"Because I Learn!": An Exploratory Note on the Academic Identity of African American Children

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Abstract

Academic identity refers to the extent to which one identifies or defines the self in terms of academic-related experiences and can motivate one to engage or disengage from school. Most research on the academic identity of African American students has focused on adolescents; high school students in particular. The primary concern has been academic dis-engagement as an explanation of low African American academic achievement relative to other racial and ethnic groups, white students specifically; the "achievement gap." As a result, relatively little is known about the subjectively experienced academic identity of African American elementary-aged students: How do they make sense of and understand the student role and what does being "smart" mean to them? Data were drawn from two third grade classes at an African American k-5 charter school on the campus of a prominent HBCU in a small town in the Deep South. Aligning with, yet extending in important ways, the thirty-plus year dialogic tension with the work of Fordham and Ogbu, data presented here clearly indicate this small sample of African American third graders define themselves as intelligent and capable students who identify strongly and positively with the student role. At this stage of their lives their academic identity is robust; they are engaged, achievement oriented, and they seem to be saying "School is for me!" Results suggest the school's proximity to a prominent HBCU in the Deep South may have had a protective effect on student academic identity.

Introduction

Popular conceptions emerging from historical and national media contexts tend to portray African Americans, especially males, as thugs, athletes and entertainers, while females are often portrayed as hypersexualized and available to fulfill male fantasies. Other media images reinforce stereotypes of African Americans as "potentially dangerous, anti-intellectual, and downtrodden" (Nasir, McLaughlin, and Jones 2009:78). Such portrayals fit a long historical pattern of racism and discrimination in the United States, reinforcing beliefs about black students' intellectual ability and lack of engagement. Stereotypes and how they are perceived by students form part of the context that students must negotiate in attempting to construct and maintain positive racial and academic identities.

Clear and quantifiable differences separate the educational attainment of African American and white students. The achievement gap, as it has come to be called, encompasses numerous aspects, including measures of standardized test scores, grade point averages, dropout rates, college attendance, and graduation rates (Hallinan 2001; Kovach and Gordon 1997; National Center for Education Statistics 2001; Nettles and Perna 1997). The impact of these unequal

outcomes is experienced in diminished employment opportunities and earning potential, not to mention a potentially diminished sense of efficacy and self-esteem.   Persistent academic underachievement among African American adolescents, it should be noted, contradicts evidence that African American youth articulate high educational aspirations and a desire to experience upward social mobility, sometimes exceeding those expressed by white youth (Cheng and Starks 2002; Kao and Tienda 1998; MacLeod 1987; Qian and Blair 1999).

What explains the achievement gap? As identified above, cultural stereotypes of African Americans as lazy and academically dis-engaged fit a long historical pattern of racism and discrimination.   In 1986 Fordham and Ogbu offered a scholarly, structural explanation of the achievement gap, which refers to differential educational outcomes based on race and ethnicity. Distorted and simplified by media processes and ideologues in a society historically reluctant, at best, to publicly reckon with issues of race, and with the structural aspects of their analysis conveniently ignored, findings such as Fordham and Ogbu's "…resonate with educators, scholars, and the general public because they are consistent with the popular cultural belief that education is not valued in the black community" (Tyson 2002:1161).   Simply stated, appropriated and taken out of context their work can feed racism. In fact, according to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), African American students, responding to centuries of structural inequality and discrimination, experience tension or competing demands between representing an authentic black self on the one hand, and striving for academic success on the other, which is said to create a "burden of acting white." This burden of acting white, it is claimed, leads to the creation of an oppositional culture, which in turn fosters the comparatively low academic achievement of black students relative to their white cohort. Racial identity is essentially represented as a zero-sum game in which African American students must choose between being authentically black or being white, whiteness being associated with academic engagement and achievement.   Works by at least three other scholars reinforce the claim that African American youth are at greater risk than youth from other racial and ethnic groups, particularly white youth, of disengaging, or not identifying with the student role (Giroux 1981; Mickelson 1990; Willis 1977).

Over the course of thirty plus years the bulk of the academic literature exploring the achievement gap and/or related issues such as student orientation toward achievement, academic engagement, and academic identity, has existed in dialogic tension with the work of Fordham and Ogbu. How do we define the concept of academic identity? What does our study entail? What factors other than the "burden of acting white" may begin to account for the achievement gap? Why is the study of academic identity among African American students, particularly elementary-age students, of importance?

