapter I and the iMovie projects. The research questions guided the data collection from the participatory dialogues and the iMovie projects, and generative themes surfaced from the interpretations of the findings. The generative themes are correlated with recommendations and are presented in Chapter V.
**Research Question 1: How do students define the “spirit” (i.e., motivation or excitement) to learn?**

To ignite a dialogue about the African spirit, I first had to acknowledge whether participants even knew what spirit meant, their perceptions of spirituality, and how they nurtured their spirits. Once participants shared their perspectives, I asked them what they thought moved African Americans of the past to struggle and fight for the educational opportunities of African American students today, and whether the belief that education is freedom still exists (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). This allowed participants to reference what may have inspired African Americans of the past and what may be missing in present-day for African American students. The dialogues then transitioned into whether African American students are currently taking advantage of the educational opportunities provided for them.

**Defining Spirit**

All the participants with the exception of one were readily able to define “spirit.” Six of the participants believed that spirit is a feeling such as happiness or excitement. One participant, Tasha, felt that it had to do with one’s personality, and three participants identified spirit as something that comes from within. One participant, Dedra, enjoyed the company of others to lift her spirit while three participants chose activities like drawing, writing fictional stories and dancing. Half of the participants felt that being alone to think helped to nurture their spirits because they often had too much on their minds of what was happening at school, home and on the streets of their neighborhoods.

Jordan expressed that in trying to concentrate in the classroom, he often worries about his life and his family’s well-being, aware that his worrying is interfering with his studies. When I asked him what could he do to stay focused in class, he replied, “Quit
worrying about things... I can worry about them when I come home but when I’m in school I should just focus on my work” (Gibson, p. 121). When I asked Jordan what he does to help himself spiritually to cope with the stress of worrying, he stated,

...[I] pray and do all that, that’s what I be trying to do like every night [before] I go to bed, I pray that I hope to live the next day because you don’t know what’s going to happen like the next morning when [I] wake up, there’s a shooting and I’m out the house and my mom don’t know where I am...”(Gibson, p. 121).

When I asked Keisha about her performance in school and whether she tries her best, she shared that, “I try... but sometimes I just be having stuff on my mind, so” (Gibson, p. 125). It was interesting to me how many participants would respond that they were often consumed with outside influences that affected their thinking process in school. When I asked Keisha to share whether those thoughts she spoke about had to do with school, home, streets, or something else, she stated, “It’s all of that... cause it’s like... to get home... a lot of people be shooting where I live at or whatever and like... it’s not cool to be on the streets no more” (Gibson, p. 125).

Often the participants had expressed the hardships of living in communities where violence was prevalent and affected their families either directly or indirectly. Although not all the participants lived in violent neighborhoods, notably that more than half of them did. Those participants who didn’t still have family members who were victims of violence. This allowed me to recognize the trauma that some African American students experience and how that affects their learning development as well as distracts in a classroom setting.

To guide the dialogue further, I asked the participants to compare the hardships of the past to the present and whether that same spirit which inspired African Americans of the past to seek “education as freedom and freedom as education (Perry, Steele &
Hilliard, 2003) still existed today. The majority of participants said no, the belief that education is freedom does not exist among African American students. Several of the participants stated that since they are able to have access to public places, schooling is just something you have to do. Only a few participants acknowledged that getting an education affords them the opportunity to get jobs in the future but nothing further.

When I asked specifically whether students today take advantage of the opportunities provided for them, this is what some participants had to say,

Researcher: Since there were so many African Americans from the past who struggled but continued to move forward despite the difficulties such as people disrespecting them, calling them out of their names, being possibly jailed or even killed, do you think that African American students of today take advantage of the opportunities that they fought for back then?

Shauna: Mm. Yes, some of them.

Researcher: Why do you say some?

Shauna: Because some just don’t care, they don’t appreciate what our African American people did back then... they just don’t care, some of them (Gibson, p. 158)

Maceo believed that the reason his peers view education differently than those of the past is because African Americans students are not conscious of their history. He stated,

Well, I think that they (African American students) didn’t really take a good glimpse in the past and try to really think about what their Ancestors really fought for to really understand... I think they really need to have more African American activities here (at school) so that they could really want to fight for their education, if they don’t want to fight for it... well no matter how much you say no or no matter how much you want to deny it, you still have to have an education (Gibson, p. 138).

Tasha expressed a similar view that African American students today may not care about the importance of receiving an education because there is nothing else to fight for and no purpose for them to do well in school. She stated,
Because now no one cares. It’s really like no one cares. They feel like we’re free enough so we might as well do what we want to do... because like back in the day people couldn’t ride the bus and now that people can ride whatever they want to and it’s barely racism like around, well [that’s] what they think... now everyone feels like, “Okay, well I feel free. Why not just do what I want to do? (Gibson, 172).

It seems that since there has been such an emphasis on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s being taught in school and narrowed down to just having access to public schools, facilities, and water fountains, that some African American students don’t see the same value or need for an education as it was perceived in the past.

**Research Question 2: How do students perceive teachers utilizing “spirit” (i.e., motivation or excitement) in their teaching?**

The participants had strong opinions and similar experiences with teachers in school and in classroom settings. The majority of participants stated that teachers and administrators often treated them differently based on their race and culture, and that the classroom was often an unsafe place to learn. Additionally, participants expressed that the classroom curriculum in several classes was not relevant, exciting, nor engaging.

**Unsafe Learning Environment**

Participants stated that the classroom environment was often hostile due to teachers kicking certain students out as soon as they walked in the door. Teachers would suspend students from particular classes over several days and write multiple referrals to document students’ behaviors for minor offenses like not having a pencil, wearing the half of the uniform, or chewing gum. The participants expressed that certain teachers’ behaviors communicated to them that teachers did not like them nor cared whether they received an education or not.
When I asked Darren whether he felt safe in the classroom to ask questions, seek help, communicate with his teachers, and feels comfortable being a part of the classroom community, he stated, “...some of the teachers I don’t feel safe with because of things that they say and I guess I don’t like those teachers by the way that they treat me (Gibson, p. 73). When I asked Keisha the same question she responded, “Sometimes I need some support from the teachers, but they don’t say nothing. Because some of the teachers make us feel that like um, they make us scared of them so that we don’t open up to them, that’s the teachers I don’t like (Gibson, p. 134). Shauna felt the same way about how some teachers don’t create a safe learning environment and how that directly affected her learning experience.

...It’s like the attitude, like the vibe in the classroom like, “Oh, I don’t want to go in.” That’s all I be thinking about. I always be thinking about raising my hand, I know the answer but I just be sitting there. Nobody raises their hand ever then I just be sitting there looking at the clock waiting for the time to change (Gibson, p. 86).

Tasha also expressed how a hostile classroom environment hindered her from wanting to participate in class and complete her assignments,

Like I’ve even tried to say like I’m going to do my work, I’m going to do as best as I can and then when I ask for help, they do something to bring me down to say I don’t even care no more... But most of time I do try, I try to prove them wrong. It’s hard (Gibson, p. 174).

What is interesting to me was how the participants felt that some of their teachers did not care about their learning and how the students themselves were able to read those teachers’ body language, facial expressions, and energy (spirit). Also, it was interesting that since the participants did not feel that the teachers who were creating unsafe learning environments cared about them, that they would completely shut down and not perform
well in class to just simply please those teachers, regardless if it really only affected their own educational experience. Donovan shared his perspective,

...it’s just that some teachers maybe at school to get he money or whatever. Like some teachers are really here to teach us and like are there for us. And some are like, “Oh they’re just kids, they don’t know no better. They ain’t going to learn.” And that ain’t right (Gibson, p. 99).

What is unfortunate is that every participant spoke about one particular teacher who was hostile, insensitive, and ineffective. She was teaching science under an emergency permit while taking courses for her credential. Since science teachers are in high demand, she has managed to teach at other middle schools but had been unsuccessful working with students. Students mentioned that everyday she kicked certain students out of class for minor offenses and other reasons like wearing body sprays for hygiene control after coming from P.E. class. Hopefully, this teacher will learn to create a safe learning environment for students so that her classroom management would be more effective, “Cause she doing stuff and she always has an attitude with people and stuff like that” (Gibson, p. 25). To protect students’ identity, I chose not to mention which participant said what.

“There are some people... like Ms. Gershwin’s class, I feel like they don’t care if I learn so why should I even try...” (Gibson, p.174).

I stay focused in your class, I stay focused in Mr. McCoy’s class, P.E., but Ms. Gershwin’s class, I kind of just like sometimes, you’ll just look around and you’ll be like cause she saying one thing and nobody knows what she’s talking about. Everybody’s just looking around for a minute. I’m paying attention to the board and I really do try to pay attention to the board but then I just fall asleep cause it’s just so boring. Then I’ll wake up and I see people still laying their heads down going to sleep and everything” (Gibson, p. 178).

