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The Role of Spirituality in the School Experiences of Church-Going African American Female Adolescents

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The Role of Spirituality in the School Experiences of Church-Going African American Female Adolescents

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Dedication

This dissertation is my offering to God, whose power fueled my efforts.

To my grandmother, Eulene Anglin, and grandfather, Robert Jones, for a legacy of wisdom, service and tenacity.

To my parents, Noel and Ruth Jones, for your unwavering support and confidence in my abilities.

To my husband, Bavu Blakes, and my son, Ellison, for your undying patience and love.

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“My soul looks back and wonder how I got over…”

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The Role of Spirituality in the School Experiences of African American Female Adolescents

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Over the last century, people have questioned the ability of African American cultural knowledge to facilitate academic achievement among African American students. The cultural understandings of this group are often positioned as incompatible with the beliefs, practices and values that produce mainstream and school success. The spirituality of African Americans is a significant, yet often overlooked, component of African American culture and life. Through group interviews, in-depth interviews, personal narratives and participant observations, this dissertation explores the role of spirituality in the school experiences of African American female adolescents. Spirituality is defined as the conglomeration of beliefs, practices and values that connect an individual to an unseen force(s) and/or a non-material realm.

Cognitive, behavioral and affective school outcomes are products of spiritual and personal development. Thus, this study pays particular attention to the processes and factors that cultivate the spiritual identities of this group. Family and religious organizations commonly initiate the spiritual awareness of African Americans. Lived experiences in contexts shaped by intersections of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism facilitate their development of individualized spiritual self-understandings, expressions and practices. To privilege the perspectives of African American female

adolescents, Black feminist epistemology and critical youth studies guided this project's design and methods of data collection and analysis. Additionally, this work builds upon the relational framework for the study of spirituality and religion in the lives of African Americans to explore this group's spiritual development, understandings and school outcomes.

This dissertation suggests that the theological perspectives of African American female adolescents directly impact their academic beliefs, behaviors, and school experiences. Understandings of God and employment of spiritual practices may act as protective factors that cultivate the educational resilience and academic self-confidence of this group. Additionally, African American female adolescents may employ spiritual beliefs to promote unity and build community on their school campus.

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Introduction

A Personal Reflection

"Are they laughing at me?" I asked myself, broadening my smile to mask growing confusion. As my classmates chuckled, I wondered which part of my presentation they found so amusing. At the time, I was sharing the results of a pilot research project that I had conducted for an advanced ethnography course during my final semester of coursework at The University of Texas at Austin. To explore my budding interest in spirituality's impact on the education of Black female adolescents, I had carried out a 10-week case study with a friend's 15 year-old daughter, Aimee, who I knew from a local predominately Black, Christian church.

During the study, Aimee and I spent a great deal of time together. I visited with her at her house, observed her at school and worshipped with her at church. We had one formal interview and several informal conversations about her spiritual development, school experiences, and interactions between the two. Additionally, I interviewed her parents, friends and mentors about their contributions to her spiritual development, as well as any observations that related Aimee's spiritual beliefs and practices to her school experiences and goals.

Aimee's spiritual development reflected that of many African American female adolescents, including my own at her age. Most of her spiritual beliefs and practices had been passed down from her family and community, yet shaped and negotiated through her lived experiences (Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner, & Cain, 2003, p. 9). Aimee subscribed to a Christian religious tradition heavily influenced by philosophies that

reflected African cosmological thought (Paris, 1995) and Black Liberation Theology (Cone, 1990). These theological perspectives position a sovereign, male deity as inserting Himself into the daily realities of the marginalized. Aimee referred to this deity as “God” and often spoke of having personal encounters with Him, primarily through dance. For Aimee, these encounters facilitated her resistance to societal norms, particularly at school, and reinforced her ability to cope within racist and classist hierarchies. As an African American female who grew up heavily influenced by Christianity and the charismatic Black church experience in the highly segregated South, I could relate to much of Aimee’s story and felt honored to share it with my class.

During my presentation, I introduced the study by juxtaposing Karl Marx’s criticisms on religion to Nat Turner’s slave rebellion. In his treatise, A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, Marx (1977) declared religion to be the “opium of the masses” (p. 130) . He offered that religion obstructs revolution in part by indoctrinating the marginalized to accept, and even welcome, domination by the controlling class in this life for a dubious promise of redemption and reward in the next. However, Nat Turner (1831), an African American slave and self-proclaimed Baptist prophet, attributed his initiation of the most effective slave insurrection in the antebellum South (Greenberg, 2003) to a personal visitation from “the Spirit” (Gray & Turner, 1831, p. 11). According to Turner (1831), this supernatural Being commanded him to “fight against the Serpent” (p. 11), reiterating the Biblical promise that “the first will be last and the last will be first” (p. 11). Nat Turner followed the command of this Spirit, and while

the slave revolt lasted less than two days, it resulted in the death of many slave owners in the name of African American liberation.

My goal in introducing my study with these stories was to foreshadow spirituality's impact on Aimee's school and everyday experiences. In sharing them, I offered that despite the protest of canonical thinkers towards its virtues, spirituality has been documented as a catalyst for transformation and resistance in the African American community (Higginbotham, 1993). The response from my classmates, however, was not what I expected. As I started discussing the spiritual influences of Nat Turner's decision to revolt, the room grew silent. Initially, I thought this to be a good sign, naively equating silence with interest and curiosity, but soon after, the silence turned to chuckles, and I knew the presentation had taken a turn for the worst.

"Are they laughing at me?" I asked myself, quickly becoming overshadowed with initial shock and self-doubt that I tend to experience when feeling Othered. Was my explanation of the events leading to the slave rebellion too vague, or did they find the mystical images used on Nat Turner's power point slide to be corny? Or, rather, was the idea of a human being communicating and interacting with a supernatural presence so preposterous that they could not hide their amusement?

It wasn't until a few weeks after the incident that I recognized the academy's long-standing denial of spirituality and religion as noteworthy functions of human existence (Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000; Freud, 1927; Leuba, 1921). Reflecting upon my 10-year academic career as a student of the social sciences, I could recall only a few times that spirituality or religion were highlighted as significant historical, political,

or socio-cultural factors that influenced a person's or group's cognition and behavior, even during conversations around multicultural education. However, my personal experiences and those of countless other people of color suggest otherwise.

I am the daughter of a 3rd generation Pentecostal preacher and pastor. He and my mother met at a Christian Bible college eight years before my birth. I grew up in East Texas where both anti-Black racism and Christian religiosity were widespread and overarching cultural norms. For the African American community, the church offered a refuge from societal forces that seemed determined to maintain our marginalization. In this space, narratives were promoted that countered those of Black inferiority that were pervasive in our town (Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren, & Peters, 2013). Collective identities were constructed based on theoretical perspectives that placed God at the center of our existence. Our spiritual beliefs emphasized God's deity and sovereignty and positioned God as an advocate who struggled with us against seen and unseen nemeses. I participated in weekly services that included songs, prayers and messages that positioned God as being on our side, having a divine purpose for our lives, and fighting our battles with and for us. The African American Christian community shared an understanding about God's desire for our liberation and success, not only in the afterlife, but also in the one that we encountered everyday. These beliefs and practices were the foundation of an identity that influenced my pre-college and college academic success.

The current religious landscape displays clear intersections between race and religiosity and spirituality that the academy should note if it is to respect and enrich the knowledge of all students, specifically those who are African American. A 2009 Pew

Report (Sahgal & Smith, 2009) suggests that African Americans are more religious than the U.S. population as a whole. Nearly 80% of African Americans reported that religion was very important to their lives, compared with 56% among all U.S. adults. Additionally, 88% of African Americans indicated that they are absolutely certain of God's existence, and more than three-fourths (78%) stated that they pray at least once a day. What's more, African American women reported the highest level of religious commitment, when compared to Black men and members of other racial or ethnic backgrounds. Lastly, a National Study of Youth and Religion (Schwadel & Smith, 2005) suggests that African American teenagers whose parents are affiliated with conservative or Black Protestant denominations are especially likely to report belief in God (98%) and participate in spiritual practices (67%). This group is also more likely that their non-Black peers to position God as being involved in their everyday lived experiences (73%).

Overview of the Study

My experiences as an African American female educator who self-identifies as spiritual have shaped the intention and design of this study. Rather than sacrifice objectivity, this acknowledgement of my positioning allows for a more transparent and nuanced discussion around this project's goals. The purpose of this dissertation is to expand discourses that explore the influences of sociocultural factors in educational experiences. It hypothesizes that spirituality is a noteworthy component of African American culture that impacts Black student achievement in U.S. schools.

Spirituality is defined in this study as the conglomeration of learned and negotiated beliefs, practices, and values that guide understandings of self and others in

relation to unseen forces and a transcendent reality (Norton, 2008; Stewart, 1999). It is an aspect of African American culture that has developed from and contributed to the shared knowledge and experiences of this group, yet individualized spiritual understandings produce unique affective, cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). While spirituality is not synonymous with religiosity, for many African Americans, religion facilitates a connection with and knowledge about God, a non-material reality and humans in local community (West & Glaude, 2003; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Thus, while spirituality and religiosity are not conflated, they interact in myriad ways.

This study positions spirituality as an aspect of African American cultural knowledge, which has been primarily constructed according to shared experiences in Africa and the United States (Paris, 1995; Stewart, 1997). It recognizes spiritual awareness as being initiated and cultivated through social interactions with members of a distinct community or social group (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). Socializing practices transmit culturally constructed knowledge from the group to an individual, and socializing agents transmit these contextualized understandings across generations (Haight, 1998; Newlin, Knafl, & Melkus, 2002). Spirituality is recognized as an aspect of African American culture (Stewart, 1997), yet it is also understood as being in constant formation as it is continually influenced by an individual's human attributes, lived experiences and sociocultural factors (Templeton & Eccles, 2006; Tisdell, 2003). Thus, although this dissertation lifts up the need for the academy to unequivocally include spirituality in discourses and pedagogy that center and shape the schooling of African

American students, it makes an effort not to essentialize the spiritual knowledge and experiences of all African Americans.