Academic identity results from, and in turn represents and influences, the extent to which a student's perception of self is shaped by their performance on school related tasks. It reflects the extent to which a student believes that academic experiences and performance are important, relevant components of their sense of self and identity (Pintrich, Roeser, de Groot 1994). Stated simply, academic identity represents the extent to which a student identifies with school and school related activities, especially academic performance.   A positive or strong academic identity is reflected in the child who defines the student role as important, defines herself as smart, and defines herself on the basis of academic activities.   A negative or weak academic identity is reflected in the child who does not define the student role as important, does not specifically define herself as smart, and does not define herself on the basis of academic activities. Operationally defined in this exploratory note, academic identity refers to the extent to which a child verbally defines school as being important during the interview process and the extent to which a child feels intelligent and confident enough to verbally identify herself as smart during the interview process.

Based on interviews with a small number of third grade African American students at a k-5 charter school on the campus of a prominent HBCU in the Deep South, our study entails a simple, exploratory investigation of the academic identity of students. We seek to understand the ways that third grade African American students at the school construct and understand academic identity by asking about the importance of being a student, whether they defined themselves as smart, and how they knew they were smart. Though the bulk of the literature reviewed below draws on data from African American students in secondary school several works seek to give voice to elementary-age students. Putting aside the issue of student age, however, it is clear that most research exemplifying this dialogic tension with the work of Fordham and Ogbu, while maintaining and more clearly explicating the structural issues that may foster

academic disengagement and the belief that "School is not for me," does not implicate "the burden of acting white" as a significant factor or force in explaining the achievement gap.

Identified factors and forces at the historical, national, local, school, and familial contexts that would seem to encourage academic disengagement and the underachievement of African American student relative to their white cohort include, for example, the reality that schools and school systems in Southern states, where large numbers of African American children attend school, are funded at lower levels than schools in other geographic regions of the United States (Wenglinsky 1997), resulting in fewer, and in many cases inferior, resources. More ominously, "White resistance to black progress has been more overt and pernicious in the South, even after slavery was legally abolished" (Morris and Monroe 2009:22). Significant contextual variables such as the local and school contexts must be considered as well. Particular features of the school context can increase or decrease the likelihood of academic engagement and a positive academic identity, such as academic tracking and low or negative teacher expectations (Nasir et al. 2009:77). Consider that as early as preschool African American children are overrepresented in "low ability" classes (Hatt 2012). The stigma which accompanies being defined as a student of low ability can harm one's self-concept, making it more difficult to sustain a sense of self as a smart and capable student; students who define themselves as "not smart" may manifest this sense of self in low achievement, lack of motivation, even the eventual desire to drop out of school. These forces, alone and in combination, would seem to encourage academic disengagement and the underachievement of African American students. Put bluntly, these dynamics may push African American students to conclude that "School is not for me." Based on the literature reviewed below, however, these forces do not seem to have given rise to a robust, sustained, empirically documented oppositional culture the likes of which Fordham and Ogbu report. If "the burden of acting white" and the oppositional identity implicated by Fordham and Ogbu as explanatory factors in the achievement gap are not empirically verified with any consistency we are left to seek other avenues of understanding. If African American students do not display a lack of academic motivation and disengagement then how are we to make sense of the achievement gap? Complicating matters still more, what if African American students consistently

display a robust, positive academic identity characterized by high levels of motivation and engagement? If African American students conclude with enthusiasm and energy that "School is for me!" how are we to explain the achievement gap? Analyses of relevant empirical research, both explicitly and implicitly in response to Fordham and Ogbu, follow.

Literature Review

For at least three decades educators, commentators, journalists, parents, and members of the general public have sought to understand the achievement gap separating black and white school-children, as manifested in measures such as grades, test scores, and graduation rates. The dominant public perception of black students is that they are disengaged from schooling, devaluing education and achievement (Tyson, 2002:1159). Since 1986 the scholarly conversation has essentially been a response to Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) article Black Students' School Success: Coping with the "Burden of Acting White," the most influential scholarly work addressing academic underachievement of black students and the black-white achievement gap. As Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005:582) put it: "…the acting white hypothesis—the premise that black students are driven toward low school performance because of racialized peer pressure—has served as an explanation for the black-white achievement gap." Specifically, for African American students who are responding to centuries of structural inequality and discrimination, tension is said to exist between representing an authentic black self on the one hand, and striving for academic success on the other; according to Fordham and Ogbu this creates a "burden of acting white" which contributes to the comparatively low academic achievement of black students. Racial identity is essentially represented as a zero-sum game in which African American students must choose between being authentically black or being white, as stated above.

In her widely read, influential book, Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversation About Race (1997), Beverly Daniel Tatum explores the five stages of racial identity development. Though offering suggestions as to how positive black identity can be encouraged, nourished, and cultivated so that negative cultural stereotypes of African Americans are mitigated rather than internalized by youth, she largely reinforces Fordham

and Ogbu's premise in speaking of "oppositional social identity." "Fordham and Ogbu identified a common psychological pattern found among African American high school students…" (1997:60) she says. Cultural stereotypes of African American students portray them as disengaged and uninterested. Though she does not locate the cause of black student underachievement solely in black culture, stressing that oppositional identity has not always been a characteristic of black adolescent peer groups; during the Jim Crow era an oppositional identity was in fact one that embraced education and achievement, she does seem to accept Fordham and Ogbu's assertion of the existence of an oppositional culture among African American students that contributes to academic disengagement and the achievement gap.