“Ms. Gershwin... she’s... I don’t like her that much because she’s, she’s kind of like a racist teacher... she teaching us lessons how, how Black people get AIDS because... how we get AIDS of eating monkeys or having sex with monkeys” (Gibson, p. 11).
Unfortunately, this teacher continued to work at the school where multiple students and parents complained about her teaching style and lack of classroom management. Although students and parents held teacher conferences with this specific teacher, little was done to address the issue. Therefore, students continued to state that this teacher created an unsafe and hostile classroom environment.

**Discrimination**

Another perception that was common among participants was that teachers and administrators were targeting African American students for behavioral issues as compared to other student groups. Multiple participants felt that African American students were being treated differently in the classroom by not receiving the same recognition of achievement and progress as other students, and were being singled out and harshly penalized by school administration for minor offenses like not wearing the full uniform and being tardy to class. Participants felt that other students received preferential treatment and were usually ignored for their offenses, while African Americans were keenly noticed for everything teachers and administrators deemed was wrong and defiant behavior.

Shauna explicitly stated her observation of how African American students are treated unjustly in school, she said,

> Because most of the African American students on this campus are either going to juvenile or being suspended for nothing. And then I feel like if another race or culture do it, it doesn’t happen to them. They either get like a referral or get talked to, but they don’t get suspended or expelled (Gibson, p. 165).

Dedra had a similar observation as to how African American students were perceived differently than other student groups in school and how that affected African
American students perceptions of their own learning abilities. She shared her sentiments about being compared to others,

You know like, I’m not trying to be racist, you know like the Chinese people always get like good grades and stuff. Everybody trying to make it seem like only Chinese people can do that. Like if you really wanted to, you can do it (Gibson, p. 90).

Another common response among participants was that they wanted to be a part of the class and participate in the learning process, but their teachers were often concerned with drilling the same concepts repeatedly for the purpose of standardized testing, thus making the curriculum boring and disengaging. Tasha shared her perspective and basically sums up her peers feelings as, “Because I’m the type of person who wants to learn new things sometimes but like now my teachers... just don’t teach it to me and I’m like school is boring (Gibson, p. 52).

Overall, the participants wanted the classroom environment to be safe for them to ask questions, receive feedback, express their opinions, and have a sense of community. Therefore, teachers creating unsafe learning environments may experience difficulty with African American students behavior and classroom management. In my experience as a teacher, this particular topic of classroom management and discipline issues has been the most talked about topic in district and school site professional development workshops, staff meeting discussions, and in-services, in which African American students are always mentioned as repeated offenders.

Research Question 3: **How does a student’s “spirit” (i.e., motivation or excitement) encourage him or her to learn and be successful?**

The participants had similar beliefs about education and philosophy about success. All participants admitted that they were not performing at their highest potential
academically and that they could do better if they chose to. The phrases often repeated among participants were, “If I put my mind to it, I can do it” or “I can do better” (Gibson, 2007, pp. 32, 43, 49, 73, 109).

When I asked Dedra whether she tried to do well in school, she stated, “It’s like sometimes it seems like it’s not enough, so why even dare to try... Yeah. I’m like I’m just going to pass anyways, so it don’t matter (Gibson, pp. 84-85). What was interesting to me is that Dedra was tracked as a High Potential Student by the school district. She was highly capable of performing higher but she seemed to settle for just doing the bare minimal.

Jordan also admitted that he doesn’t perform at his best academically and that he is more concerned about outside influences. He shares, “For me... I don’t know, I really don’t know... I be clowning around in class but sometimes I be trying to put my mind in trying to do the work. But I’m like, I just be trying to think about stuff that’s in my head (Gibson, p. 118). Shauna also admitted that she was not doing her best and repeated the same feeling about her performance, “I can do better if I put my mind to it and stuff like that but... I’m not doing my best like should be doing...” (Gibson, p. 32).

Low Expectations

Another commonality among all participants was the perception that others had low expectations of African American students to succeed. Some participants felt that since teachers did not expect for them to do well in class, then they had no reason to even try and do their best in school.

Renee believed that African American students did not do well in school because others expected them to not do well. She argued that since her peers felt others perceived
them as incapable of succeeding, that African American students internalized those impressions resulting in self-doubt and low expectations of themselves. Renee stated that,

...so many African American students today aren’t doing that well in school and maybe it’s because of racism and maybe it’s just because um when people are used to like, they’re used to like people saying that they’re dumb or that they won’t succeed at all and like [feel], “Maybe I’m not that smart. Maybe I shouldn’t do well in school” (Gibson, p. 147).

Tasha shared her own experience and perception of her teachers’ low expectations for her to do well in school and points out how those feelings of self-doubt manifested in her own academic performance,

...they’re (teachers) thinking it all the time and I’m just like, “You know what, if you say I can’t pass then you’re probably right. I probably can’t pass.” I do think that sometimes because they say it all the time like, “I really know you can do this.” But I know in their brain they’re like, “She ain’t going to do this, why I am telling her that?” (Gibson, p. 180).

**Self-determination**

This belief transitioned into self-determination and participants defining success as accomplishing goals that they set for themselves without success being defined or having goals set by others. Some participants felt that they had nothing to prove to anyone else and that they knew they were smart, “As long as I know I’m smart, nobody got to say, ‘Dedra, you so smart’” (Gibson, p. 86).

I asked participants to reflect on African Americans of the past who were literally taunted and were told that they were genetically incapable but still felt the need to prove that they were intelligent. In response, Maceo passionately shared his sentiments about how some African American students felt they didn’t have to prove anything to anybody, and that they didn’t have to feel accepted by others like in the past.
Some don’t because they know that they’re smart. They don’t need nobody to tell them that they smart. If you are smart, you smart. To me I don’t think there is no such thing as dumb, because no matter how you put it everybody got something that they’re good at and they smart (Gibson, p. 145).

Based on John Ogbu’s (1986) belief that African American students may maintain low levels of achievement purposely to avoid "acting White" and to gain the approval of their peers, I asked participants whether they viewed being educated as trying to be White. All ten participants disagreed with the notion and were adamant about their philosophy that education was not based on one race but spans across all races and cultures. Maceo summed up participants’ beliefs and stated,

Of course not... White isn’t the only performance of education. Everybody has their own education. From African Americans, to Latinos, to Chinese, Filipinos, to any type of nationality, they all have their different ways of education. There’s no only White way of learning, there’s all different types of ways (Gibson, p. 144).

When I asked participants whether teachers should be held accountable for students’ failures because they might not have met students’ needs, two participants agreed that teachers were at fault, one participant felt it was solely the student’s fault, while the rest of the participants believed that both the teacher and student are accountable for academic success. Participants expressed that it takes a team effort with the teacher extending his or herself to go beyond teaching while the student takes responsibility for his or her own learning. Darren stated, “I think that maybe both should be held accountable for the learning... The teacher for not trying their hardest and the student also not trying their hardest” (Gibson, p. 78). Dedra responded, “Teachers should teach and help the child or student or whatever, and the students should also make the effort to do it” (Gibson, p. 93). To guide the discussion and solicit responses I specifically stated, “...in Ancient African traditions, it was always this belief that if a
student fails it’s the teacher’s fault and that the teacher should be held accountable because that teacher didn’t do everything in their power to help that student. Do you agree with that?” (Gibson, p. 105). Donovan responded,

Actually I would agree with that because like the same thing, kids are a reflection of their parents and if I’m getting taught everyday and my grades are bad, evidently I’m getting reflected on that teacher because she evidently he, she or her isn’t teaching me anything. I’m not understanding or comprehending, so I would think that’s their fault. And also my fault cause maybe I didn’t feel like learning or I don’t feel like doing something one day and don’t do nothing. It’s half and half sometimes (Gibson, p. 105).

Donovan expressed that although it takes a team effort for students to do well in school, that the teachers are more so responsible for teaching students how to be successful academically. Maceo shared a similar outlook about teachers taking a lead in students’ education but also admitted that students must take responsibility for their own learning,

It depends because some teachers may not support them well enough, they may not give them more feedback no, not, not only because of the teachers sometimes the students. The student must have the will to learn. They don’t have the will and they not going to learn (Gibson, p. 144).

Overall, participants unanimously admitted that their academic performance did not reflect their true academic abilities and that with self-discipline, self-determination, and their teachers’ encouragement they can do better and succeed academically.