This study gives particular attention to the spiritual beliefs and practices maintained by African American female adolescents in the school setting, as well as the cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes that may result from such spiritual understandings (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). It, also, contributes to the growing body of literature that centers the voices and experiences of Black female students in U.S. schools (Chavous, Smalls, Rivas-Drake, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Evans-Winters, 2007; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007; Muhammad & Dixson, 2008). Like Black women, African American girls have learned to exist and function in the margins of society, as well as within various communities and cultures (Phillips, 2006). As a result, this group possesses an invaluable standpoint by which multicultural education discourses can be explored and amplified (Collins, 2000).

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This study recognizes the oppressive contexts in which spirituality and education for many African American female adolescents are performed (Weis & Fine, 2000). Accordingly, Black feminist epistemology and Womanist philosophies frame discussions, methodological applications and data analysis (Collins, 2000; Williams, 2000). The participants' school experiences are explored through a lens that acknowledges the pervasiveness and intersections of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism in their lived experiences. This study is interested in the unconventional sources of strength and

agency employed by this group to navigate these environments (Collins, 2000; Phillips, 2006).

The methodology reflects my desire to privilege the lived experiences and intellectual work of African American female adolescents (Best, 2007). In the context of an 18-month ethnography, formal data collection included group and in-depth interviews with 22 African American female adolescents who subscribed to Christian traditions. It also included interviews with their peers, parents and church leaders. Group interviews provided the participants with a safe space for communal reflection and theorization around intersections of spirituality and education (Reinharz, 1992). Through in-depth interviews, the African American female adolescents that I worked with shared personal narratives and stories (Foss & Foss, 1994). These personal narratives and stories validated their lived experiences and provided a self-defined foundation upon which knowledge was co-constructed (Collins, 2000; Foss & Foss, 1994).

The bulk of the data collection took place within the youth department of a large, predominately Black, Pentecostal church in Southern California. During the tenure of this project, I worked at the church as the Director of Ecclesia and managed all programming related to the members' spiritual growth and development. Additionally, I was a member of the church and had familial ties, as my father is the pastor and my brother was the Chief Financial Officer. Ten years earlier, I served as the Youth Director of the department from which the participants were recruited. Ongoing ties to this community facilitated my entry to the field site and informed my understanding of the organization's culture (Pedersen, 1998).

Twenty-two female adolescents who self-identified as African-American and spiritual were recruited from four of the youth-centered church programs. Twenty-one of the 22 participants self-identified as Christian and one agreed with most of the Christian philosophies, but did not self-identify as Christian. Two additional girls who did not endorse Christianity participated in and influenced this study. However, this dissertation focuses on the experiences and knowledge of the 22 participants who believed in Christian philosophies, even if they did not label themselves as such.

While this study is not a church ethnography, the church served as the primary setting in which the study took place. There were two reasons for this. First, the Black church remains a key site of spiritual, cultural and social development for many African American youth (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Haight, 2002). Having the study in this setting allowed me to observe common social, cultural and spiritual practices of the participants and their peers. Furthermore, in this setting, I was able to examine the dialogic process of spiritual socialization, as well as witness attempts to transmit spiritual knowledge that the participants accepted, rejected or negotiated (Goodnow, 1992). Several questions for the group and in-depth interviews were formed as a result of the activities, conversations and negotiations that I observed.

Secondly, the Black church often signifies a counterspace to the antagonizing realities of school and society and offers empowerment, support, and comfort for many African American youth (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). This study recognized the church as potentially providing a safe space for the contributors to recall and reconstruct school experiences and spiritual connections from a position of power. The focus groups and

some of the in-depth interviews were conducted in this space; the additional in-depth interviews were conducted over the telephone.

While this project was set in a faith-based community, it is not only a study in youth spiritual development or religiosity. It explores the developmental impact of cultural knowledge as it articulates with the larger societal structures within which African American girls are a part. This study contributes to the work of educational anthropologists and black feminists concerned with the impact of African American cultural understandings in the academic achievement and school experiences of this group (Akom, 2003; Belgrave et al., 2004; Boykin, 1994; Chavous et al., 2008; V. Evans-Winters, 2007; Fordham, 1993; Foster, 2005; King, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rollock, 2007). Furthermore, it encourages intergroup discussions between the fields of education, anthropology, psychology and black and religious studies (Cone, 1990; Cokley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2012; Dillard et al., 2000; Paris, 1995; Tisdell, 2003; Williams, 2000).

This study does not essentialize culture or present spirituality as a static entity that all African Americans monolithically practice according to the conventions of a historical past (Hall, 1990). Instead, while historical contributions are noted, spirituality is viewed as dynamic, and African American spiritual knowledge – like other forms of cultural knowledge – is interpreted and practiced according to an individual's positioning and perspective (Holland et al., 2003). While all of the participants in this study endorse Christianity and participate to various degrees within a Black church tradition, by no means does it represent the spiritual knowledge and experiences of all African American

youth. Rather, it offers an example of indigenous cultural knowledge as positively impacting Black student achievement in hopes of contributing to multicultural discourses in the field of education.

Layout of Chapters

Chapter One presents the theoretical landscape by which this project is conceptualized. Educational philosophies that position African American culture as incompatible with school success are discussed and critiqued. I describe spirituality as an often overlooked component of African American culture, as well as a function of human existence that has traditionally been neglected by the academy and in educational discourses. Additionally, this chapter presents the theoretical framing for this study and defines key terms significant to this work.

Chapter Two presents literature that has explored the educational experiences and spiritual development of African American female adolescents. It highlights early research that minimized their school presence in relation to more dominant groups and positioned them as a culturally deprived sub-group. This chapter also addresses the paucity of literature that has focused on spiritual development of Black female adolescents. By doing so, it presents its role in the school setting for this group.

Chapter Three presents the methodological perspectives, assumptions and methods used in this project. It pays particular attention to my positionality as a native researcher with a long, intimate history in the research setting, as well as my role as an employee during the time of the study. My positioning added complexity to the data

collection and analysis. Thus, in this chapter, I account for positions of privilege, power and gendered subjugation.

Spiritual profiles of six participants are presented in Chapter Four. Each profile provides an in-depth look at their process of spiritual development, as well as subsequent outcomes in the school setting. I focus on the significance of spiritual socializing agents and lived experiences in producing personalized spiritual understandings that shaped the participants' academic philosophies and behaviors.

Chapter Five draws from the profiles presented in Chapter Four, as well as group interviews and ethnographic data collected throughout the study, to present themes around the participants' schooling and the factors impacting their academic performances. It brings to light the significance of the participants' theological conceptions around God and God's role in their lives. Additionally, it attends to prayer as the spiritual practice most employed by the participants in this setting.

Finally, Chapter Six discusses the findings of this project in relation to the current academic and Black church climate. I argue that spirituality should be included in discourses around culturally responsive pedagogy. In this chapter, I also urge churches and youth groups to facilitate theological understandings that are culturally relevant to its youth.

Chapter One: Background and Significance

For centuries, the ability of African American culture to facilitate Black student achievement in the United States has been questioned. Mainstream intellectuals, cultural critics, entertainers, policy makers and academics from a wide range of backgrounds have decried the practices, habits and understandings displayed by this group as detracting from their academic preparedness and success. For example, in his widely sold book, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America,* John McWhorter (2000) blamed the low performance of African American students on the cultural transmission of a defeatist mentality. African Americans, he believed, subscribe to a "Cult of Victimology" mindset that has generated ongoing attitudes of apathy, anti-intellectualism, and separatism from mainstream society. As a result, African American students maintain what they believe to be an authentic African American cultural identity by shunning academic practices that would lead to education and school success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Similarly, at the 50-year commemoration of the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling to integrate schools, Bill Cosby rebuked poor and working-class African Americans for promoting what he felt were destructive practices that valued materialism over education and victimhood over personal responsibility (Dyson, 2005). He implied that the academic failure of poor Black students was directly related to the cultural understandings of their families and communities, which were manifested through their ineffective parenting skills and self-destructive social activities (Moynihan, 1965).

The ideas promoted by McWhorter and Cosby hint at long-standing beliefs about the pathological nature of African American cultural practices (Scott, 1997). Nineteenth and 20th century intellectuals commonly suggested that the self-understandings of African Americans had been distorted by American slavery and social discrimination to such a large degree that its impact upon facilitating mainstream success was often negative (DuBois, 2012; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). DuBois (2012), for instance, spoke about the daily practices, mannerisms and home structures of the Black masses in the North and South regions of the United States as contributing to their lack of post-slavery progress. Their "shiftlessness" (p. 148), "ignorance" (p. 148) and lack of desire for economic and social assimilation, he felt, were the results of apathy brought about by a distorted mentality that positioned mainstream America as untrustworthy and their attempts to advance in it as futile (DuBois, 2012). Similarly, Frazier (1950) focused on the "disorganization" of the Black family as "the most important social problem that has retarded the development of the Negro since his emancipation" (Frazier, 1950, p. 169). This cultural family pattern, according to Frazier (1948), was initiated when slave owners separated African families into the American slave system. As mothers and their children were separated from fathers, mothers were forced to lead the household, which did not reflect the "natural organization" (p. 435) of family set by African culture. Frazier suggested that family disorganization was a component specific to African American culture – one that was transmitted inter-generationally, as evidenced by modern rates of children born to unwed parents, single motherhood and the divorce rate of Black families. Additionally, he suggested that dysfunctional family arrangements led to Black cultural

pathology, which was evident by the economic and social realities of Black families and the underachievement of Black children (Frazier, 1950).

These academic and popular assessments about the cultural practices of African Americans influenced thoughts around the capacity of Black students achieve academically. Black families and youth, many believed, lacked cultural knowledge that schools could build upon to facilitate student success (King, 1994; Moynihan, 1965). Additionally, scholars and educators frequently believed that Black student achievement could only be reached if African American youth distanced themselves from their home cultures and practices and acquired White, middle class ways of knowing (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Reissman, 1962).