Other scholars, in dialogue with Fordham and Ogbu, either explicitly or implicitly, (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Horvat and Lewis 2003; Kao, Tienda, and Schneider 1996; Morris and Monroe 2009; Nasir et al. 2009; Rubin 2007; Tyson et al. 2005;) have reported scant empirical evidence of an oppositional culture among black adolescents. The bulk of the empirical research investigating a potential link between oppositional culture and academic underachievement among African American students has been undertaken in high schools, with scholars offering detailed analyses of the role of socio-economic status, peer groups, the meaning of black identity, even geographic location, in the process adding several layers of complexity to Fordham and Ogbu's original task of explaining the achievement gap separating black and white students.

Research based on data collected in high schools includes that of Horvat and Lewis (2003), for example, who demonstrate clearly through an ethnographic study of academically successful black female high school seniors from two California public high schools, each with over three thousand students, one serving primarily low income students, the other serving students of various racial and class backgrounds, that the burden of acting white did not play a significant role in their lives, nor did they sacrifice their racial identity. In fact, observed and interviewed students embraced African American culture and displayed a positive racial identity. Horvat and Lewis thus point to the importance of peer groups in sustaining black identity and nurturing and encouraging school engagement and academic achievement. The authors found that peer and friendship groups co-exist; some peer groups pull students toward disengagement while others pull

students toward engagement. "This article highlights the ability of students to sustain an authentic black identity and to achieve academically by effectively managing their academic success among their peers" (265). In contrast to Fordham and Ogbu's claim that oppositional culture and identity characterize African American students, this work gives flesh to the empirical reality that black peer groups are much more heterogeneous than previously conceptualized.

Relying on focus groups, observations, and survey analysis, Nasir et al. (2009) present data drawn from a two-year study of a primarily African American urban high school, exploring the meanings of racial identity for African American students, how they relate to academic engagement and achievement and how those meanings are fostered by the school context. The authors emphasize that multiple meanings of African American racial identity were available to students and that students in fact embraced different meanings of African American racial identity. Specifically, they sketch out two ideal types of African American identity. First, the thug or "gangsta" identity, which portrays African Americans as drug dealers, pimps, and gangsters as represented in movies, music videos, hip hop and rap music, does not define official education and academic achievement as a key feature of what it means to be African American. The second ideal type of African American identity is "school-oriented and socially conscious," and involves being positively connected to school. This second identity allowed students to be engaged and achievement oriented without feeling as though they were acting white. These identities were available at the levels of the historical and national media context as well as the school and local context. School and local contexts not only made available, but actively supported each of these identities.

Using semi-structured interviews of eighty-five students, thirty-six white, forty African American, and nine other students of color from a diverse range of eight secondary high schools in North Carolina, Tyson et al. (2005) demonstrated that just two of the forty black students adolescents reported experiencing "racialized ridiculing" The authors state: "Thus, our data provide little evidence to suggest…that a burden of acting white is a 'major reason' why black students do poorly in school and a key contributor to the achievement gap" (599). Rather, they suggest that a burden of achievement is common across racial and ethnic groups, but is a function of class rather than race, and is in fact often experienced by low-income white students, who typically face the burden of high

achievement embedded in the criticism that they are "acting high and mighty" (582). "Students in all racial and ethnic groups confront similar dilemmas of high academic achievement…" (600). Moreover, their data demonstrate that many black students avoided taking advanced courses out of concern that they may not be able to handle the work rather than fear of appearing white.

Aligning with Hatt's (2012) analysis of a semi-rural kindergarten class reviewed below, Rubin (2007) makes the case that low teacher expectations and rote teaching styles negatively impact the academic identities of low-income African Americans and Latino students in urban settings. In this context, intelligence or "smartness" translates into compliance in completing "meaningless, boring school-work," which many students resist as an encroachment on their agency (228).