**Research Question 4: How do students view their own academic achievement? What suggestions do they have for improvement?**

The participants had several suggestions specifically on how teachers could help students improve the learning process and what they truly wanted from their teachers. Since all of the participants mentioned that they receive emotional support from their families to be successful, they really just need teachers, with whom they spent most hours
of their day, to be equally encouraging. Since many of their families were busy with other concerns, only two participants received outside tutoring services while one participant’s family provided a college fund for her. The other participants’ families offered emotional support and high expectations but did not have the additional means to address their child’s academic needs. Therefore, much of the additional help had to come from teachers and so the participants suggested that teachers actively monitor their progress and provide step-by-step instruction. Renee clearly explained her suggestion as,

Because, okay. I think the teacher should try... not like if a student is not doing well and then he gets an F, and then the teacher just says, “Oh you got a F. You’re not doing well.” I think if I was the teacher I would try to help that student get his grades up and like say,” I want you to do this and your grade will go up higher. I want you to do all your missing work. I’ll help you, tutor you if you want, if you come in at lunch or maybe after school or before school. I’ll tutor you and the stuff that you’re missing and I’ll try my best to help you get a higher grade.” Cause if I were the teacher, my expectations would be to teach the standards that need to be learned, and to have them succeed, and have them all get good grades. And if they were failing I think it would be my responsibility like my fault because maybe I didn’t teach a lesson right or maybe I wasn’t doing my job of paying attention to them and I would think that it would be my fault (Gibson, pp. 153-154).

Engaging & Relevant Curriculum

Often participants expressed that they wanted the curriculum to be more engaging and exciting, and not primarily filled with rote-learning. Since nine out of ten participants shared that they were excited to learn, they expressed that they wanted more projects and hands-on learning so that it would allow them to discover new information while having fun. Overall, the participants had high expectations of their teachers to make the extra effort to incite students’ curiosity by making learning exciting, while developing meaningful relationships with them. Donovan suggested that middle schools should model after elementary schools’ classroom management and curriculum:
Yeah you should have [classes] like in elementary... [even though] middle school is more striciter, you should still have a curriculum but then at the same time have fun... And what I’m saying is certain teachers [I] have... just make it work, work, work to like not hear us and I would think that that is not right. You should want to hear your students talk and like make sure they understand (Gibson, p. 107).

Participants shared their experiences and provided insight on what they believed were significant learning moments. Each participant presented his or her thoughts about learning and how specific lessons fostered positive incidents. Following are participants’ specific suggestions for teachers in creating engaging and relevant curriculum.

iMovie Projects

The iMovie projects were student-produced multimedia narratives that allowed students to share autobiographical incidents in learning. Students were asked to write a story about a time when they were really excited about learning. They were to describe the lesson they had learned and reasons why they liked it. Students also had to describe their feelings while learning the lesson, the significance of what they learned, and their suggestions for how teachers can create similar learning experiences. Students wrote and digitized the stories, and incorporating them into the visual production of their iMovie projects. Following are interpretations of the findings from the iMovie projects. The generative themes, correlated with recommendations, are presented in Chapter V.

Three participants shared about outdoor lessons and being exposed to new experiences. Renee told a story about a lesson taught in the 6th grade and how she was nervous about going on a field trip to Alcatraz where it was initially considered sacred land but turned into a prison. Once she learned more about the Native American history of the island and experienced entering a prison cell, she was able to understand what people felt during a specific time in history. She also learned that before she thinks
something is going to be boring, she should take the chance to experience it first and should try new things to not miss out.

I learned that before I say something is boring, I should take the chance to experience it first. Now I can teach others to try new things because you might end up missing out on a good experience. Teachers should use different methods of teaching because some students might understand a lesson better when you teach it to them in a way they can relate to (Gibson, p. 183).

Dedra remembered a field trip to UCSF Hospital during the 5th grade. She told a story about her feelings about going to an actual hospital where dead bodies were preserved. She communicated that by having a medical assistant present actual body parts to explain a scientific concept helped to make sense of the lesson and encouraged excitement to learn more about it.

Shauna shared about an outdoor lesson in the 4th grade. She told a story about a field trip to the aquarium and how she was initially resistant to learning and experiencing something that was new to her. At first, she was not interested in animals but once she learned about them and went to an aquarium to actually see them, she developed the desire to learn more about animals and a clearer understanding of them. Just like Renee, she also learned that her resistance and previous judgments about learning new concepts were based on ignorance. Once she developed a clearer understanding about them, she felt confident in wanting to learn more.

Overall, the three participants, Renee, Donovan, and Dedra, felt that it was important to learn and be exposed to new outlooks by going on field trips so that students would be more engaged in learning while and gain memorable experiences. Participants suggested that teachers use different methods of teaching like exposing students to real-
life situations so that they would be able to understand and relate to the content of the lesson.

Another participant who learned to try new experiences within the classroom was Donovan, who remembered a science lesson taught in the 5th grade. He shared a story about a time when he learned about electronic Leggos and how to build a miniature robot. Since the project looked “weird,” he didn’t want to do it at first, but his teacher insisted that he participate and learn. Once he began working on the project, he became excited because he was amazed that his miniature robot that he and his partner actually created worked. He learned that a person should not prejudge something and resist learning something new, but rather try it first and experience it because it may be something that he or she would enjoy.

What I learned from this teaching experience was don’t diss things until you try it. You should also try new things for a chance. Also, sometimes new is better. What I can tell people from this experience is that have people have you do things for a reason, like me I found out after my teacher Ms. Ford made me do the electronics project I found to like electronics (Gibson, p. 183).

He also suggested that teachers create new and challenging lessons to encourage students to discover and try new experiences.

Two participants remembered a recent lesson on social and dining etiquette taught in the 7th grade. They shared their feelings about learning and experiencing something that was completely new to them. Tasha explained how she was curious and nervous, yet excited to learn about etiquette because she didn’t know much about it before. She felt good about learning something that she felt was valuable and useful to her future when she went to college and on to adulthood. “I had a real good time, that was a real fun experience to remember. I wish all the teachers taught us something like that to help us
in the future” (Gibson, p. 184). Since the lesson focused on real-life experiences, using kinesthetic activities to assess students of what they learned as oppose to a written exam, participants suggested that all teachers teach lessons like this so that students will see how it may benefit them in their future while making the lesson itself relevant and fun.

One participant, Jordan, remembered a presentation he had seen in the 6th grade. He told a story about what he felt when he attended the annual 6th grade assembly on puberty where a community theater group presented a play entitled, *Nightmare on Puberty Street*. He spoke about how the play was entertaining to him because the actors displayed similar emotions that he and other students were experiencing during puberty. He learned more about how his body changes as he gets older, and how to stay calm during that hormonal process. He felt confident in sharing this new information with his sibling because it was just a normal part of life that others needed to know. He suggested that teachers provide more assemblies like this so that students can learn more about themselves and make informed decisions as they mature. Therefore, the lesson was relevant, engaging, and entertaining.

I learned that when I finally go through puberty, I just have to stay calm. Now I can teach my little brother about puberty and how it’s just a normal part of life. I think that other teachers should provide more assemblies like this... (Gibson, p. 2).

Another participant, Maceo, remembered a science lesson in the 1st grade. He told a story about how he learned to be a responsible student. He was presented with a science lesson about sea animals in which he had to dissect a fish. At first he was very curious and excited about the experiment, but became distracted when his teacher briefly left the classroom. During that time he and his partner decided to play with the plastic knives for dissecting the fish, and he ended up cutting his finger. Fortunately, he did not get in trouble and was still able to participate in the science experiment. He learned that
when he is in an independent and unsupervised situation, that he should be responsible to make wise decisions concerning his behavior. “I learned that we had to be leaders not followers” (Gibson, p. 185). This story suggests that teachers encourage students to make wise decisions regarding their conduct and take responsibility for their own learning.

Overall, the participants shared their appreciation of teachers who made the extra effort to expose them to new experiences by making learning exciting and meaningful. Participants felt that it was important to learn, even if not anticipated to be fun, and that teachers should encourage students to discover new concepts. Participants suggested that teachers take students on more field trips so that they can be exposed to new outlooks, teach lesson using real-life experiences so that students be engaged in wanting to learn more, and be creative in developing a curriculum that fosters memorable experiences.

Unfortunately, Keisha and Darren’s iMovie projects were lost and destroyed during the editing process. Therefore, their input for the data collection was not included in the data analysis of the iMovies.

*Nurturing Relationships*

Basically, the participants had high expectations of their teachers to be more than just teachers, desiring a relationship which enables them to feel like their teachers are concerned about their future success. Donovan expresed how a relationship with a previous teacher helped him emotionally and spiritually, which ultimately resulting in his improved academic performance.

... I only got a problem with one teacher in this school and that’s just it. I know last year I didn’t even know no teachers and then Mr. Bryson was my buddy, he was my friend. He always helped me with any homework I had, like when I had
trouble at home I would come to him and he would tell me how to resort it out so like whenever I need help I just go to him. And like if teachers were more like that, more like I can talk to... them... [and] have conversations with them, I wouldn’t have no problems in school but it’s not like that (Gibson, pp. 107-108).