Incompatibility Theories

Whaley and Noel (2012) label educational theories that position African American cultural identity as undermining academic performance as incompatibility theories. These theories suggest that the underachievement of African American students is largely due to problematic culturally-oriented practices, attitudes and beliefs that are not congruent with those that facilitate school success. I appropriate this label – incompatibility theories – to similarly describe theories that position the Black achievement gap as resulting from problems associated with the cultural understandings of African Americans. I present and examine those theories that have positioned the Black child as culturally deprived and disadvantaged (Reissman, 1962), Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory (Ogbu & Simons, 1998) and Fordham and Ogbu's burden of acting White (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Cultural Deprivation/Disadvantaged Theory

In the late 1950's and 1960's, the cultural deprivation theory emerged from the field of sociology (Gordon, 1965; Reissman, 1962). This perspective replaced genetically-oriented theories that positioned Black inferiority as a biological consequence (Baker, 1998). The cultural deprivation theory suggests that the underachievement of the economically disadvantaged results from their inability to learn and perform White, middle class cultural values and mannerisms that translates into cultural capital needed to produce school success (Bourdieu, 1990; Reissman, 1962). According to Reissman (1962), the term "culturally deprived…refers to those aspects of middle-class culture – such as education, books, formal language – from which these groups have not benefitted" (p. 3). Because of this, Reissman found it imperative for educators to understand and accommodate for the academic disadvantages of this group and transform their anti-intellectual views into academically beneficial ones. Describing the traits of the culturally deprived, Reissman (1959) states:

> The anti-intellectualism of the underprivileged individual is one of his most significant handicaps. It is expressed in his feeling that life is a much better teacher than books – theory is impractical... This anti-intellectualism seems to be rooted in a number of the traits that characterize him: his physical style, alienation, antagonism to the school, defensiveness regarding his gullibility, and his generally pragmatic outlook (p. 29).

While the concept of culturally disadvantaged was initially presented as race-neutral, ideas around who constituted the "culturally deprived" were inextricably linked

to race. In mainstream press, the culturally deprived were regularly described as "minority, from broken homes, and from poor 'slumlike' environments" (Martinez & Rury, 2012, p. 9). African American children were believed to make up a large portion of this culturally deprived population. During this era, discussions around the specific tools needed to educated the African American child surfaced (Ornstein, 1966; Schenck, 1969), along with an abundance of compensatory education programs, many of which were not effective (Beatty, 2012).

Though the term "culturally deprived" has largely faded and now tends to be shunned by mainstream society, scholars suggest that it has been replaced by less explicitly damning terminology, such as "disadvantaged" and "at-risk" (Martinez and Rury, 2012). At the root of these terms, however, remains an idea around the academic unpreparedness of ethnic minority students, specifically those who are African American. Though there are many challenges to this perspective, the one most relevant to this study is its denial of academic integrity for different beliefs and practices that are not middle-class and White (Boykin, 1983).

Oppositional Culture Theory

John Ogbu (Ogbu, 1986, 1987; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) is possibly the most widely referenced author regarding oppositional culture and African American student achievement. While he agreed that cultural knowledge of a minority group contributes to their academic practices, Ogbu (1987) did not believe that this argument could be applied universally to account for the achievement of some minority groups over others. Instead, Obgu (1998) posited that the underachievement of African Americans was influenced by

two major factors: (1) societal and school forces, and (2) community and individual-level forces. As such, he suggested that African American student failure is partly due to social discrimination that results in unfair treatment of minority groups and partly due to the groups' responses to such treatment.

Ogbu (1987) acknowledged that some minority groups are systematically denied access to opportunities that the dominant group receives. These structural differences include opportunities connected to economics, policies and education. Ogbu (1987) believed that the treatment of minorities in the wider society was largely reflected in their educational opportunities. Racial inequality, thus, presented itself in disparities in educational policies and practices, unfair treatment of minority students and the lack of societal rewards for their educational attainment. The structural barriers in society, Ogbu believed, determined ideologies of academic achievement that were constructed by members of a social group. He also suggested that differences in performance for minority groups were related to differences in their responses to unfair treatment. School achievement, then, was dependent upon congruency of school knowledge with cultural knowledge, treatment of the cultural groups within and outside of the school setting, and culturally shared ideas around the value of schooling.

Part of this theory also relies on Ogbu's (1987) classification of minority groups according to their terms of incorporation into a society. His classifications were based on the reasons for the group's migration to the US and their treatment by the dominant group upon arrival. Autonomous minorities migrated to the US on their own accord, and while they may suffer some discrimination, they are not subjected to intense subjugation and

inequities. Immigrant, or voluntary, minorities migrated to the United States to receive greater economic opportunities. As a result, they accept less than equal treatment in exchange for increased opportunities.

Caste-like, or involuntary, minorities (i.e. African Americans) were forced into the US, through slavery, conquest or colonization and relegated to harsh social inequality. As a result of such severe treatment, these groups develop survival strategies in order to cope; yet these strategies do not always contribute to their progress or success. Ogbu felt that because of the intense oppressive conditions of Black people in America, African American students have inherited a culturally transmitted oppositional collective identity. This cultural identity has produced counterproductive schooling behaviors due to beliefs that the system of social mobility is rooted in racial discrimination.

The work of Ogbu has had groundbreaking influence on educational anthropology and has advanced conversations around culture, minority student groups, minority agency and school success. In fact, the cultural-ecological theory may allow for an explanation of recent literature that suggests that African immigrants as a group greatly outperform African Americans in school and society (Bennett & Lutz, 2009). Yet, critical commentary around his analysis has been offered (Akom, 2003; Foster, 2005; Lynn, 2006; Whaley & Noel, 2012). Foster (2005) represents the voice of many when he suggests that Ogbu's work fails to adequately account for the wide range of academic behaviors and orientations routinely manifested among involuntary and voluntary minorities. In other words, Ogbu presents a cultural identity for African Americans that is monolithic, static and leaves no room for the existence of Black academic achievers.

Burden of Acting White

A final theory, which suggests the cultural incompatibility of African American cultural knowledge with school cultural knowledge, is the burden of Acting White (Ogbu and Fordham, 1986). The acting white theory builds upon the oppositional culture theory, as well as a 'fictive kinship' framework (Chatters, 1994), to suggest that some Black students underachieve because they fear being imagined as outside of the Black social and cultural community.

As suggested by Ogbu (Ogbu and Simons, 1998), students develop an oppositional culture to school as a result of social discrimination. Additionally, in society and the school setting, students acknowledge and participate within a system of status mobility (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). It is by this system that the qualities, competencies and behaviors valued by different social groups are shared. Children learn to gain status and get ahead by cultivating these group attributes. These systems are constructed according to an established Black cultural frame. Ethnic minorities, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) believed, regard some forms of behavior as inappropriate for them because they are characteristic of white Americans and fall outside of that Black cultural frame. Behaving in a manner that falls "within a white cultural frame of reference is to 'act white'" and such behaviors are "negatively sanctioned" (p. 181) because it reflects betrayal a collective identity.

At the heart of this theory is the idea that ethnic minorities perceive schooling as a "subtractive process" (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, p. 182; Valenzuela, 1999). In other words, African American students believe that excelling in school requires an ethnic

minority to become acculturated into a white American cultural frame of reference. Fictive kinship "symbolizes a black American sense of peoplehood in opposition to white American social identity" (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, p. 184). Thus, the perception of schooling as subtractive causes ethnic minorities to resist academic pursuits and encourages them to discourage group members from adopting white attitudes and practices needed to succeed.

Critics to the acting white theory contend that its tenets position black adolescents and Black people in general as anti-academic. This implication has been critiqued throughout the years as being simplistic and inaccurate (Ballard, 1973). Additionally, racialized peer pressure is not always prevalent in schools (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). Horvat and Lewis (2003) suggest that academically successful Black students can maintain their authentic Black identity by cultivating positive friendship groups in their school communities. Additionally, Carter (2006) introduces the idea of "cultural straddlers" to denote high achieving minority students who successfully balance between academic and social groups. By negotiating the multiple cultural environments at school, these achievers maintain and share their Black cultural practices with peer groups while succeeding academically in primary spaces of learning.

Selected Responses to Incompatibility Theories

The presented theories have served as a foundation for work and perspectives that focus on the incompatibility of African American culture with mainstream school culture. However, a number of scholars have challenged these ideas and offered alternative assessments to each one. Akom (2003) and Carter (2008) have shown instances where

Black and critical race achievement ideologies, respectively, serve as tools of resistance and adaptation to hegemonic school forces that would attempt to subtract from their cultural identities. Application of these ideologies in the school setting allow Black students to maintain their cultural beliefs and practices while pursuing academic success. These studies demonstrated the importance of Black peer support in facilitating individual success.

Similarly, Oyserman, Gant, & Ager (1995) offered a socially contextualized model of African American identity to explain academic possibilities for Black students. This model suggests that African American youth who have developed a sense of African American "community embeddness" are motivated to pursue academic success. The collectivistic culture of African Americans, they contend, gives youth necessary support to persist in school when confronted with racism.

O'Connor (1997) suggests that the knowledge around Black collective struggle that low-income Black adolescents acquire from family members can facilitate their resistance to apathy that may result from recognizing structural barriers. The high achievers in her study who were informed by the tradition of the Black collective struggle, acts of resistance and "theories of making it" (p. 608) developed a greater sense of personal and collective agency, which resulted in their pursuit of academic success.

Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) argue that schools tend to ignore funds of knowledge that students carry to school. Funds of knowledge are the strategic and cultural resources that Mexican-American households contain. Mexican-American children acquire them through daily social interactions. The authors suggest that these

funds, if utilized in the classroom, can become useful assets of ethnic minority students' academic success.