Despite much focus on the achievement gap in the form of grades, test scores, and graduation rates there has been comparatively little focus on the American South as a variable in understanding differential educational outcomes separating black and white students. Geographic location has implications for children's life chances, particularly social and educational outcomes. In contrast to previous researchers, Morris and Monroe take a geographical approach, encouraging sociologists to explore the "…nexus between race and place and the implications for Black student achievement…" (2009:21) and how Southern life shapes student opportunities and outcomes. Though a majority of black people reside in the American South the role of this large geographic region in the academic achievement of black students is overlooked. Morris and Monroe point to the importance of acknowledging and investigating "the geography of opportunity" (22); sociologists are therefore urged to take geography into account as a "contextual factor" in their analyses. Understanding the "nexus of race and place" with regard to the South and the academic achievement of African American students begins with acknowledgment of the following: Southern states have higher rates of underemployment and unemployment and provide the least educational resources to low-income students. The South has the lowest per pupil expenditures in the nation and is the only region of the United States where a majority of public school children are from low income families (23). Though local political power within certain Southern school districts and the strong racial identity which characterizes the region may positively shape opportunities for some black students, even a supportive local school context is "…nested in a larger conservative white context. Remnants of the racialized 'Old South'…persist." (27) in the form of gross disparities.

While a number of significant qualitative explorations of high school students have been undertaken, as reviewed above, in general the voices, perspectives, and experiences of elementary-age students have been under-represented in the literature. Because the popular conception of African American academic achievement, led by the work of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and reinforced by cultural stereotypes, centers on African American adolescents we tend to project these ideas onto black students as a whole (Tyson 2002); however, there is a dearth of scholarly literature exploring the attitudes of younger students, in particular the school-related attitudes of elementary-age black students. Several important studies reviewed below (Ford and Harris 1996; Gracey 1975; Hatt 2012; Lareau 1991; Lareau 2003; Tyson 2002), however, stand in contrast.

First, Gracey describes how kindergarteners are socialized into the student role, a process that foretells their eventual entry into the broader society and economy: They are being groomed to fit the demands of structures they had little role in creating and likely do not even understand, which is reflective of much of their kindergarten experience. He points to physical and social structural features of the classroom that are created and controlled by adults, leaving few opportunities for children to engage in spontaneous creation and self-expression. Instead, children learn to follow adult-imposed routines that may have no larger meaning for them, supplanting the possibility of spontaneity and creativity with obedience to authority.

Ford and Harris (1996) surveyed gifted low socio-economic-status African American fifth and sixth grade public school students between ages of nine and fourteen on school related attitudes, finding that low-income students had positive attitudes about school, in contrast to Fordham and Ogbu's thesis.

Tyson (2002) undertook an ethnographic study observing third and fourth-grade students at two small, all-black schools in "one of the largest cities in the Southeast," (1164) a more urban setting than is reflected in our data. The promotion of positive black identity, high expectations, and challenging material was a focus at both schools. Though most children observed were from middle-class families, also included were "…voices of…higher-socioeconomic-status black students" (1167). Parents in the sample had, on average, higher levels of education, family

income, and occupational status than African Americans nationally (1183). Overall, "Across the four classrooms, a distinct pattern of school engagement and achievement orientation was evident" (1168). The observed black children were achievement-oriented and positively engaged in school.

Lareau (2003) is also focused on elementary-age students, but steers us instead to consider the role that cultural and familial resources play in the creation and reproduction of inequality. In Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education (1991) she explicates the link between social class and parental involvement in school by observing two first grade classrooms, one working class and one upper middle class. Classroom observations as well as interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators reveal upper class parents to be more active in managing their child's education, whereas lower-class parents, though compliant in fulfilling school requests, did not question or supplement school decisions. The importance of social class is brought to bear by parents who are not only able to provide material resources to their children, but cultural resources as well. Therefore, a narrow focus on children's abilities and aspirations, including levels of academic engagement and motivation, overlooks how parents shape children's educational careers by passing on cultural capital.

Based on a year-long ethnography in a semi-rural kindergarten classroom consisting of fifteen white and ten black students, a white middle-class female teacher and her white middle-class female teaching assistant, Hatt (2012) convincingly argues that "smartness" is socially constructed rather than biologically based, the construction of which then has consequences for academic identity and the achievement gap. Through classroom practices that value obedience, rule-following, and demonstrating behaviors which align with teachers' and school authorities' definitions of intelligence, children are sorted into "smart" and "not smart," often along lines of class and race. Being smart is about fulfilling teacher expectations: "Smartness came to be associated with following rules, becoming docile bodies, and behaving in ways expected by teachers," including keeping hands to one's self, remaining in line while in the hallway, and speaking only when given permission (455-56). Echoing the view of Lareau (1991, 2003), Hatt's analysis reinforces the meaning of "smartness" as possessing the cultural capital valued by teachers and school authorities. The "Shoe Tyer's Club"

example is instructive, and includes the intersection of race and class as bases of stratification within the classroom. Though shoe tying was not taught in the classroom it was highly valued; children who were able to successfully tie their shoes were inducted into the "Shoe Tyer's Club" and praised by the teacher as being smart. Hatt writes that three of the four original members of the club had mothers who were able to stay at home with them prior to their beginning kindergarten. Children from single-parent families or those whose parents worked multiple jobs were disadvantaged, as they had less time to teach their children this valued skill. Being able to tie one's shoes was highly valued and used to confer social status and placement within the classroom hierarchy. However, "The concept of 'smartness' makes ability to tie shoes seem based on innate smartness rather than family circumstance" (451). Hatt convincingly argues that defining smartness and deciding which students fit the definition is in practice a gate-keeping exercise, determining in turn which students will have access to valued resources within the classroom, including material resources such as snacks and blocks, but also status and placement within the classroom hierarchy (456).