Darren believed that when his teachers made the extra effort to go beyond the curriculum to make it exciting and fun, that they were subconsciously encouraging him to do his best so that he would lift his spirit and be successful in his future.

...I guess they (teachers) are encouraging me to do things. I guess that’s giving me more spirit to keep trying, that way I don’t give up. Because in my family they always telling us not to give up... because you can’t really become something when you’re nothing (Gibson, p. 75).

Overall, participants repeatedly expressed the need for teachers’ encouragement as validation of their progress to succeed academically, and for relationships to help nurture their development as contributing citizens of society. No participant expressed that they did not want to learn. In fact, every single participant stated that they knew getting an education was important to their future. It’s just that their spirits (excitement or motivation) to learn have been tainted by external factors, causing them to feel discouraged and settle for not doing their best in school.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter summarizes and interprets the results of the participatory research study conducted with African American students. It focuses on how touching their African spirit through developing an engaging curriculum, creating a communal atmosphere, and nurturing teacher-student relationships may be a motivating factor in achieving academic excellence. The generative themes derived from the findings are presented and recommendations for practitioners are proposed. Finally, the researcher reflects on her use of participatory research in this study and on her own process of enlightenment.

Summary of Findings

Common feelings among African American students were the perception of others’ low expectations of them and the lack of feeling safe in the classroom environment. Therefore, others’ negative opinions about African Americans ultimately cause African American students to feel inadequate and not confident in themselves (Lee, 1992; Perry, 2003). And so, the participants expressed their need for encouragement, support, and meaningful relationships with teachers so that they would feel that their teachers indeed cared about their learning and academic success (Nobles & Mann, 1994). Specifically, six generative themes evolved from participants’ responses in the research: low expectations, unsafe learning environment, discrimination, nurturing relationships, engaging and relevant curricula, and self-determination.

Acknowledging whether participants would dialogue about the African spirit, participants were asked to define spirit, provide their perceptions on spirituality, share
how they nurtured their spirits, and give their perspectives on what they thought moved African Americans of the past and whether the belief that education is freedom still exists today (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). In nurturing the spirit, participants enjoyed the company of others, chose activities to do, and spent time alone to think. In comparing present perceptions to past ideas, some participants believed that some African American students today did not care about the importance of receiving an education.

In regards to specific themes, participants stated that teachers and administrators often treated them differently based on their race and culture and that the classroom was often an unsafe place to learn. Participants felt that the classroom curriculum in several classes was not relevant, exciting, nor engaging, and that this contributed to conflicts within the classroom. Participants believed that the classroom environment was often hostile due to teachers kicking certain students out, writing multiple referrals for minor offenses, and displaying dislikes for certain students.

Additionally, participants felt that teachers and administrators were targeting African American students for behavioral issues and treated them differently by not recognizing their achievements and progress like other students. Therefore, participants felt that success was accomplishing goals that they had set for themselves and could not be defined nor set by others. Participants believed that others had low expectations of African American students to succeed. Since teachers did not expect for them to do well in class, they had no reason to try and do their best in school. Several participants admitted that they were not performing to their full potential in school. However, participants had high expectations of their teachers to make the extra effort in creating engaging and exciting curricula, and provided suggestions through their iMovie projects.
Conclusions: Generative Themes

In this section, the researcher reviews topics that naturally surfaced during the course of the participatory dialogues and the iMovie projects. Generative themes derived from the dialogues reinforced the participatory nature of the study as having the African American students being the best source of knowledge in addressing and critically analyzing their own experiences and perspectives.

Six generative themes evolved from participants in the research:

- The perception of others’ low expectations of African American students
- The experience of an unsafe learning environment
- The system of discrimination as compared to other student groups
- The desire to develop nurturing relationships with teachers
- The need for relevancy, engagement and excitement in the curriculum
- The determination to define one’s own ideas about success.

Low Expectations

All participants felt that others, whether society or their teachers, had low expectations of African American students to succeed. They believed that since teachers did not expect for them to do well in class, they had no reason to do their best in school. In the research literature, Perry (2003) mentions how students begin to have low expectations of themselves because of the way society negatively perceives them. Since society views African Americans as underachievers, what is the point of doing well in school? Lee (1992) similarly argues that African American students enter school with the desire to do well, but learning about the negative experiences of African Americans in school ends up affecting their self-worth unless discussed with a critical perspective. Therefore, African American students may feel embarrassed or ashamed about society’s negative perceptions of African American people.
Researcher Claude Steele (Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003) mentions “stereotype threat” as a certain kind of danger when one is “viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (p. 111). Steele argues that negative stereotypes of African American students affect their perceptions of how society views them, resulting in the constant feeling of having to deal with such negative viewpoints.

...the threat posed by this group stereotype becomes a formidable predicament, one that could make it difficult for him to trust that he would be seen objectively and treated with good will in the setting. Such, then, is the hypothesized nature of stereotype threat- not an abstract threat, not necessarily a belief or expectation about oneself, but the concrete, real-time threat of being judged and treated poorly in settings where a negative stereotype about one’s group applies (p. 112).

According to Steele (2003), unlike internalized negative stereotypes that result from performance anxiety and low expectations of one’s self that become “self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 116), stereotype threat is external in the sense of an ever-present situation that threatens African American students to be viewed negatively. For example, some teachers may expect African American students to have poor classroom behavior, perform low academically, and not care about getting an education even before they (teachers) get to know them. In my study, the participants also felt that teachers had low expectations of them, validating this notion.

Steele (2003), along with researchers Steven Spencer and Diane Quinn (1999), found that stereotype threat depresses students’ academic performance; but once that threat is lifted, students’ performance improves dramatically. Therefore, African American students are sensitive to the way others view them in a classroom setting, which can ultimately affect their academic performance.
Unsafe Learning Environment

Many of the participants felt that some of their teachers did not care about their learning. Therefore they would completely shut down and not perform well in class to just simply please those teachers, regardless of how it affected their own educational experience. Nobles and Mann (1994) remind us that from an African-centered perspective, “Interdependence assumes that everything in the universe is connected... [and] inextricably interdependent upon and with one another” (p. 13). Therefore, teachers should be conscious of how they dictate rules, regulations, and the curriculum to students, and allow students to feel connected to what is being taught in the classroom. Perry (2003) states,

African-American students will achieve in school environments that have a leveling culture, a culture of achievement that extends to all of its members and a strong sense of group membership, where the expectation that everyone achieve is explicit and is regularly communicated in public and group settings (p.107).

Discrimination

Participants felt that some teachers discriminated against African American students by targeting them for penalties and disciplinary actions such as suspension and expulsion. The participants expressed that certain teachers’ behaviors communicated to them that teachers did not promote success for African American students.

Ogbu (1991) believes that the reasons African American students do not perform well in school has to do with their coping responses and perceptions of education itself:

The lower school performance of black children does not originate in the inadequacy of the black family environment, in the inadequacy of black parents as child-rearing agents, or in the autobiographies of black children. The problem originated in the involuntary incorporation of blacks into American society, in the subsequent subordination and discriminatory treatment of blacks and in the adaptive responses of blacks to their castelike status. All these resulted in a
differential school experience for blacks, which produces the lower school performance (p. 259).

Ogbu (1991) mentions the concept of the social mobility system in which a group theorizes a method of getting ahead in society. Within the African American community this concept teaches students that education correlates with the occupational structure of society and what works to get ahead (Ogbu, 1991). Therefore, African American students do not see the benefits of getting an education due to what their parents perceive and experience in the labor force as discrimination. According to Ogbu, since African American parents’ perceptions are that they “can not succeed or get ahead in areas controlled by whites” (p. 264) they teach their children that they are discriminated against, thus creating an “oppositional identity” (p. 267).

Ogbu (1991) goes on to state that African Americans believe that “culturally there is a white way and a black way” (p. 267), and when African American students are in a school setting that is controlled by Eurocentric values, then “the schools have caused blacks to develop a deep distrust for white people and the institutions they control” (p. 267). Therefore, African American students hinder themselves from performing well academically based on their own perceptions.

However, Ogbu (1991) admits that within-school treatment, some schools in “subtle ways” (p. 269) do contribute to the lower performance of African American students through low teacher expectations and attitudes, misdiagnosis of academic problems, testing, tracking, and biased classroom materials and textbooks. As a result, African American students are not equipped for the job market and do not achieve academically. African American students then develop an attitude that in order to succeed, they must adapt a White way of doing things for the purpose of social mobility.
In reaction, students who resist the theory of acting White to succeed academically (Ogbu, 1986) develop “hustling strategies” (Ogbu, 1991, p. 281) such as doing just enough to get by and pass, finding ways to manipulate the teacher through disruptive classroom behavior, and creating the idea that hustling itself is an alternative to schooling.