Finally, several scholars suggest that Black student underachievement does not lie in an incompatible or deficient student cultural identity, but rather in the cultural incompatibilities and deficiencies of mainstream schools (Boykin, 1994; Dantley, 2005; Delpit, 2012; Hilliard, 1992; Shujaa, 1994). In other words, if the "cultural fabric" of mainstream schools reflected and respected African American cultural values and promoted pedagogy that was culturally responsive, the academic performance of African American students would significantly increase (Boykin, 1983; Geneva Gay, 2000).

Missing from these critiques is literature exploring the significance of spirituality in the school experiences of minority adolescents. Scholars suggest that spirituality is an element of African American cultural identity that impacts the educational experiences of Black students in U.S. schools (Norton, 2008; Watt, 2003). Described by Boykin (1994) as, "an approach to life as being essentially vitalistic rather than mechanistic…" (p. 249), spirituality signifies the role of non-material forces in maintaining connections with and influencing African American's everyday lives. While the significance of spirituality in Black life has been extensively documented (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Stewart, 1999), its direct impact on Black student achievement has been under-theorized and under-studied (Parker, 2006a).

Spirituality and the Academy

Roehlkepartain, Benson, King, & Wagener (2005) contribute the neglect of spirituality in the social sciences to long-standing biases in the academy against religion.

In 1914, Leuba determined that an overwhelming number of academic scholars expressed disbelief in the existence of God and immortality. More than eight decades later, Larson and Witham (1998) suggested similar results, finding that over 90% of widely influential U.S. scholars denied the possibility of the existence of God and immortality. For instance, respected scholar Sigmund Freud (1927) continually dismissed religion as “a universal obsessional neurosis” and mere illusion derived from “infantile human wishes” (p.43). Furthermore, religion has often been narrowly positioned as a secondary, discretionary human activity, as opposed to a core, fundamental dynamic of human life (Freud, 1927; Smith, 2003).

Ethnic minority scholars contend that the characterization of spirituality as separate from and subordinate to a secular worldview reflects hegemonic Eurocentric paradigms upon which the academy was founded (Anzaldua, 2007; Dillard et al., 2000; hooks, 2003; Milner, 2006). With the dismissal of spirituality in the academic space comes the silencing of distinct non-White epistemologies and cultural understandings of spiritually minded ethnic minority and historically marginalized scholars and students who are expected to separate their academic lives from their spiritual ones. As Dillard and her colleagues state (2000):

> Given the reward structure and cultural milieu of the academy, spiritually minded academicians have often received the implicit message to hang their spirituality outside the doors of the university and to pick it up again (if they are still inclined to do so) on the way out. As the ultimate “s” word, spirituality has tended to be a

> topic rarely explored in its multidimensionality in the sacred secular halls of the academy (p. 449).

I lift up the words of Dillard, not only to partially explain the lack of scholarly research traditionally given to spirituality in the social sciences, but also to join an emerging group of historically marginalized scholars who call for the academy to “re-vision” its epistemological and pedagogical practices to include the lived realities and cultural understandings of African Americans and other non-dominant cultural groups. I also agree with Tisdell (2003) who attributes its neglect to the lack of clear, universal definitions of culture and spirituality and few published conceptualizations that represent and come from multiethnic perspectives.

Understandings of Culture

In mainstream educational discourses, culture is often thought of as the observable practices of a social group. Particular attention is given to the group’s shared customs, beliefs, and habits, and culture is presented accordingly, as an essentialized, unchanging product of their collective history (Banks, 2010; Bullivant, 1989). Such conceptualization of culture has been criticized by critical multiculturalists as encouraging the exotification of social groups and misappropriation of their artifacts (Wax, 1993). Simplistic understandings of culture feeds the construction of symbolically violent pedagogies that attend superficially to visible cultural elements without addressing the oppressive structures within which they were constructed and are currently displayed (Bullivant, 1989).

Bullivant (1989) draws on Gramsci's idea of culture as "thought in action" (Crehan, 2002) to redefine culture as the knowledge, ideas and skills of a social group that have enabled them to survive in their given environments. These "survival programs" facilitate interactions with, adaptation to and modification of their social settings and structures and give meaning to those things with which the group is concerned. According to Bullivant (1989), the group's visible traditions and artifacts are not the primary elements of their culture. Rather, they symbolize collective interpretations of values, functions, rights and obligations that are needed for the group to exist and prosper in their given context (Banks, 1993). In other words, these patterned and routine practices become "…the embodiment of a cultural program. According to this line of thinking, behavior is not culture; behavior 'contains' it" (p. 33). As changes occur within the group's environment, the knowledge of the group evolves, and their multidimensional cultural understandings adjust in order to remain relevant and functional (Gay, 2000). Multicultural education, then, must stress the importance, legitimacy and vitality of cultural knowledge in relation to intersecting oppressions within a stratified social system, as well as the ever-changing cultural knowledge by which these groups survive.

According to Scott (2006), "Culture provides a line to thinking, speaking and behaving that crosses generational experiences and is expressed in the day-to-day practices of people in a culture" (p. 1112). It is through cultural understandings that spirituality is learned and articulated. Tisdell (2002, 2003) emphasizes the role of symbolic processes, such as images, symbols, and rituals, in facilitating spiritual

knowledge construction. These processes are used to make meaning in powerful and, often, unconscious ways. Such manifestations of spiritual knowledge are often deeply cultural and connect us back to our cultural selves (Tisdell, 2003).

While culture is the product of a unified, communal understanding of behavior, it is also “super individual” (Blumenthal, 1940), and there are varying degrees of unity and subjectivity within human beings. Men and women, then, are not “receptacles to be stuffed full of empirical data and a mass of unconnected raw facts…” (Gramsci, 1990, p. 10), but rather, they interpret, perceive and construct knowledge through a lens informed by a particular set of experiences. Therefore, all members of a cultural group may display cultural elements identically or at all; yet, the cultural feature is not invalidated (Gay, 2000). Hall (1990) puts it best when he states:

> Cultural identity… is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (p. 225).

In this study, I understand spirituality as a component of African American culture. I recognize its fluidity and its development as being in dialogic relationship between the past and present. While spirituality has roots in an identifiable past, its development includes lived experiences, which contribute to its unique nature and ongoing transformation.

Understandings of Spirituality

I position spirituality as a component of African American culture for two reasons. First, the spiritual understandings of African Americans are often developed through a culturally constructed lens and according to shared ideas and lived experiences (Bridges, 2001; Newlin et al., 2002; Stewart, 1997). Similarly, spiritual understandings are transmitted inter-generationally through processes of religious and spiritual socialization (Haight, 2002). The second reason that I position spirituality as a cultural component speaks to the visibility of spiritual development. According to Tisdell (2003) and Stewart (1999), spiritual development occurs within cultural contexts and in accordance with pre-established cultural understandings. It is through these cultural understandings that we learn to articulate and perform our spiritual knowledge. As cultural understandings remain in constant negotiation, so does our spirituality (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). Spirituality comprises the rooted yet gradually shifting beliefs, practices, and values that connect an individual to an unseen force or forces and transcendent reality. Through an individual's spiritual understandings, they develop understandings of self and others in relation to this non-material realm (Mitchem, 2002; Templeton & Eccles, 2006).

Spirituality's significant and unique attributes to the Black community have been well documented (Higginbotham, 1993; Wilmore, 1983). Bridges (2001) recognizes spirituality as, "the essence of African-American culture and religion and the impetus for the struggle for freedom of the African-American community…" (p. 1). In a similar vein, scholars have pointed out its contemporary virtues in the Black community. They suggest that spirituality positively influences self-perceptions of African Americans (Mattis, 2002), our ability to cope and bounce back from difficult situations (Watt, 2003), our life's purpose or direction (Newlin et al., 2002), and our ability to resist social injustice (Cone, 1990; Ross, 2003).

Though nearly 9 in 10 Americans profess to believing in God (Newport, 2011), the spirituality of African Americans is unique. It does not replicate traditional Eurocentric explications, neither is it rooted in a trichotomy that polarizes the sacred, secular and political (Hull, 2001; Milner, 2006). Rather, spirituality among African Americans is a historically and socially constructed source of empowerment that has created and shaped an "alternative consciousness, community and culture" that establishes itself by "refuting all attempts at psychological devaluation…. Black spirituality positively reinforces the value, sanctity and worth of black life…" (Stewart, 1999, p. 30).

Scholars suggest that there is no universally accepted definition of spirituality (Zinnbauer et al., 1999). Prior to the last few decades, social scientists commonly conflated spirituality with religiosity and offered few definitions that would differentiate one term from the other (Roehlkepartain et al., 2005). Much of the contemporary

literature, including the current study, recognizes the similarities of the terms, along with their dialogic capacity, but agree that they are not synonymous in meaning (Bridges, 2001; Mattis, 2000; Zinnbauer et al., 1999). Scholars often describe spirituality as representing an individual's connection to, search for, and involvement with things, people and forces identified as sacred or divine (Newlin et al., 2002; D. G. Scott, 2006; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). This connection helps individuals make meaning of themselves, their experiences and their world (Mattis, 2000; Watt, 2003). Religion, on the other hand, is viewed as consisting of institutionalized rituals, practices and teachings that may aid in an individual's search for and relationship with those sacred and divine forces (Zinnbauer et al., 1999). Definitions about spirituality tend to highlight its influence on an individual's personal experiences, while those around religion underscore collectivity and community in practice.

Research suggests that ideologies that polarize spirituality and religion (i.e. the "spiritual, but not religious" trope) have recently emerged ("Nones" on the Rise: Religion and the unaffliliated," 2012; Wong & Vinsky, 2009). These perspectives often recognize the constructs as being situated in a "good-bad" binary, with spirituality positioned as positively influencing one's life journey, and religion as negatively promoting group-think. Zinnbauer (1999) warns against such dichotomization. He states that, "the purpose of religion is to facilitate people's relationships with God or a divine force…. To see spirituality as solely a personal phenomenon overlooks the cultural context in which the construct emerged" (p. 903). In other words, only perceiving the spirituality-religiosity

relationship according to a “good-bad” binary will lead to limited understandings of both of their meanings.