The literature reviewed above is implicitly and explicitly a dialogic response to Fordham and Ogbu's thesis on oppositional identity as an explanation of the achievement gap separating black and white students. Our work expands the understanding of academic identity and achievement of elementary-age African American students, asking: Do elementary-aged African American children at a semi-rural black school on the campus of a prominent HBCU in the Deep South define themselves as smart? If so, how do they operationalize the concept? Do they define the student role as important to their sense of self? What impact does the school culture have? What about the community? Finally, remaining sensitive to geography, what role does the location of the school in the Deep South have on the academic identity of interviewed students? In the brief section that follows we detail the steps in our data collection process.

Data Collection

Three methods were used to gather data: a review of available public documents regarding school and community demographics, informal observations by the lead author over a period of several years, and face-to-face interviews conducted by the second author. Interviews took place at a charter school open to Parish

students from kindergarten through fifth grade with a student population of one-hundred forty-four students. Ninety-four percent of the students were African-American; nearly three quarters were eligible for free breakfast and lunch, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). The two-story school building was approximately fifty years old and had clearly seen better days. Signs of disrepair were evident in the form of a leaking roof and semi-frequent plumbing issues. The school lacked both a gymnasium and an auditorium, and the one piece of playground equipment, rusty and unappealing to students, was basically ignored.

Two area public elementary schools located in a larger town with a population of approximately twenty-two thousand are broadly comparable to our data collection site. The first has five hundred seventy five students, fifty-nine percent of whom are defined as African American. The second school has three hundred fourteen students, sixty-three percent of whom are defined as African American. Percentages of students receiving free lunch are fifty-two and fifty-three percent, respectively, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). With regard to overall school grades, all three schools received Cs for 2017 (Louisiana Department of Education 2017). These two broadly comparable schools are much larger, newer, have far more classroom and recreational resources, including new playground equipment, than our data collection site. Compared to these two area public schools our data collection site is characterized by a much higher percentage of African American students and higher levels of poverty, using the percentage of students eligible for free breakfast and lunch as a measure of low-income. Though differing in racial composition and the percentage of students from low-income families, each of the three schools earned of a C on their performance scores for 2017, as noted above.

Located on the campus of an HBCU of some note in the Deep South, the school is located in a high poverty area. The median household income of this small rural town was twenty-two thousand dollars; forty-two percent of the local population were officially living in poverty, and the population of approximately five thousand is eighty-nine percent African American (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). A larger town of approximately twenty-two thousand just a few miles away has a median income of twenty-seven thousand dollars and a poverty rate of forty-three percent. In contrast to its smaller neighbor down the road, the larger town's population is forty-eight

percent African American and forty-seven percent white, with small Asian and Latino communities (U.S. Census Bureau 2017).

Figure 1: Race and SES
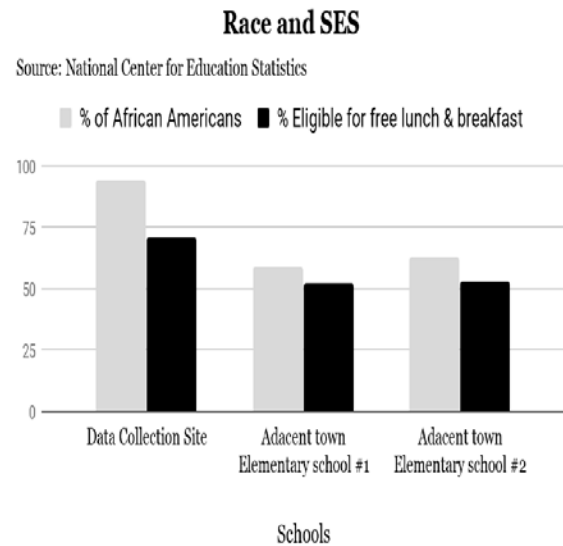
Initial access to students emerged from an ongoing relationship between the lead author, who has regularly read to kindergarten, first, and second grade students over a period of six years, and school officials. The lead author was therefore able to facilitate the second author's entre: She was able to meet with the school principal, explaining the goals of the proposed research, requesting access to the student body for interview purposes, and responding to concerns or questions from the principal. Deeming the proposed research to be meaningful and worthy of support, the second author was allowed to distribute consent forms to all children in two third grade classes. A total of thirty forms were distributed to students, who were asked to pass them on to parents or guardians. The response rate was fifty percent; fifteen consent forms were returned. No inducements were promised or presented to students in exchange for their participation other than the expression of sincere thanks from the second author. Students seemed eager to be interviewed