Ogbu (1991) argues that since African American families have such a distrust for the school system, African American parents teach their children to not accept or follow the “school rules of behavior made by whites” (p. 265) thus the rules of academic achievement. To that extent, Ogbu roots the low academic performance of African American students on their own perceptions and coping responses, and identifies academic achievement as an Eurocentric behavior.

For their part, blacks contributed to the problem of lower school performance by the nature of their coping responses. They developed a folk theory of success in which school credentials play an ambiguous role, survival strategies compete with or detract from schooling, a cultural frame of reference and identity system make difficult to cross cultural boundaries in school learning, and a deep distrust does not encourage school learning or following school norms (p. 283).

Perry (2003) critiques Ogbu (1991) by arguing that he does not truly comprehend the long history of African Americans fighting for the rights of receiving an education. In other words, Ogbu does not take into account the historical struggles for literacy and educational opportunities that were indeed the underlying factors of motivation for an oppressed people. Perry acknowledges that there has always been a desire for educational opportunities despite discrimination. The theories of education as freedom, racial uplift, citizenship, and leadership have “motivated African American students to commit themselves to academic excellence” (p. 63), thus contradicting Ogbu’s theory that African American students lack effort optimism.
According to some participants, teachers did not care if African American students did well in school, so they would do the bare-minimal just to get by and pass. Therefore, Ogbu’s (1991) theory of the coping response as hustling applies. However, participants also stated that if they felt that the teacher cared about their learning and well-being, they would make the effort to do well in their classes. Additionally, participants stated that education was valuable to them because they wanted to get good jobs to support their families. This notion supports Perry’s (2003) argument that there has always been a desire to achieve academically within the African American community despite any discriminatory conditions. Therefore, it is not a question of whether African American students want to achieve academically or how they perceive schooling. Instead it is a question of whether the conditions within the current school system discourage African American students from achieving by not nurturing their academic abilities to perform.

Nurturing Relationships

Participants shared that they wanted positive relationships with their teachers so that they would feel encouraged to do well in school. In traditional classroom environments, both teachers and students work independently without any collaboration with their peers or colleagues. However, Nobles and Mann (1994) argue that as part of the African-centered approach, all stakeholders (administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the community) work together to improve the quality of education.

...the performance outcome of cooperative effort will be greater than the sum total of individual effort. Children will become skilled in working together as they grow up experiencing collaboration in tasks and artistic cultural activities as the norm. ‘Two heads are better than one’ is understood and operationalized in every day activities (p. 17).
Therefore, meaningful relationships between students and teachers can foster a sense of community and collaboration in which African American students will feel encouraged to achieve academically.

**Engaging and Relevant Curriculum**

Participants expressed a desire to be included in the classroom community and to participate in the learning process. However, teachers were more often concerned with standardized testing, thus making the curriculum boring, disengaging, and culturally irrelevant. One participant stated, “...I’m the type of person who wants to learn new things sometimes but like now, my teachers... just don’t teach it to me and I’m like school is boring (Gibson, p. 52). Carruthers (1999) argues that,

Teaching about Africa must go further, beyond history and social science. When the engineering in books about construction projects of ancient Egypt and Kush is treated with the same respect as the Greek projects in engineering books; when the architectural styles and techniques of Timbuktu and Axum are afforded parity in the books of architecture; when Egyptian and Yoruba medicine are given a place of import in the history of science, we will be on the road to recovery (p. 70).

Researchers (Ani, 1994; Nobles & Mann, 1994; Goggins, 1998) agree that within the public school core curriculum, cultural relevancy is a missing factor. By factoring cultural relevance into the school curriculum, African American students may develop a stronger sense to learn in order to fulfill that sense of spiritual purpose and excitement. Also, Carol D. Lee, a professor at Northwestern University and one of the founders of the New Concept Development Center (NCDC) (1992), believes that linking content knowledge in core subject areas to the philosophical and social principles is a critical element of African-centered pedagogy.
Researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) argues that a critical culturally relevant pedagogy that supports high academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness encourages African American students to perform well. Being that public schools are based on mastering particular sets of knowledge such as the standards, most of the curriculum mainstream has nothing to do with students’ everyday experiences. Rather it is based solely on content knowledge assessment. Therefore, Ladson-Billings (2000) argues that culturally relevant instruction “challenges externally set curricular guides and mandates” (p. 190) because it begins with the idea that students come to the classroom with knowledge and that the teacher has the “responsibility to build the curriculum upon the students’ foundational knowledge” (p. 190).

For example, Ladson-Billings (2000) mentions a fourth grade teacher who assigned her students to interview family members and bring that story from home. Over the course of the school year, the teacher used the students’ family stories and interview questionnaires as part of the curriculum. So one day when a student recognized a word from his story that was assigned as part of that week’s spelling vocabulary, he was excited that he was able to put into context what was being taught in the class. Therefore, the teacher developed a curriculum that both met the standards as well as provided opportunities for meaningful instruction; this allowed students to capitalize on their own foundational knowledge and “expect academic excellence of themselves” (p. 190).

Ladson-Billings (2000) claims that incorporating cultural competence instruction into the curriculum allows African American students to acknowledge their individual and collective identities, thus making them “become better students academically” (p.
For example, Ladson-Billings mentions a teacher who used a student’s interest in rap music and acknowledged its link to poetry:

By making a bridge or scaffold from the cultural and popular forms that the students appreciated to a form that is more valued in the dominant society, the teacher was able to shoe students how what they knew was valuable and transferable. She was able to draw on the reservoir of knowledge that students possessed and extend their learning to the kinds of things that likely to be tested by standardized measures (p. 192).

Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (2000) argues that sociopolitical critique, which is relevant to Paulo Freire’s (1970) concept of “conscientization” or “critical consciousness,” allows students to take responsibility for their learning and “employ the ‘practice of freedom’ rather than the exploitation of others and their environment” (p. 192).

For example, the service-learning projects that I assign my students allow them to identify social issues affecting their community. Analyzing the historical, political, social, and economical aspects of problems, and then developing action plans to address the issues, serves to allow students to develop sociopolitical consciousness and leadership abilities that employ problem-solving skills. Therefore, just as Ladson-Billings (2000) argues, students take responsibility for their own learning since the curriculum is meaningful based on a cultural relevant pedagogy.

Participants responded that they felt that field trips and outdoor learning provided exposure to new outlooks and experiences, helping them to contextualize what was being taught to them. In addition, hands-on projects and kinesthetic learning allowed them to be engaged in the lessons by actually performing projects to help develop their skills and to assess their abilities to independently perform tasks. Finally, real-life lessons and their relevancy allowed participants to see the value in learning the information and therefore to develop the desire to learn more. All participants stated that they were initially
apprehensive about learning new information, but teachers’ persistence in exposing and engaging participants with relevant lessons encouraged them to become curious, intrigued and excited to learn more.

Self-determination

Participants were adamant about defining success as accomplishing goals that they set for themselves without success being defined or having goals set by others. Some participants felt that they determined what it was to be smart and successful, and that they don’t have to prove it to anyone else. “As long as I know I’m smart, nobody got to say, ‘Dedra, you so smart’” (Gibson, p. 86). According to Karenga (1989), the originator of the African American celebration Kwanzaa, the Nguzo Saba principles for promoting and supporting family and community relations includes the principle, Kujichagulia meaning self-determination. The principle emphasizes that self-determination is to define yourself for yourself without being defined by others.

In summary, participants felt that society had low expectations of African American students to succeed, which unfortunately transferred into the classroom environment where some teachers’ expressed hostility towards them. Participants felt that teachers who did not foster safe learning environments and had difficulty with classroom management, created hostile environments. Therefore, African American students often responded negatively towards those teachers who constantly reprimanded them for behavioral issues, thus making them perceive discrimination in being treated differently from other student groups. Accordingly, participants felt the need for positive examples of African Americans to be presented in the classroom curriculum so that others as well would recognize those positive images. Then African American students
themselves would feel encouraged and self-determined to accomplish academic goals.
Therefore, meaningful relationships with their teachers are necessary for nurturing the
students’ spirits to learn and achieve academic excellence.

Recommendations for Practitioners

In this section, the researcher describes a series of recommendations that
African American students themselves offered during the course of the
participatory dialogues and iMovie projects, and links them to effective strategies
that are commonly used in African-centered schools. These strategies also can be
implemented in public school settings.