The arguments of Zinnbauer and his colleagues’ regarding interactions between spirituality and the cultural significance of religion are particularly useful for this study. Although religion has contributed to oppressive, discriminatory and colonizing practices throughout African American history (McKivigan & Snay, 1998), this study takes an positive leaning to the construct and highlights its role in facilitating spiritual understandings and relationships with others (Mattis, 2000; Zinnbauer et al., 1999). Religiosity is understood as a positive contributor to the spirituality and spiritual understandings of African Americans. The significance of religion in the Black American experience has been heavily documented (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994; Calhoun-Brown, 1996; Glaude, 2000; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; West, 1982). Literature consistently affirms that the spirituality and religion of African Americans was, and continues to be, formed largely in response to specific historical and socio-cultural factors that impacted their daily realities (Cone, 1990; Newlin, Knafl, & Melkus, 2002; Bridges, 2001; Stewart, 1999).

Sources of African American Spirituality

Scholars suggest that the spiritual understandings of African Americans have been shaped by at least three interrelated elements: (1) cosmological thought that originated on African continent and survived the Middle Passage experience (Paris, 1995), (2) the shared experiences of Black people in the context of patriarchic, Euro-centric America (Cannon, 1995; Stewart, 1997; West, 1982), and (3) a version of Christianity that is

congruous with African cosmology, yet modified by Black experiences of suffering and marginalization in the US (Bridges, 2001; Cone, 1990; Douglas, 1994).

The first source of spiritual development comes from traditional African cosmological thought, which generally upholds the notion of a supreme being presiding over a realm of lesser divinities, ancestral spirits and the whole universe (Paris, 1995). For most of the participants in this study, the Supreme Being is named God. This paradigm privileges a unified worldview, which makes no distinction between the secular and spiritual. God is recognized as "the beginning of everything, radically relating to everything, and binding everything together" (Bridges, 2001). To this end, God governs and empowers all of creation and bestows creativity upon all things, individually and in community (Stewart, 1997).

The second source of African American spiritual development consists of a theology that takes into account social, cultural and historical experiences of marginalization and oppression for Black people in the United States (Cone, 1990). Scholars agree that these experiences often become the point of departure by which African Americans understand sacredness and transcendence, individually and as a community (Williams, 2006). Black feminists and Womanists make clear the unique standpoints of Black women who endure racist, classist and gendered subjugation in the general population, as well as the Black sub-community (Cole, 1995; J. Grant, 1989; Weems, 1988). From this perspective, spirituality and God becomes a multidimensional force that aids Black women's ongoing struggle. Womanist theology (Williams, 2000) explores the role of God specifically in the lived experiences of women and gives women

a standpoint by which to development unique and pragmatic spiritual knowledge and understandings.

For this study, the final source of spiritual formation for African-Americans consists of a renegotiated version of Judeo-Christianity (Bridges, 2001; Stewart, 1997). It is commonly believed that slaveholders pacified enslaved Africans by introducing them to Christian folklore and doctrines that justified the actions of the oppressors (Sambol-Tosco, 2004). However, some scholars suggest that African Americans used their indigenous spiritual knowledge, which meshed well with the liberatory aspects of Jesus Christ presented in Christian doctrines, to develop a spiritual epistemology that identified Christ with the struggle of Black people in America (Cannon, 1995; Cone, 1990; West, 1982). As a result, African Americans developed a spiritual understanding that positions God as an advocate in the struggle of the oppressed and Jesus as the ultimate example of victory (Cone, 1990; Douglas, 1994; West, 1982).

African American Female Spirituality

African American women maintain a spirituality that is as unique and varied as their lived experiences (Hull, 2001; Wade-Gayles, 1995). While the spirituality of some Black women is cultivated through interactions with nature, creativity or engagement within one's community (Hull, 2001), other women come to understand God, self and a non-material world through their religious experiences (Wade-Gayles, 1995). Wade-Gayles (1995) contends that African American female spirituality defies definition; it is the collection of Black women's spiritual perceptions and experiences, and thus, is fluid and in constant formation.

Hull (2001) suggests that the spirituality of African-American women blends "racial-feminist-political realism" with "spiritual-supernatural awareness" (p. 24) to become pragmatic and purposeful (Wilmore, 2004). Spirituality is manifested in everyday acts of resistance and struggle. Hull argues that any conceptions of spirituality for this group must take into account their on-going challenges in a racist, sexist, classist and heterosexist environment and offer its contributions to their liberation.

Mattis' (2000) suggest that the spirituality of African American women develops in a 3-way relationship with others. African American female spirituality is cultivated and defined through connections with self, a transcendent being or beings and members of her community. Similarly Parker suggests that the spiritual development of African American female adolescents develop largely in relationship with fictive kin – immediate and extended members within Black girls' respected and loyal communities (Parker, 2003).

Significance of the Study

> "To acknowledge and respect one another - to be fully human - requires mutual understanding and appreciation based on cultural understanding" (Geneva Gay, 1994, p. 10).

Geneva Gay (1994) makes the aforementioned declaration in response to educators' arguments for a colorblind classroom. She implies that an individual's humanity necessarily includes their culture and ethnicity and to ignore those things contributes to the dehumanization of ethnic minority students. In a similar vein, the lack of attention given specifically to African American female students and their unique

educational experiences in multicultural education literature affords their continued devaluation and marginalization (Lightfoot, 1976; Rollock, 2007).

Angela Burt-Murray, former Editor-in-Chief of Essence Magazine, stated in 2007, "I think this is the best time to be a black woman in America. By most conceivable measures, we are excelling" (Ellis, 2007). The measures that Burt-Murray spoke of refer to the academic and professional progress seemingly being made by this group. For instance, research consistently presents African American women and girls as excelling academically, particularly when compared to African American males. Black women and girls are more likely than their male counterparts to graduate from high school, attend college and advance economically and professionally (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2009). Additionally, Black women with similar levels of education as White women may earn slightly more than their white counterparts (Fisher & Houseworth, 2012; Press, 2005), and the number of black female entrepreneurs is reportedly increasing (Jeffries, 2011).

Rollock (2007) points out society's tendency to exaggerate the progress made by African American women and girls. She suggests that in doing so, these widespread reports promote a false sense of their well-being. As a result, this group becomes regarded as prospering and not in need of attention or concern, particularly when compared to Black males. Furthermore, the racial, gendered and classed-based oppression, which challenge their daily realities, remain unnoticed and untouched.

The daily realities and educational experiences of African American female students reflect long-standing subjugation of Black women and girls within U.S. culture

and society (Collins, 2000). Pervasive in American culture is evidence of traditional Western discourses that position the black female as antithetic to Eurocentrically-defined concepts of femininity and womanhood (Collins, 1989, 2000; Spillers, 2003). Pop culture, folktales and media depictions perpetuate classic stereotypical tropes and discourses of Black women as mammies, superwomen, welfare queens and jezebels (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Collins (2000) contends that in society, these ideologies justify Black women and girls' continued marginalization, even within the Black community (J. Grant, 1995). The images are designed "to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins, 2000, p. 69).

Schools uphold, reflect and function according to the discourses, which prevail in our society (Sanders & Bradley, 2005; Tolman, 1996). These discourses naturalize and disguise "power relations that are tied to inequalities in the social production and distribution of symbolic and material resources" (Luke, 1995, p. 12). Luke (1995) suggests that while these discourses are typically positioned as biological or fact, they are actually products of history, social formation, and cultural constructs of those in power. Yet, teachers and students construct student identities an manage student behaviors based on these prevailing images (Leander, 2002) .

For instance, African American girls are the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice system (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). They comprise over one-third (36%) of juvenile females in residential placement (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzzanchera, 2011). Scholars suggest that part of the rapid increase in the incarceration of Black girls

may be caused by relatively new zero-tolerance policies at school that push them out of the classroom based on racialized disciplinary measures (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Black girls are disproportionately affected by these policies, which may lead to their participation in the school-to-prison pipeline, much like Black boys (Morris, 2012). Additionally, at school, Black girls experience violence at a higher rate than White girls. They are more likely than White girls to report missing school due to safety concerns and participation in a physical fight (Grunbaum et al., 2004). Lastly, it is typical for Black girls to experience sexual harassment by other students while in the school setting, which often results in unproductive emotional and behavioral disadvantages (Interactive, 2001).

Academically, Black girls outperform black boys, yet they lag behind their white and Asian peers (Vanneman, Hamilton, & Anderson, 2009). Socially, African American girls may continue to suffer greater mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges from being placed in contradictory and marginal academic spaces. They have been perceived as over-sexualized, yet lacking femininity (Morris, 2007); gifted, yet underachieving (Grantham & Ford, 1998); and loud and overbearing, yet frequently ignored (Fordham, 1993; Rollock, 2007; Henry).

Stephen Hawking has been credited with saying, “The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance; it is the illusion of knowledge”. I find this quote compelling and agree with Banks (2010) that multicultural education has a moral obligation to upend long-standing misrepresentations of African American women and girls. By developing pedagogical ideologies and practices that both highlight the lived experiences of Black

women and girls and celebrate the integrity of their cultural knowledge base as a distinct sub-culture, the process of de-marginalizing this group can begin. However, this cannot happen unless multicultural education takes a more intentional approach to understanding unique challenges, perspectives and survival strategies of African American girls.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Black Feminist Epistemology and Womanist Thought

Black feminist epistemology, which includes womanist philosophies, is the lens through which this study is framed (Collins, 2000; Phillips, 2006). While I acknowledge that there are presumed differences between Black feminism and womanism, I also recognize that the points of deviation are insignificant to the goals of this dissertation, and that the concepts are, in fact, compatible (Collins, 1996; Walker, 1983). Black feminism and womanism are both concerned with the daily experiences, challenges and methods of problem solving employed by Black women in the United States and throughout the Diaspora (Phillips, 2006). Additionally, both frameworks recognize the impact of intersectionalities of racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism on their lived experiences (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1983; Smith, 2000). Black feminism and womanism both advocate for the empowerment of women, as well as social transformation, by recognizing the unique collective standpoints through which Black women interpret meaning and facilitating their knowledge construction (Collins, 1989; Williams, 2006). Through this lens, this dissertation provides insight about the daily school experiences and methods of problem solving used by African American female students in their pursuit of success.