Semi-structured, audio-taped interviews were conducted with fifteen third graders; six girls and nine boys. Interviews took place in the hallway immediately outside the third-grade classrooms, where a teacher had placed two desks; one for the interviewer and one for the student. One-on-one interviews lasted from seven to ten minutes. The hallway was free of student traffic but for the

interviewer and the student. The interviewer introduced herself and explained the purpose of her visit as each child arrived at the designated interview area. Attempting to put students at ease, she asked each student if he or she knew what a research project was, explaining that she was, like them, a student who had to complete a research project, thanking each student for helping her with her research project.

Ten questions were asked of each subject (See Appendix A for a complete list of questions asked of each student.). Student responses were considered yet direct, which rendered the task of coding straightforward, even simple. Interview questions focused on children's academic performance, including whether or not they self-define as "smart," how they specifically operationalize "smart," and their school experiences more broadly. Student responses to each item were recorded on a chart and recurrent themes and responses were noted as they occurred during each interview. Individual notes were made on each interview subject, though neither coded data nor notes were tied to student names, ensuring anonymity going forward. Audio recordings were erased upon satisfactory extraction of data.

Several methodological shortcomings must be acknowledged. First, the nature of the research required parental or guardian consent, which may have increased the likelihood that all students interviewed displayed a robust, positive academic identity and seemed to strongly identify with school. It may be the case that a variation of the self-selection bias was a work: It is possible that parents and guardians who are more involved in the lives of their student(s) and have created a home environment conducive to a robust, positive academic identity and positive identification with school were more likely than less involved parents and guardians to consent to their child's participation in the study, biasing the results in favor of those displaying a robust, positive academic identity and strong identification with school. The unanswered and unanswerable question given our current data set is: What about the academic identity and strength of school identification of those third graders who did not participate? In addition, it is possible that this small sample of third-grade students, having been socialized to follow rules, display obedience, and in general having been socialized to give school authorities and their proxies what the children think they wish to hear may have simply understood that the most appropriate and expedient way to deal with the interview was to display enthusiastic compliance in response to questions such

as "Is being a student important to you?" and "Are you smart?" As interview data reported below indicates, there was no variance in student responses to these two interview questions. In short, it is possible that students felt it was in their best interest to respond in the affirmative, regardless of whether or not their answers aligned with their subjective experience of self.

In addition, the non-random sample and small data set disallow for the assertion of external validity: We have no basis upon which to claim that the results reported herein are more broadly applicable to the academic identity of elementary aged African American children.

Finally, though able to access publicly available data permitting basic demographic and statistical comparisons between our data collection site and the two broadly comparable area public schools identified earlier in this section our study lacks data regarding the subjective experiences of students at the comparable area schools, each of which, as noted above, had a lower percentage of African American students and a lower percentage of low-income students, again using eligibility for free breakfast and lunch as measure of low-income. We simply lacked access to those area schools. A multi-site design would undoubtedly assist in moving the empirical conversation forward. Despite these methodological shortcomings, however, the lack of existing empirical studies on academic identity among African American elementary-aged students provides a critical opportunity to begin filling this void. Data presented here, though limited and partial, are suggestive, leading us to define the present study as an exploratory note.

Results

All students interviewed in the course of this research define the student role as being important to them as measured by two questions. First, students were simply asked if being a student was important to them: all responded in the affirmative.

Table 1: Is being a student important to you?

	Yes	No
Male	60% (9)	0% (0)
Female	40% (6)	0% (0)
Totals	100% (15)	0% (0)

Second, a Likert scale was used to measure individual student agreement with the following: "Being a student is important to me." All interviewed students agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Table 2: Being a student is important to me.

	SA*	A	D	SD
Male	47% (7)	13% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Female	20% (3)	20% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Totals	67% (10)	33% (5)	0% (0)	0% (0)

Note: SA (Strongly Agree), A (Agree), D (Disagree), and SD (Strongly Disagree).

Third, student responses to the question "Are you smart?" were all answered in the affirmative as well.

Table 3: Are you Smart?