Create Engaging & Relevant Curricula

Participants recommend that more projects and hands-on learning be a part of the
classroom curriculum and assessment. Since the majority of participants stated that they
were excited to learn, the best way to maintain that excitement is for teachers to create
new and challenging lessons to incite curiosity by making learning exciting. The
challenge for teachers in the public school system who teach African American students
is dealing with the time constraint of having to address standards and prepare for annual
standardized testing. This makes it difficult not to develop watered-down culturally
competent curricula (Ladson-Billings, 2000). In addition, teachers must be careful not to
just have “nice” classroom discussions using culturally relevant materials, but instead to
actually teach the content standards using such pedagogy. This effective strategy of
using culturally relevant pedagogy to make the curriculum engaging is possible, but
teachers must take into account the time and preparation of developing meaningful,
culturally relevant materials.
Improve Guided Instruction

Participants recommend that teachers provide tutoring for students who want additional help and that teachers actively monitor students’ improvement. Several of the participants expressed that they sometimes did not understand what was being taught and since many of them felt the classroom environment was unsafe, they did not feel comfortable to ask questions or seek help.

However, actively monitoring students’ improvement is possible if teachers are provided sufficient preparation periods and are compensated for the additional time needed to tutor students. Therefore, African American students attending public schools have ample opportunities to work with teachers as a team to encourage academic success.

Foster Nurturing Relationships

Participants want schools to foster relationships between students and teachers as a way to meet their need for encouragement and high expectations for success. Participants want to feel as though their teachers believe in them to succeed and are there to guide them through the learning process, even if it means going beyond the job of just teaching to the standards.

Carol D. Lee (1992) describes how teachers in the independent African-centered school, New Concept Development Center, are referred to as “Mama” or “Baba” (meaning mother and father in Kiswahili) followed by their first name as a way of connecting family to the school environment. With parents and students referring to teachers in this way, teachers act as co-parents in a sense.

NCDC teachers are required to assume responsibility for the character development and academic achievement of their students. They also strive to ensure that families become and remain supportive of their children’s physical, social, and moral development as well as their educational development. These
expected social relations are made clear to parents when they enroll their children in the school (p. 173).

The challenge that teachers of African American students in public schools face is the discontinuity of being able to establish nurturing relationships. In my experience as a teacher in a public school with a high turnover of teaching staff, I have witnessed the frustration African American students feel when they think they are going to get a specific teacher once they move to the next grade level, but then find that that teacher moved on to another school. Additionally, when the turnover of teachers averages about 10 new ones every school year, there is constant change that hinders the continuity of teachers being able to connect with students. So an effective strategy to foster nurturing relationships is for teachers to be conscious of African American students’ cultural perspectives and make the effort to demonstrate in their own way that they care for students (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

African-centered Solutions

One African-centered school that uses effective strategies to create engaging and relevant curricula is the Ile Omode School in Oakland, California. Ile Omode is an African-centered PreK-7th grade school that was established by members of the Wo'se Community Church in light of the Nguzo Saba principle, kujichagulia, meaning self-determination, and means "House of the Children" in the Yoruba language. Ile Omode formally began its educational program in 1986 as a licensed preschool then added grades kindergarten and first grades in September 1989. At that time, Ile Omode was recognized by the State of California as a private school and has been serving the African American community for over 15 years. Ile Omode was found on the Ancient teachings of MAAT
and Yoruba culture, and is committed to the social, political, and spiritual uplift of African American students.

Our vision is that our students become highly motivated and creative leaders who are both capable and committed to the betterment of our nation. We stress the development of our students' bodies, minds, souls, and consciousness. We develop our bodies by eating a proper diet and exercising daily. We develop our minds by acquiring knowledge and skills that are useful to our advancement. We develop our souls by developing our relationship with the Creator and with our people based on Maat (truth, justice, right-order, and reciprocity). We develop our consciousness by attaining self-awareness, identity, self-control, and discipline (Ile Omode, http://www.ileomode.org/, Accessed 9/27/07).

A teacher from Ile Omode (B.J., personal communication, September 27, 2007), shared effective strategies that work in the classroom as well as his thoughts about the advantages of African-centered schools creating engaging and relevant curricula as opposed to public schools. This teacher stated that because Ile Omode promotes African-centered pedagogy, the curriculum is geared to African American students. Much of how the lessons are taught, no matter the content, is from the perspective of African Americans. The teacher mentioned that this is an advantage for his school as opposed to public schools because usually in public schools, the diversity of students is wider. Therefore, teaching culturally relevant material takes great effort to make sure that all students are represented in the curriculum. Teaching content standards and connecting them to shared African American experiences allow him to go beyond the curriculum, thus making it exciting and engaging.

In my conversation with the teacher from Ile Omode about developing nurturing relationships, he noted that knowing his students’ strengths and weaknesses permitted him to tailor his classroom instruction to meet their academic needs. Since he averaged about 16 students in a class and had known 15 of them for over two years, he had the
advantage of managing their academic progress. Therefore, if a student had not
completed his or her homework, he had several opportunities to provide individualized
instruction and the relationship with parents to communicate his concerns.

Public schools encounter the limitations of having to address the standards at
specific times to keep pace in preparation for standardized testing, and larger class sizes
in which teachers have limited opportunities to provide individualized instruction. In
regards to public schools building nurturing relationships within the school’s community,
the teacher stated, “If the demographics of students is constantly changing in addition to
the high turn over of teaching staff, how can you really develop any relationship?” (B.J.,
personal communication, September 27, 2007). This teacher was able to develop
nurturing relationships because he lived in the same neighborhood as African American
students, only a few blocks away from the school. He knew the parents and even
coached the local football team. Therefore, he knew his students who were inclined to
feel that he cared about them.

The teacher from Ile Omode stated that teachers of African American students in
public schools had to demonstrate that they care. Since African American students come
from an African heritage that has based its educational system on connectedness (Nobles
& Goddard, 1990), many feel that the classroom experience is personal to them.
Therefore, African American students are sensitive to the way teachers interact with
them. This message is just like what participants in this study mentioned; they could
sense whether teachers cared about them or not. In African-centered schools, the
challenge is to teach students that sometimes education is not personal due to that fact
that the wider educational system in this society is based on Eurocentric values such as
individualism (Carruthers, 1999). Therefore, cultural conflicts in the public school classroom usually play out when teachers feel the need to just teach content standards and African American students feel the need to connect with them.

Recommendations for Further Research

Since many African American communities in urban cities are suffering from gentrification, poverty, violence, and drugs, the emphasis of teaching about the Civil Rights Movement and its accomplishments possibly does not seem valid to African American students today. Although African Americans are currently able to attend public schools they still seem to be re-segregated; able to go to public venues and places but are still stereotyped and sometimes harassed; and able to receive higher education but yet may not have the financial means to attend colleges and universities. Perhaps African American students feel that since society has such a low expectation of African Americans to be successful in school, they then settle for just getting by maintaining a “do what you got to do” (Gibson, p. 45) mentality and not perform at their highest level academically.

I recommend that further participatory research be based on asking African American students the following research questions:

1. Do you see the benefits and opportunities today that African Americans of the past fought for?

2. Do you think with the high percentage of African American males going to prison, the high percentage of African American students performing low and being suspended/expelled in school show that society for African Americans today is better or worse than in past struggles (slavery, lynching, segregation, etc.)?

3. Since several African American communities are disadvantaged in many metropolitan cities across the country, do you think African American students do not see any benefits of what was fought for in the past?
Additionally, I recommend that further research be conducted on the disproportionate number of African American males being placed in special education classes based on behavioral and disciplinary issues. Since the 1970s, African Americans were diagnosed as needing to be in separate classes due to not comprehending the regular curriculum (Ghiselli, 2007)). Since then the Differential Ability Scale has been used to determine whether African American students truly need to receive special education services. However, in many public schools today it seems that African American students are still being misdiagnosed and recommended for special education.

For example, two of the participants in this study were tested to receive special education services even though one participant is tracked as being a GATE student and the other score at Basic level on the CST and is an avid reader. Another participant who has experienced multiple traumatic experiences and not performing well in school (0.83 GPA; 3Us/3F/1D), did not qualify for special education services but rather social services.

The question is: How is the school distinguishing between who has learning disabilities and need additional services as opposed to those students who just need emotional and social support? Although there has been a link between post-traumatic stress and learning disabilities (Stringer, 2007; Perry, 1997), I recommend that research be conducted on finding alternative strategies to address student needs so that they may be mainstreamed in regular classes.

Researcher’s Final Reflection

In the process of conducting this study, I, the researcher, was evolving through the process of enlightenment and spiritual uplift while experiencing family
trauma, social injustice, pregnancy and childbirth. What was so powerful about this study was the spiritual validation that the experiences of my Ancestors who were brought to America and struggled for the future, did not go in vain and that this study was to remind those who read it that African American students’ lives matter and that we as educators must be conscious of how we may contribute to their success or to their demise.