Black feminist epistemology advocates for the production of theoretical representations of Black women's reality by Black women (Collins, 2002). Accordingly, it privileges the lives and experiences of this group in an effort to produce knowledge. Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000) provides a four dimensional, interactive framework by which African American female adolescents can construct knowledge. First, this framework positions the lived experiences of Black women as a credible criterion of meaning by which they can make knowledge claims and recognize these experiences as potentially challenging dominant epistemologies. Secondly, Black feminist epistemology supports the use of dialogue in understanding knowledge claims. Dialogue can be described as "talk between two subjects" (hooks, 1989) and underscores the need for connectedness, interaction and support in the knowledge construction and validation processes. Third, this epistemology advocates for intimate dialogue by encouraging the researcher and the contributors to demonstrate individual expressiveness, emotions and empathy during the data collection and analysis. The final dimension of Black feminist epistemology upholds an ethic of personal accountability. Individuals are expected to be accountable for the knowledge claims that they may make and assume responsibility for arguing their validity (Collins, 2000).

This four dimensional epistemology helped to guide this study. Through it, I hypothesized about the intersections of education and spirituality for African American female adolescents, analyzed data, and made methodological adaptations. For instance, while ethnographies typically employ individual interviews to collect data, this study put into practice group interviews (Reinharz, 1992) as a way of encouraging dialogue and

support among the contributors. I will review the methodology of this study in the next chapter.

Womanist thought explicitly acknowledges a spiritual and transcendental realm within which all living things and the material world are connected (Phillips, 2006; C. J. Sanders, 1995). Additionally, it highlights the impact of spirituality in supporting and contributing to the political and social understandings and practices of Black women (Hull, 2001). Womanism recognizes spirituality's contributions to activism and the strategies that support resilience and social transformation.

Womanist theology provides a way for Black women to theologize around the role of sacredness and divinity, as well as God's presence and participation, in their everyday lives (Williams, 2006). According to Mitchem (2002), theology is tied to context and personal experiences as it links faith to life by guiding Black women's interpretations of God in their self-definitions and lived experiences. In this study, Womanist theology is positioned as the foundation upon which African American girls can construct meaning about God's presence and participation in their school experience from their unique perspectives.

Relational Framework for the Study of Spirituality and Religion

Mattis (2000) positions spirituality as a relational phenomenon for African American women. The very act of believing in God places an individual in relationship with a non-material being and encourages the individual to cultivate connections with others. Mattis and Jagers (2000) propose a relational framework by which to explore the roles of spirituality in the everyday social interactions of African Americans. This idea of

social interactions is interpreted broadly to include interplay not only with material and non-material beings but also interactions that occurs within one's own mind.

Within this framework, the authors attend to four components that operate in a dialogic relationship. All but one component is in constant transformation and is shaped by interactions with the others. The four components to this framework are: (1) an individual's demographic factors, (2) religious and spiritual socialization and activities, (3) affective, cognitive and behavior correlates of those religious and spiritual experiences, and, (4) resulting outcomes. In the overview that follows, I define and discuss each component in greater detail.

Demographic factors refer to the socioeconomic characteristics of a given population, which are generally expressed statistically. In this framework, these factors include gender, age, family, education, income, region of residence, nation and culture of origin and the nationality and cultural background of an individual's parents. According to socioeconomic positionings, lives are experienced and unique standpoints are produced. Spiritual and personal understandings result in accordance with these sociocultural factors.

This study assumes that the participants' demographics will shape their religious and spiritual socialization, as well as their daily experiences. It explores the impact of intersectionaliy (Collins, 2000) in the development and practices of spiritual understandings. Intersectionality refers to demographic systems (i.e. race, class, gender) as "mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women's experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women" (p. 299). Thus, intersectionality

puts the demographics of the participants in constant relationship, which will offer unique perspectives by which spirituality will be understood.

Socialization refers to the process by which an individual becomes part of a social group through the transmission of cultural norms (Alsaker, 1995). Through the socialization process, beliefs, practices, and knowledge that are valued within a community are learned often in social interactions with others. In this study, spiritual and religious socialization refers to the transporting of spiritual and religious beliefs, practices, and knowledge through direct or indirect training from one individual to another (Haight, 2002).

Agents of socialization are the individuals, groups and institutions that facilitate the transmission of cultural knowledge. They create the contexts in which cultural understandings are disseminated, obtained and practiced by group members according to their various positions in established social structures (Holland et al., 2003). This study understands the socialization process to be one that is active. Individuals not only receive information from socializing agents but also respond based on their lived experiences, human attributes and prior knowledge. The youth in this study then are recognized as active participants in the spiritual socialization process. As they are acted on by socializing agents, they respond by accepting, rejecting or negotiating the spiritual beliefs, practices and values that are being transmitted (Goodnow, 1992).

This relational framework attends to the correlates, or mutual connections, of religious and spiritual experiences with affective, cognitive and behavioral outcomes. It closely attends to links between religion, spirituality and emotional, psychological or

action-oriented outcomes. This study hypothesizes that the spiritual development of African American female students directly impacts their academic ideologies, beliefs and behaviors in the school setting. Spiritual development and spirituality, then, may contribute to academic achievement.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the theoretical landscape by which this dissertation project was conceptualized. I discussed the works that helped establish public and intellectual imaginations of African American culture, education and spirituality and introduced this project's theoretical and conceptual frameworks. In the next chapter, I present the literature that centers the school experiences and spiritual development of African American girls. I draw upon the work of psychologists, sociologists and educational anthropologists to argue the need for qualitative explorations of spirituality in the school experiences of Black female adolescents.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review is divided into two sections. First, it presents literature that centers the school experiences of African American females students. Second, it explores works that examine their spiritual development and performance in the school setting. I begin this review by acknowledging the lack of attention generally given to Black girls in the academy, school and society (Rollack, 2007). For at least the last four decades, scholars have argued the absence of this group from the public imagination (Lightfoot, 1976). These scholars have pushed for the inclusion of the school and life experiences of African American females in academic discourses highlighting schooling in the U.S. (Muhammad & Dixson, 2008).

The literature centering the school experiences of African American female students is broken up into two sub-sections. The first highlights early understandings of them as academic beings, and the second looks at contemporary explorations of their schooling. The literature presented in this review does not offer exhaustive coverage of the educational experiences of African American girls. For instance, it does not include literature focusing on their academic abilities in specific subject areas (i.e. math, science). Instead, this review highlights the role of socio-cultural factors in the schooling of African American girls, general perceptions and management by others, and their responses to such interactions.

Invisibility of Black girls

In the summer of 2013, the U.S. justice system found George Zimmerman not guilty of first-degree murder (Alvarez & Buckley, 2013). Zimmerman, a 29 year old,

white neighborhood watchman shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed, African American teenager, in a middle class Floridian community in which both resided. Following days of protests led by Black people and their allies, President Barack Obama addressed the nation to contextualize the frustration and pain that emerged following the verdict (Staff, 2013). He spoke at length about the long-standing plight and struggle of Black people in America, and specifically, the challenges facing Black males in the contemporary U.S. President Obama touched on the criminalization of Black men and boys, who are likely to be profiled as criminals by law enforcement officers and civilians. He also briefly discussed racial disparities in the application of criminal laws - disparities that have resulted in the disproportionate incarceration of African American males when compared to other groups (Alexander, 2012). President Obama concluded his speech by asking the nation to consider several ways to concretely build trust and nourish race relations in the U.S., one being to "bolster and reinforce African-American boys". He went on to ask, "Is there more that we can do to give them the sense that their country cares about them and values them and is willing to invest in them?"

President Obama's remarks about the multiple challenges endured by African American boys validated well-established thoughts within the Black community. They reflected the viewpoints of those Black scholars and lay community members who position Black boys as an "endangered species" - a group that faces a high risk of social, if not physical, extinction unless extreme interventions are enacted to "save" them (Gibbs, 1988). The verdict and president's remarks stimulated conversation in a number of forums, prompting celebrities, politicians and others who influence mainstream

cultural understandings to acknowledge the struggle of Black boys in the U.S. and accept a call to action (Times, 2013). President Obama's remarks were laudable, as were the reactions of the Black community and its advocates. However, in instances where attention is given solely to the struggle of Black boys, the experiences and challenges of African American girls may go unnoticed.

In 1976, Lightfoot declared, "Young black girls are an ignored and invisible population" (p 239). Though she was speaking specifically about the absence of this group from early educational literature and discourses, her words reflect the sentiments of past and contemporary scholars concerned with the welfare and education of Black girls (Butler, 1987; Henry, 1998; Muhammad & Dixson, 2008; Rollock, 2007; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). Rollock (2007) proposes that the lack of attention given to this group results from an overwhelming interest by the Black community and general society in the Black male – his threatening physicality, his staggering underachievement and his perceived potential to save the Black community. Compared to her male counterpart, the African American girl is often typified as academic and social overachievers and, thus, less of a cause of concern (Ferguson, 2001). This positioning makes invisible her academic and social struggles, particularly within the school setting.

African American Females Students and Early Education

Before the 1980's, research seldom explored the educational experiences of African-American girls as a distinct social group. Instead, the school experiences of Black girls were often included in comparative studies exploring gender, race and socioeconomic differences in traditional markers of academic success (Knafle, 1972;

Long & Henderson, 1971). For instance, Gist and Bennett (1963) compared the occupational and educational aspirations of Black and White urban high school students. While their findings suggested that there were few differences between the goals of both groups, Black girls showed a higher desire for occupational mobility than their classmates. The study also suggested that Black students perceived females as having more influence in their lives and decision-making processes than those of their White classmates. Schmuck and Luszki (1969) explored various measures of personal and school adjustment of Black students in small towns when compared to White students in similar settings. Their findings suggested that while there were few differences in self-esteem and school adjustment for both groups, Black girls were more concerned about and felt more pressure to achieve academically than their Black counterparts.