	Yes	No
Male	60% (9)	0% (0)
Female	40% (6)	0% (0)
	100% (15)	0% (0)

Data collected indicate a positive attitude about the student role and their own intelligence. Responses such as these suggest interviewed third graders currently display a positive identification with school and school based activities: They seem to define being a student as important and they believe themselves to be smart. In identifying the student role as important and themselves as smart, they seem to be saying that, as third graders, they believe that "School is for them," though an alternate interpretation cannot be ruled out: Perhaps interviewed students define being a student as important to them because they define it as a place to have fun and meet up with their friends, like going to the mall. Future studies should seek to clarify this issue.

Finally, the meaning and importance of the student role for African American children was further probed by asking: Why (or why not) is being a student important? What does it mean to be smart? How do you know you are smart? Twelve students in this study described what it means to be smart based on their academic performance, specifically on tests and homework. Three students mentioned specific behaviors such as class participation or the ability to do math when asked what it means to be smart. One student defined himself as smart because "…I know how to read and do math." Another said he was smart "Because I'm very good at solving math equations like 3x3=9!" A number of children linked their academic identity to an expectation of future success, displaying an expectation that hard work will bear fruit. These ten children displayed a future orientation approach in explaining the meaning of being a student by talking about college, potential career paths, and future financial success. For example, one third grade student said: "… you need to get your education to learn and get your degree." Five students mentioned specific subjects in defining the meaning of being smart. One student stated, for example: "Students are people that try to do their best like on a math test". Another went a little further: "Knowing multiplication, knowing a lot of stuff about the world, knowing science." Finally, three students defined being smart as involving pro-social behavior: "You get to help others."

Table 4: How do black children describe the meaning of being a student and being smart?

Performance	Learning Behaviors	Future Orientation	Subject Based	Relational
80% (12)	20% (3)	67% (10)	33% (5)	20% (3)

Though our data set was small, the qualitative and quantitative data presented above indicate clearly a positive academic identity on the part of interviewed third grade African American students. Throughout the interview process students defined the student role as important and self-defined as smart, operationalizing smart in five different ways. In the brief discussion and conclusion which follow we attempt to add meaning to these findings by grounding them in the larger conversation regarding African American student's academic identity, levels of engagement and motivation, and ultimately, the achievement gap.

Discussion and Conclusion

For over thirty years scholars have been in dialogic tension with Fordham and Ogbu (1986) over their claim that the "achievement gap" can be understood as emerging from the desire of African American students to avoid "the burden of acting white." As presented here, a number of studies have added complexity to their initial thesis, though most have focused on adolescents, high school students in particular. Reviewed works, though sharing a structural focus similar to that of Fordham and Ogbu, do not sustain their claim that oppositional culture and identity explain the achievement gap. In fact, the bulk of reviewed literature in this paper strongly indicates a lack of robust, sustained, empirically documented oppositional culture the likes of which Fordham and Ogbu report. Though the voices of elementary age students have largely been missing from the conversation several key pieces that begin to bring in the perspectives of elementary age children were reviewed; however, Ford and Harris (1996) and Tyson (2002) focused specifically on academic identity, engagement, and orientation toward achievement. Both found robust levels.

Like Tyson, we found robust levels of academic engagement and achievement orientation among interviewed third grade students at the African American elementary school under consideration, but our study differed in at least two key respects. First, Tyson's data came from middle-class informants whose households exceeded the median income level of African Americans nationally. Our data, in contrast, were collected at a school characterized by a high level levels of poverty: A high percentage of the students at our data collection site were eligible for free breakfast and lunch, which we interpret as a proxy measure for low-income. The median income in the area was just twenty-two thousand dollars annually; the local poverty rate stood at forty-two percent.

Second, though also located in the South, Tyson's data collection sites, in contrast, were in "one of the largest cities in the Southeast" (1164), a far more urban context than is reflected in our small sample. We agree with Morris and Monroe (2009) that sociologists should consider geography a significant contextual factor in their analyses. More specifically, heightened sensitivity to geographic location can aid researchers in contextualizing and understanding empirical findings related to academic identity, engagement and motivation, and the achievement gap.

How does living in the South impact African American students' experiences, opportunities, and outcomes? Elementary-age students in Tyson's study as well as ours, though living in different types of locales, one urban and the other rural, inhabited broadly similar Southern contexts in at least several respects. Morris and Monroe describe this Southern context as "…a region marked by strong African American identity, stark economic disparities, and psychological attacks on Black people's humanity and intellect during and after enslavement…" (30). As noted previously in this paper, schools and school systems in Southern states, with high numbers of black students, have historically been funded at lower levels (Wenglinsky 1997).