One of the most powerful incidents during the process of transcribing the collected data from dialogues was having the opportunity to watch Alex Haley’s television series, “Roots” (1977). During my breaks in between transcribing dialogues, I would watch the inspirational movie that I hadn’t seen since I was a young child and have epiphanies that allowed me to recognize my own purpose for conducting this study.

In the movie, “Roots,” Haley chose to tell stories of his Ancestors beginning with an African warrior named Kunta Kente who was kidnapped and brought to America as a slave. Being that Kunta arrived in America during the time of chattel slavery when slave masters no longer allowed to “legally” travel to Africa for stock but had to breed the Africans who had already been slaves on the plantation, Kunta refused to give up his African identity. Even though Kunta was challenged by other enslaved Africans to give up the idea of African pride, Kunta refused to let go of his spiritual connectedness to his motherland.

In one scene where Kunta was whipped for not accepting the slave name Toby and instead insisted that he be known as Kunta, was so powerful because even though Kunta was beaten to the point where he eventually called himself
Toby, he still identified himself as Kunta, his African identity. Eventually, as Kunta struggled with the hardships of enslavement he sought to build a family and community that allowed him maintain purpose and self-actualization.

One scene that truly depicted the resiliency of the African spirit was when Kunta’s baby was born and he took that child outside, stood on top of a mountain, raised that child to the stars and stated, “Behold, I present to you the only thing greater than yourself!” In this scene, Kunta was establishing to that child at birth that despite the challenges and mistreatment that you may face, do not allow it to destroy you for the only thing that is greater than you is the Creator, the Universe. Throughout the “Roots” series, Haley (1977) presents the theme, resiliency through the African spirit, as the moving force that allowed his Ancestors to endure inhumane treatment and discrimination over the years as African Americans and still have spiritual purpose and obligation to pay homage to those who came before them.

This movie touched me because with my family being affected by the struggles that currently plague the urban African American community (i.e., social injustice, violence, incarceration, drug addiction, and death), the resiliency of the African spirit has moved our family to heal, be determined, honor those who struggle and fought before us, and maintain a purpose to pave the way for future generations. Therefore, conducting this study was my way of meeting an ancestral obligation to address the needs of African American children and the community while uplifting my family. By reminding them that despite the hardships and traumatic experiences we may go through, we will not allow it to break our spirits
because like always we will overcome. For the only thing greater than ourselves is the Creator, the Almighty Spirit.
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U.S. Constitution Bill of Rights (1791).

Amendment I: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.


APPENDIXES
APPENDIX A

Approval Letter from IRBPHS

December 14, 2006

Dear Ms. Hughes-Gibson:

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your application has been approved by the committee (IRBPHS #06-103). Please note the following:

1. Approval expires twelve (12) months from the dated noted above. At that time, if you are still in collecting data from human subjects, you must file a renewal application.

2. Any modifications to the research protocol or changes in instrumentation (including wording of items) must be communicated to the IRBPHS. Re-submission of an application may be required at that time.

3. Any adverse reactions or complication on the part of participants must be reported (in writing) to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS at (415) 422-6091.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,
Terence Patterson, EdD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
IRBPHS University of San Francisco
Counseling Psychology Department
Education Building- 107
2130 Fulton Street
San Francisco, CA. 94117-1080
(415) 422-6091 (Message)
(415) 422-5528 (Fax)
irbphs@usfca.edu
APPENDIX B

Consent for Research Participation

University of San Francisco

PARENTAL CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Purpose and Background

E’leva D. H. Gibson, a teacher at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Academic Middle School and a graduate student at the University of San Francisco, is doing a study on the academic achievement gap among students in the public school system. As teacher-researcher, she is interested in learning effective teaching strategies that encourage high scholastic achievement among African American students to close the achievement gap between them and other student groups. My child is being asked to participate because he/she is an African American student who exemplifies academic progress.

Procedures

If I agree to allow my child to be in this study, the following will happen:

1. My child (as well as his/her classmates) will be provided a standards-based language arts curriculum and will be asked to keep a journal of which assignments are interesting or exciting.

2. My child (as well as his/her classmates) will be given a multimedia project to identify what motivates him/her to learn and discuss with the researcher what is needed for him/her to be academically successful.

3. My child will meet 5 times with the teacher-researcher to discuss what is needed for him/her to be academically successful. I understand that these meetings will be audio-recorded and will take place during lunchtime so that my child will not lose any instructional time.

4. The teacher-researcher will review my child’s test scores (as well as his/her classmates’) to monitor academic progress and identify effective teaching strategies to meet my child’s learning needs.

5. The teacher-researcher will analyze and find similarities among responses to make connections with educational theories.

Risks and/or Discomforts

Participation in research may mean a loss of confidentiality. Study records will be kept as confidential as is possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. Study information will be coded and kept in locked files at all times. Only the teacher-researcher will have access to the files.
**Benefits**

There will be no direct benefit to me or to my child from participating in this study. The anticipated benefit of this study is identifying effective teaching strategies that may encourage academic achievement among African American students, thus, closing the achievement gap.

**Costs/Financial Considerations**

There will be no costs to me or to my child as a result of taking part in this study.

**Payment/Reimbursement**

Neither my child nor I will be reimbursed for participation in this study.

**Questions**

I may speak with Mrs. Gibson about this study by calling (415) 330-1500 ext. 207, or contact Dr. Susan R. Katz from the University of San Francisco by calling (415) 422-2209.

If I have any questions or comments about participation in this study, I should first talk with the researcher. If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the IRBPHS, which is concerned with protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the IRBPHS office by calling (415) 422-6091 and leaving a voicemail message, FAX at (415) 422-5528, by e-mailing IRBPHS@usfca.edu, or by writing to the:

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS)
University of San Francisco, School of Education
Department of Counseling Psychology
2130 Fulton Street
San Francisco, CA 94117-1080.

**Consent**

I have been given a copy of the “Research Subject’s Bill of Rights,” and I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep. PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to have my child be in this study, or to withdraw my child from it at any point.

My signature below indicates that I agree to allow my child to participate in this study.

_________________________  ______________________
Signature of Subject’s Parent/Guardian  Date of Signature

_________________________  ______________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent  Date of Signature
APPENDIX C

Media Release Form

University of San Francisco

SAVE THIS COPY FOR YOUR RECORDS

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO AND
DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR ACADEMIC MIDDLE SCHOOL

Touching the Spirit of African American Students as a Motivating Factor to Achieve Academic Excellence
Teacher-Researcher: Mrs. E’leva D. H. Gibson

MEDIA RELEASE FORM

Congratulations! Your child has been chosen to have their iMovie project be a part of an educational study. These iMovie projects are NOT confidential because many children who participate in this study will have their iMovie projects shown to other students as well as to researchers. Since students may include photos of themselves in their iMovie projects, parental approval is mandated. Every participating student will also be given a copy of their iMovie project which they may show to parents and as they wish.

Signing this form indicates that you allow your child to have his/her iMovie project shown to others.

Your child cannot show their iMovie project publicly without your consent.

I allow my child ________________________________ to show their iMovie project.

(please PRINT child’s name)

________________________________  __________________________________
Signature of parent                        Date
APPENDIX D

Current Educational Institutions

One local organization that is making the effort to rekindle the African spirit today within education through professional development is the I.R.I.S.E (Infusing Responsibility For Intellectual and Scholastic Excellence) Initiative. This organization has based its mission on finding ways to effectively train teachers to teach all students by developing a closer fit between students’ home culture and that of school. As director of I.R.I.S.E. Michael “Chappie” Grice (2006) states at a conference for the National Council on Educating Black Children:

One way this has been done is through recognition and understanding of certain cultural learning styles, particularly those of African American youth. Research has suggested that cultural learning styles, which include differences in both cognitive and affective approaches to learning, develop based on the socialization by families and friends (Cohen, 1971). It is argued that these differences in socialization create learning styles that can be potentially problematic once children enter a school community where their learning styles are incongruent with the Anglo mainstream (Grice, 2006, p.4)

There is an understanding that African American students rely upon connecting with what is taught in school and the value to their own and their families’ lives. The I.R.I.S.E. program attempts to teach educators how to tap into black students’ learning styles, or spirit, to honor experience, and to support African cultural values to achieve academic excellence. I.R.I.S.E. trains teachers to implement the strategies in tapping into African American learning styles, or spirit, to achieve academic success.

Other educational institutions besides I.R.I.S.E that are making the effort to engage African American students through ancestral principles besides I.R.I.S.E. are KIPP Academy and High Tech High. In researching their backgrounds, generative themes are found within their missions and objectives: connectedness (spirit) and
principles. Consistent among the institutions, is a link to ancient principles that focus on enlightenment and social responsibility.

KIPP Academy (Knowledge Is Power Program) is not an African-centered school but it is a foundation that utilizes similar principles such as connectedness by building healthy and productive relationships between its schools and students’ homes.