Studies that looked solely at the school experiences of Black girls or compared their experiences to those of Black boys typically set out to explore the educational and personal experiences of the "culturally deprived" (Ornstein, 1966; Reissman, 1962; Wasik, Senn, Welch, & Cooper, 1969). For example, Clark (1965) examined the occupational aspirations of the culturally disadvantaged, who were working- and middle-class African American boys and girls. The researcher sought to determine this groups' desire to obtain white-collar jobs when they were older, arguing that their future employment aspirations frequently appeared to be unrealistically high. Clark's findings suggested that African American girls had higher aspirations then their male counterparts to obtain professional and white-collar jobs - such as teacher, nurse and secretary - and thus, were less realistic in their goals than their male counterparts. Furthermore, the

researchers implied that the girls' superiority in their responses when compared to those of Black boys could result from the girls having better role models in Black women than their male counterparts had in Black men (Moynihan, 1965).

Wasik and her colleagues (1969) examined the application and results of behavior modification techniques that were employed with two second-grade African American girls of average intelligence who were in a school for culturally deprived children. The techniques were used in an effort to increase the girls' appropriate classroom behaviors and reduce those that reflected aggression, anti-sociability and defiance. With both students, the researchers found that the results indicated that the treatments were successful. After three months of participating in the assigned techniques, both girls began displaying behaviors that the researchers felt were indicative of academic success.

The research on African American female students during this era often reflected cultural deficit viewpoints and ideas that African American girls fared better academically than Black boys. According to Smith (1982), early research exaggerated this groups' achievement because their school and intellectual abilities were typically only compared to those of their male counterparts. Most of these studies suggested that the matriarchal structure of the Black family dispensed higher expectations to African American girls than it did to African American boys. This disparity, scholars felt, resulted in increased academic support for Black girls and aided in their outperformance of Black males in school and in their careers (Clark, 1965).

Smith (1982) questioned the validity of much of the early educational research on African American female students, claiming that they contained biases and limitations

that produced questionable results. For example, she emphasized the tendency of early scholars to generalize positivist research data that was collected from a limited number of Black female students. Relying solely on this quantitative data ignored lived experiences and did not allow for thorough explorations of the effects of socio-cultural factors in their learning processes and abilities.

Without doubt, many of the early educational studies exploring African American female student achievement were flawed. Yet, the published results and conclusions helped to lay the foundation upon which subsequent studies would be built. Part of the narrative that emerged from this era solidified ideas around Black female superiority and Black male inadequacy in the realm of education.

African American Female Students and Contemporary Education

Contemporary educational research suggests that intersections of race, class and gender yield unique school and educational experiences for African American female adolescents (Collins, 2000; Fordham, 1993; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007; Sanders & Bradley, 2005). The academic identities and efforts of this group are largely constructed and performed in contexts that reproduce denigrating, yet well-established, discourses about Black womanhood. In school settings, African American girls are often positioned as antithetical to "white femininity" (Luke, 1995). This mythical concept of femininity is derived from a stereotypical White, female, middle class persona that privilege passivity and submissiveness in girls' social and school behaviors. It is by this measuring stick that the academic efforts of African American female students are often evaluated.

For example, Morris (2007) explored teachers' perceptions of Black female adolescents in a predominately minority, middle school setting. While many of the girls performed well academically, school leaders tended to enact discipline on them based on social behaviors that they deemed "unladylike." Educators in the study attempted to coerce the girls into embracing a traditionally feminine disposition, even at the expense of their academic achievement. In other words, teachers and administrators stifled qualities of the girls' personalities that displayed assertiveness and strength, although those very qualities bolstered skills, such as curiosity and independent thinking, which ultimately led to their academic success.

Citing the work of Morris (2007), Blake (2011) and her colleagues suggest that Black female students are disciplined more often than other female students, in large part due to perceived unfeminine behaviors. Comparing the discipline infractions and sanctions imposed on Black girls to those of White and Hispanic female students in elementary and secondary urban schools, they suggest that Black girls are overrepresented in exclusionary discipline sanctions. The Black girls in their study were twice as likely to receive in-school and out-of-school suspensions then the other female students. Additionally, a large number of behaviors that Black girls were cited for appeared to defy traditional standards of femininity, and instead, paralleled stereotypical images of Black women as hypersexualized, angry and hostile.

Lei (2003) suggests that the production and maintenance of negative discourses surrounding Black womanhood inhibits African American female students from resisting racial, gendered and class oppression at school. In her study, the Black female students

who displayed assertive behaviors were often labeled as abnormal, undesirable, and needing to be disciplined by school leaders and non-Black students. As a result, African American girls avoided performances and practices that displayed human agency, even if those practices facilitated their resistance to structural and social school disparities.

Grant (1984) set the stage for the work of Morris (2007), Blake (2011), and Lei (2003) almost three decades ago by pointing out the disproportionate attention given to the social behaviors of African American female students when compared to the attention given to their intellectual abilities. According to Grant (1984), students are socialized by teachers and peers in ways that reflect their positioning in the larger society. Elementary school teachers and students in her study often channeled Black girls towards stereotypical roles of Black women in the United States (i.e. mammie, Jezebel, etc.). While many of the Black female students excelled academically, teachers tended to offer praise for their social, rather than intellectual, abilities. Additionally, non-Black male students often made racist and sexist remarks to high achieving Black female students in an attempt to keep them "in their [social] place."

African American females resist school-based social oppression and its reproduction of inequalities in various ways. While some scholars suggest their need to culturally code-switch in order to achieve, others argue that their ability to embrace racial and cultural identities lead to school success (Akom, 2003; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Horvat & Antonio, 1999). The term "code-switching" is typically reserved for socio-linguistic studies and entails bilingual speakers alternating between languages, according to the given context (Heller, 1988). Culturally code-switching marks the notion of

changing from one form of behavior to another for the purpose of creating a desired social impression (Molinsky, 2007).

For instance, Fordham (1993) notes differences in the ways that high and low achieving African American girls navigate through racialized, patriarchal school environments. While the high achieving group culturally code-switched by performing white femininity (i.e. silencing themselves and remaining passive in the classroom) and acting out traditional male behavioral patterns (i.e. in vocal tones and speech patterns), the low achieving girls embraced a loud and tough persona that allowed them to maintain their voice and power. In later work, Fordham (1996) suggested that high achieving black girls must take on a "race-less" persona in order to attain academic success. Race-lessness refers to the absence of behavioral and attitudinal characteristics related to a specific race. Thus, Fordham's work suggests that Black high achieving female students must distance themselves from ascribed Black identity, as well as Black community, in order to do well at school.

Similar to Fordham, Horvat and Antonio (1999) suggest that the organizational habitus of schools coerce Black girls from low socioeconomic communities to distance themselves from their home communities and cultural identities. Organizational habitus refers to the set of class-based understandings and dispositions that are transmitted to individuals within a common organizational culture (McDonough, 1998). In this study, the authors documented the often stressful coping practices of six working-to-middle class African American girls attending an elite, predominately white, all-girls school. To navigate the space successfully, each girl learned to culturally "border-cross" by

replacing their home identities with appearances of elitism that more closely reflected that within the school.

The aforementioned studies, which center the academic experiences of African American girls, imply that schools marginalize and exoticize Black girls, in large part due to socially constructed myths around femininity (Collins, 2000). Schools spend a disproportionate amount of time attempting to strip Black girls of their socio-cultural identity and womanhood, even at the expense of their intellectualism and academic success (Morris, 2007). Despite the unaccommodating realities of school for Black female students, Muhammad & Dixson (2008) note their propensity to achieve. Presenting a statistical education profile of the archetypal Black female high school student, the authors state:

> She is just as likely as her peers to receive academic honors, recognition for good attendance and service to the community…. She is focused on her future…. She finds it very important to become successful in her field of work, even to the point of becoming an expert. She is also concerned about others, finding it very important to help in the community and work to reduce inequalities. She works to create a better place for her children (p.176).

High-achieving Black girls respond to marginalizing school forces in a myriad of ways. In some instances, such as those presented in the literature of Fordham (1996) and Horvat and Antonio (1999), they feel compelled to choose between maintaining and rejecting their home-based or Black cultural identities. Yet, other scholars - such as Carter (2006), O'Connor (1997) and Akom (2003) - note alternative survival strategies

and resources that simultaneously support African American student achievement and maintain Black cultural identity. Evans-Winters (2005) highlights the importance of social networks in contributing to the educational resiliency of poor and working-class Black girls. In her ethnographic study, Evans-Winters followed and documented the experiences of six Black female students from middle school through their junior year in high school. Evans-Winters determined that the girls who excelled and graduated spent significantly more time with their families and mentors, as well as in community-based organizations and extracurricular school programs. The work of Evans-Winters demonstrates the ways that proximity to one's home community and culture may positively impact academic achievement.

Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2012) also challenged Fordham (1993) and Horvat and Antonio's (1999) suggestion that high achieving African American girls must distance themselves from their home community and culture in order to achieve school success. Using the self-described school experiences of eight African American high school girls, the authors point out the importance of caring adults and a strong racial identity in cultivating a strong academic self-understanding. Caring adults, such as parents and teachers, influenced the girls' to take academic risks leading to their high performance, and maintenance of strong racial identities prompted them to excel.

Summary

From the literature, we gather that intersections of race, class, gender and patriarchy impact the academic achievement and school practices of African American female students. Long-standing Eurocentric discourses around the traits that constitute

femininity structure the ways in which Black female students are read, thought about, treated and managed by their fellow classmates and teachers (Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007). The literature suggests that while Black female students display intellectualism and potential to achieve academically, they are more often recognized for their mannerisms and social behaviors, which are generally perceived as anti-feminine (Morris, 2007). They are also likely to be disciplined for displaying such traits, even if those attributes have the ability to contribute to their school success (Blake, Butler, Lewis & Darensbourg, 2011; Lei, 2003).