This unique Southern context presents African American students challenges in maintaining a robust, positive academic identity and high levels of motivation and engagement. As Morris and Monroe also point out, however, one factor in particular may aid African American students in Southern locales to maintain a positive academic identity and high levels of engagement and motivation: The presence of HBCUs, which are more likely to be located in the South than any other geographic region of the country. As they say: "It is possible that the greater availability of these schooling options in some regions of the country shapes African Americans…students' beliefs about academic possibilities beyond high school" (27). The location of our data collection site on the campus of an HBCU of some note in the Deep South may have offered some measure of protection for African American students, insulating them from teacher and school practices and structures that could push them toward dis-engagement and the idea that school is not for them by providing a nurturing socio-emotional climate. According to Nasir et al., Afrocentric identities are "protective and supportive of school

success" (2009:101). Though we do not make the claim that the curriculum and environment at our data collection site are fully Afrocentric, observations and personal experiences over a period of years by the lead author, who continues to read to students at the school on a regular basis and whose child attended the school for kindergarten, lead us to state that it certainly approaches that categorization.

How do our findings fit within the larger conversation regarding the achievement gap? As noted throughout this paper, for over thirty years scholars have been in dialogic tension with Fordham and Ogbu. Specifically, for students tension is said to exist between representing an authentic black self on the one hand, and striving for academic success on the other, which Fordham and Ogbu claim creates a "burden of acting white," contributing to comparatively low academic achievement of black students. A number of scholarly analyses of African American students at both primary and secondary levels, both implicitly and explicitly in response to Fordham and Ogbu, were reviewed here, revealing a dearth of evidence to support the "burden of acting white" hypothesis. In fact, a review of the literature demonstrates the protective effects of positive peer groups, which strengthen students to resist ideas about African American identity with which they disagree. Protective effects also emerge from a strong, community-based African American identity which has at its core a commitment to academic motivation, achievement and success. These protective effects help African American students create and sustain positive, robust academic identities and strong levels of academic engagement and motivation to achieve (Horvat and Lewis 2003:275). The data we add to the conversation suggest empirical validation of the protective effect being located on the campus of an HBCU has on the academic identity of African American students.

Reviewed studies and our contribution to the ongoing dialogue offer reason for cautious optimism: African American students in primary and secondary schools and across a range of economic and geographic contexts continue to display positive, robust academic identity and high levels of engagement and motivation. On the other hand, long-standing, identified dynamics and practices that threaten the academic identity of black students persist, including cultural stereotypes of African Americans as thugs, pimps, drug dealers, and anti-intellectual; school practices such as academic tracking, with African American students being over-

represented in "low ability" classes as early as pre-school (Hatt 2012); and classroom practices such as those implicated by Hatt in her analysis of the social construction of "smartness" as representing a tool of social control and domination based on class and race. Even the meaning of and practices that embody the concept of diversity, as explicated by Randolph (2013), have come to reinforce inequality and stratification, by extension making it more difficult for African American students to create and sustain positive academic identities. Specifically, she demonstrates how educators' public embrace of diversity sounds progressive on the surface but has in practice been distorted so that African American students are understood by teachers and school authorities, perhaps even members of the media and general public, to be "the wrong kind of different".

The importance of identifying, implicating, and linking these dynamics and practices, individually and collectively, to the ongoing achievement gap is of paramount importance. If African American students, on the whole, display robust levels of academic engagement and motivation yet do not experience educational outcomes comparable to those of white students are those levels of engagement and motivation sustainable? Though previous research suggests that regardless of socio-economic status, race, or ethnicity all children begin school with a desire to learn and achieve (Tyson 2002:1183), Tatum (1997:20) reminds us that the student's capacity for self-reflection allows her to ask "Who was I?" "Who am I" and "Who will I become?" In other words, it is not inevitable that students will continue to display robust academic identities and high levels of engagement and motivation. According to Hatt (2012), school is a key site in which we learn what it means to be smart. We then come to determine whether we are smart, ultimately deciding whether school is a place where we belong and is something worth investing ourselves in. Issues mentioned throughout this paper, including historical inequities, current cultural stereotypes, classroom practices, even the "logic of diversity," can conspire to create a context within which students, particularly African American students, decide that "School is not for me."

Utilizing a small data set we have presented in this exploratory note empirical evidence demonstrating that African American third-graders at a black school on the campus of a prominent HBCU in the Deep South have robust, positive academic identities and are engaged and motivated to succeed in school. Our findings align with, yet extend, the work of scholars

who have been engaged in an ongoing thirty-plus year dialogic tension with Fordham and Ogbu. Like previous scholars, despite forces at various levels which threaten to undo the positive academic orientations detailed throughout this paper, we find that African American students define themselves as smart and capable and are academically engaged and motivated to do well. In displaying robust, positive academic identity they are saying unequivocally that "School is for me!" It is our individual and collective task as scholars, parents, policy makers, and anyone remotely interested in justice and equality, to help them maintain this belief in self while simultaneously and systematically continuing to expose dynamics and practices at all contextual levels which help maintain the achievement gap.

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