The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) Foundation is a national non-profit organization that recruits, trains, and supports educators to launch exceptional public schools in some our nation's most challenged communities. KIPP schools are tuition-free, open enrollment, college-preparatory public schools in underserved communities in 15 states and the District of Columbia. Students are accepted regardless of prior academic record, conduct, or socioeconomic background. Over 75% of KIPP students are eligible for the federally subsidized meal program, and 95% of KIPP students are African American or Latino (www.kipp.org, 2006).

High Tech High is a charter school that was developed to support innovative public schools where all students develop the academic, workplace, and citizenship skills for postsecondary success.

High Tech High began in 2000 as a single charter high school launched by a coalition of San Diego business leaders and educators. It has evolved into a school development organization with a growing portfolio of innovative charter schools spanning grades K-12. HTH combats the twin problems of student disengagement and low academic achievement by creating personalized, project-based learning environments where all students are known well and challenged to meet high expectations. HTH schools show how education can be redesigned to ensure that all students graduate well prepared for college, work, and citizenship (www.hightechhigh.org, 2006).

Connectedness

I.R.I.S.E. emphasizes concept of community, fairness, and spirituality. The organization provides teachers with resources that outline these concepts to help create a stimulating learning environment.

Often times, in an I.R.I.S.E. classroom, the Virtues of MAAT and the Principles replace classroom rules. For instance, if a student speaks out of turn or is speaking while the teacher is speaking, they are reprimanded for not showing “propriety.”
Or if is student is not doing their part in a group project, they are reprimanded for not showing “Ujima.” Students in a I.R.I.S.E. classroom memorize these terms and understand their meaning, and teachers often say that their students feel a communal obligation to acting responsibly as opposed to having to obey rules (Grice, 2006, p.5).

In the building of High Tech High, members were concerned about the “digital divide” that resulted in low numbers of women and ethnic groups entering the fields of math, science, and engineering, and the responsibility to provide for future generations.

At HTH, we believe that change in schooling happens, not incrementally by adding programs, but by generating holistic designs that enable new ways of teaching and learning... speaks to the deep purpose of schools: to prepare all students for entry into the world of work and citizenship in a democratic society.

In essence, then, bricklaying at High Tech High is a way to preserve the organization’s “soul” that part of us that knows well and cares for each and every family we serve and every staff member we employ. High Tech High does not pretend to know how many schools the organization can develop without compromising its “soul.” We also do not know whether the resources needed to support growth will be available in the future. We are therefore focused on becoming a self-sustaining organization in the very near term so that we may have a stable platform from which to take stock of our efforts and assess our options for the future (www.hightechhigh.org, 2006).

Principles

I.R.I.S.E. emphasizes the building of cultural awareness in students by instilling knowledge and pride into one’s cultural heritage and positive social interaction.

I.R.I.S.E. trains teachers to teach students cultural concepts like the Virtues of MAAT and the Seven Principles of Nguzo Saba. The Virtues of MAAT are derived from the ancient Egyptian Declaration of Innocence or Ambitions of MAAT. They are used for the purpose of building community, as well as the Seven Principles of Nguzo Saba which are derived from the principles of Kwanzaa and are used for the purpose of building good character.
Virtues of MAAT
Truth—Statement of fact or a life that exemplifies virtue
Justice—The quality of being just and fair
Propriety—To behave and speak in an appropriate way
Balance—Mentally steady, emotionally stable, even
Reciprocity—The Golden Rule: The things you do, come back to you
Harmony—At peace with yourself, doing your part, being a friend
Order—First things first, work then play

The Seven Principles of Nguzo Saba
Umoja—Unity
Kujichagulia—Self-determination
Ujima—Collective work & responsibility
Ujamaa—Cooperative economic
Nia—Purpose
Kuumba—Creativity
Imani-- Faith

High Tech High has three principles for its organization: personalization, adult world connection, and common intellectual mission. All three principles connect to the broad mission of preparation for the adult world.

Personalization
Each student at HTH has a staff advisor, who monitors the student’s personal and academic development and serves as the point of contact for the family.

Adult World Connection
HTH students experience some of their best learning outside the school walls. Juniors complete a semester-long academic internship in a local business or agency. Seniors develop substantial projects that enable them to learn while working on problems of interest and concern in the community.

Common Intellectual Mission
High Tech High makes no distinction between "college prep" and "technical" education; the program qualifies all students for college and success in the world of work (www.hightechhigh.org, 2006)

KIPP Schools share a core set of principles known as the Five Pillars:

1. High Expectations. KIPP Schools have clearly defined and measurable high expectations for academic achievement and conduct that make no excuses based on the students' backgrounds. Students, parents, teachers, and staff create and reinforce a culture of achievement and support through a range of formal and informal rewards and consequences for academic performance and behavior.
2. Choice & Commitment. Students, their parents, and the faculty of each KIPP School choose to participate in the program. No one is assigned or forced to attend these schools. Everyone must make and uphold a commitment to the school and to each other to put in the time and effort required to achieve success.

3. More Time. KIPP Schools know that there are no shortcuts when it comes to success in academics and life. With an extended school day, week, and year, students have more time in the classroom to acquire the academic knowledge and skills that will prepare them for competitive high schools and colleges, as well as more opportunities to engage in diverse extracurricular experiences.

4. Power to Lead. The principals of KIPP Schools are effective academic and organizational leaders who understand that great schools require great School Leaders. They have control over their school budget and personnel. They are free to swiftly move dollars or make staffing changes, allowing them maximum effectiveness in helping students learn.

5. Focus on Results. KIPP Schools relentlessly focus on high student performance on standardized tests and other objective measures. Just as there are no shortcuts, there are no excuses. Students are expected to achieve a level of academic performance that will enable them to succeed at the nation's best high schools and colleges (www.kipp.org, 2006).

Through the use of principles and the ideas of connectedness, spirit, these three educational institutions have been successful in engaging and encouraging African American students to achieve academic excellence.

Significant achievements by the three educational institutions and their involvement with African American students are as follows:

High Tech High’s achievements to date (www.hightechhigh.org, 2006):

- 100% of HTH's graduates have been admitted to college, with approximately 80% admitted to four-year programs such as Johns Hopkins University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University, Howard University, University of Southern California, University of San Diego, University of California at Berkeley, New York University and Northwestern University.

- Over half of HTH graduates are first-generation college students.

- Academic Performance Index rankings (API) place HTH schools among the highest achieving in the state.
• HTH’s African-American students outperform district and statewide peers by a wide margin vis-à-vis test scores, percentage who take chemistry, physics, and advanced math (100%), and college entry (100%).

In a case study (1999) on teachers using ancient African principles to engage African American students enrolled in Veteran I.R.I.S.E. teachers’ classrooms, findings showed significant improvements for students in both reading and math (as measured by the SAT-9) as compared to a group of demographically comparable students not enrolled in these classrooms. It was found that African American middle school students who had taken classes with Veteran I.R.I.S.E. teachers showed improvements in their GPA.

According to KIPP Academy, “as the school matures into a full fifth through eighth grade school, their students are demonstrating significant academic gains and narrowing the achievement gap in public education” (www.kipp.org, 2006):

• KIPP Asheville Youth Academy (Asheville, NC) fifth grade outperformed other Asheville City Schools District fifth grades on the North Carolina state test.

• KIPP Aspire Academy’s (San Antonio, TX) current seventh grade outperformed every school in the school districts in its attendance zone in reading and mathematics on the 2005 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

• KIPP DC: KEY Academy (Washington, DC) is the highest performing public middle school in the District of Columbia.

• KIPP Gaston College Preparatory (Gaston, NC) is a North Carolina School of Excellence. 100% of last year’s eighth grade achieved above grade level scores in all end of grade tests including reading, math, and computers as well as a high school math test (Algebra I).

• KIPP Heartwood Academy’s (San Jose, CA) fifth grade outperformed every school in the Alum Rock Union Elementary School District on the California Standards Test. They were the highest performing fifth grade in math among all California charter schools.

• KIPP South Fulton Academy’s (East Point, GA) sixth grade had the highest passing rate in math in South Fulton County on the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test.
• KIPP Summit Academy’s (San Lorenzo, CA) sixth grade outperformed every single school in the San Lorenzo School District in every subject of the California Standards Test.

• KIPP Ujima Village Academy’s (Baltimore, MD) fifth grade earned the highest fifth grade math scores in Baltimore on the Maryland School Assessment.

• KIPP WAYS Academy (Atlanta, GA) was one of ten schools in Atlanta Public Schools with a 100% pass rate on the state’s fifth grade writing test.

• TEAM Academy’s (Newark, NJ) current eighth graders started KIPP at the 31st percentile in math. Three short years later, they were performing at the 91st percentile, as measured by the Stanford 10 (www.kipp.org, 2006).