Some scholars suggest that such treatment of Black girls at school necessitates their employment of strategies that distance them from their racial identities and cultural knowledge (Fordham, 1993; Horvat & Antonio, 1999). These scholars contend that high-achieving Black female students are often forced to culturally code-switch or become "race-less" (Fordham, 1993) in order to attain success. Other scholars highlight alternative survival strategies and resources that simultaneously support this group's student achievement and Black cultural identity. This literature often highlights the importance of social networks and race-based ideologies in contributing to school success (Akom, 2003; Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Evans-Winters, 2005).

Church and religious organizations are frequently cited as resources that facilitate the achievement of Black female students (Evans-Winters, 2005). Yet, only a handful of studies explore why these institutions are significant and how the variables within these spaces directly impact the girls' academic identities, beliefs and performances (Akom, 2003). While religion and spirituality have been documented as significant components

of Black youth culture (Schwadel & Smith, 2005), there is a paucity of research available that explores its relevance and functionality in the high school setting. While we know that spirituality and religious organizations contribute to the educational resilience of Black female students, it is important to understand the factors, processes and ideologies provided and utilized in these spaces that generate their sense of strength. By doing so, strategies may be offered to schools that uphold the integrity of Black female adolescents' spiritual and religious understandings.

An Overview of Spirituality in the Lives of Adolescents

The second section of this chapter examines literature that documents the significance of spirituality in the lives and schooling of African American girls. Because there is a lack of available research exploring the spirituality, spiritual knowledge and spiritual development of this group, I draw from various disciplines to examine the construct, including the fields of psychology, sociology and human development. Because this study's conceptual framework suggests that the application of an individual's spiritual understandings is largely impacted by their spiritual development (Mattis and Jagers, 2001), a large part of this review explores the factors contributing to spiritual development of adolescents, Black adolescents, female adolescents and Black female adolescents. A handful of available research will also be presented that highlights intersections of spirituality and education for African American youth and girls.

Spirituality and religion are significant components of Black youth culture (Christian & Barbarin, 2001; Leadbeater & Way, 1996; Stevens, 1997; Tisdell, 2006). Scholars contend that these constructs develop in community and are greatly impacted by

social interactions and lived experiences (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). Much of the research examining spirituality's role in the lives of Black children and youth comes from the field of psychology. Several of these quantitative studies suggest its capacity to guard Black youth from symbolically violent everyday experiences, such as discrimination and environment injustice. The work Christian and Barbarin (2001), for example, proposes that religious involvement safeguards poor and working class Black youth from negative psychological effects of environmental risk factors. The work of these scholars contributes to resilience studies, which have offered religion and spirituality as coping factors for youth growing up in underserved communities.

For African American female adolescents, spirituality tends to be presented as a tool that discourages their engagement in anti-social or unhealthy behaviors. Spiritual and religious involvement, in these studies, often correlate with reduced activities that are believed to be counterproductive to academic success. Spirituality, for instance, has been associated with the prevention of early sexual activities of Black adolescent girls (Belgrave, Marin, & Chambers, 2000; Doswell, Kouyate, & Taylor, 2003), along with higher self-esteem (Doswell, Millor, Thompson, & Braxter, 1998) and lowered relational aggression (Belgrave, Chase-Vaughn, Gray, Addison, & Cherry, 2000) for this group.

Good & Willoughby (2008) suggest that adolescence is an optimal time for spiritual development. At this stage, the characteristics of human development allow adolescents to be more responsive than young children and adults to the experiences that cultivate spiritual understandings (Fowler, 1981; Good & Willoughby, 2008). Literature suggests that spirituality impacts the cognition, emotions and behavior of adolescents.

Spirituality has been associated with lower instances of drinking (Knight et al., 2007), lower instances of substance abuse (Cotton, Larkin, Hoopes, Cromer, & Rosenthal, 2005; Ritt-Olson et al., 2004), lowered symptoms of depression (Cotton et al., 2005), less anxiety (Davis, Kerr, & Kurpius, 2003), overall satisfaction in life (Kelley & Miller, 2007) and positive youth development (Lerner, Roeser, & Phelps, 2008).

The field of psychology has been instrumental in bringing to light connections between adolescents' spiritual awareness, religious involvement and daily practices. The quantitative methods that are often used in these studies allow causational knowledge claims around the impact of spirituality and religion to be tested and generalized within and across different populations of youth. What these studies do not provide are in-depth descriptions around the development of spiritual identities and application of spiritual knowledge that produces these outcomes. Neither do they shed light on the distinct ways that individual youth interpret and apply their unique spiritual understandings to their daily school experiences. To explore these inquiries and the role of spirituality as a cultural phenomenon, qualitative research methods must be employed. Qualitative research methods allow scholars to observe and interpret phenomena in their natural settings and discover the meanings that people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Such information is important for schools, youth –serving organizations and the academy. With this knowledge, these groups may come to understand the cultural and spiritual knowledge of Black youth, how it is uniquely formed and how it impacts the academic identities, ideologies and behaviors of individual students.

Spiritual Development Defined

Mattis and Jagers (2001) argue that there is a distinct connection between spiritual development and relational outcomes for African Americans. In order to thoroughly analyze the role of the spirituality in school experiences of African American female students, their spiritual development must be explored. Traditionally, spiritual development has been constructed in three distinct ways: (1) as a dimension of the religious experience, which contributed to its conflation with religion and religious development (James, 1958); (2) as representing a set of human qualities, without making reference to a sacred realm (Beck, 1992); and (3) as a core, universal dynamic of human development that is positioned alongside and integrated with cognitive, social and emotional development (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003). Psychoanalytic theories initially informed early understandings of spiritual development (Jung, 1938); however, through most of the 20th century, stage theories conceptually guided scholarly understandings around the development of spiritual understandings (Erikson, 1968; Fowler, 1981).

Fowler's faith development theory (1981) is widely regarded as the theoretical framework by which to explore an individual's evolving understanding of non-material beings, as well as their self-understanding in relation to non-material beings. This theory presents ways that spirituality may impact an individual's core values, beliefs and behaviors in relation to self and others. According to Fowler, faith is universal and can exist outside of religious traditions. He suggests that an individual's belief in and commitment to a transcendent being reconciles self-identities and guides processes of

meaning-making. Fowler believed that faith develops in six chronological stages that coincide with human maturation. Each stage is characterized by the development and performance of emotional, cognitive, and moral interpretations and responses. Four of the six stages highlight spiritual development from infancy through adolescence.

Critics of stage theory point out its tendency to indicate discontinuity, as opposed to continuance, in spiritual development across time (Benson et al., 2003; Roehlkepartain et al., 2005). Stage theories, they argue, predict disconnected moments of formation, instead of experience-led evolutions of spiritual (self-) understandings. Additionally, scholars note that stage theories tend to conceptualize spiritual development from limited, Western understandings that privilege chronological time over "social time" (Mattis, Ahluwalia, Cowie, & Kirkland-Harris, 2006). In other words, these mainstream scholars assume universality in development and developmental processes and neglect cultural and contextual differences between and among groups and individuals.

Scholars of color imply that traditional mainstream notions of spiritual development are often irrelevant for ethnic minority groups in the U.S. Many of the assumptions undergirding Western philosophical systems stand in direct contrast to beliefs held by many non-Western groups (Mbiti, 1990). Mattis and her colleagues (2006) point out distinctions between mainstream and non-Western perceptions of the spiritual and secular domains of life. While European and European American social scientists tend to assume a division between the spiritual and secular, non-Western groups often imagine religiosity and spirituality as inextricably bound to and interwoven within all aspects of life (Mbiti, 1990). Thus, spiritual development does not merely exist

according to a distinct set of beliefs or activities that are directly related to non-material beings, but rather it exists within all of life (i.e. social, psychological, emotional, etc.).

Furthermore, scholars of color who explore spiritual development point out that Western social scientists tend to privilege the individual as the principal unit of analysis for spiritual development and exploration (Mattis, Ahluwalia, Cowie, & Kirkland-Harris, 2006; Norton, 2008). Yet, many non-Western groups understand individuals as situated within community (Mbiti, 1990; Sanders, 1995). Identity and selfhood, then, cannot develop outside of the context of community; just as the self emerges in relationship with others, so does one's spirituality (Parker, 2006a; Scott, 2006; C. F. Stewart, 1999; Elizabeth J. Tisdell, 2003; Wade-Gayles, 1995).

Spiritual Development and Black Adolescents

Scholars point to spiritual development as a significant component of African American youth culture. Spiritual knowledge, they believe, impacts the daily activities, practices and values of this group. Burton (2006) suggests that in the Black community, spiritual integrity and harmony are often considered to be the most important indicators of positive adjustment for African American youth.

Haight (1998) and Parker (2003) provide literature that explores the spiritual development and knowledge of African American youth. Haight (1998) suggests that the Black church plays a significant role in forming understandings around God and transcendence in the context of intersecting oppressions. Additionally, she notes that the Black church serves as a source of community, support, and education and provides a forum for ethnic, social and political formation and involvement. According to Haight

(1998), the Black church offers spiritual knowledge that cultivates resilience in African American children through culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) religious curriculum and programming. Documenting the teaching practices of religious teachers and leaders in a Sunday School class for elementary age children, Haight highlighted the tendency of these teachers to contextualize spiritual principles and disciplines within the racist and negligent society in which the children lived. As a result, spirituality served as a protective factor for many of the children that allowed them to cope with oppressive daily experiences. Furthermore, the spiritual socialization offered within the church setting facilitated the development of the children's ethnic identities and became a space where "children could learn about their heritage from other African Americans who valued and nurtured them" (p.216).

Like Haight (1998), Parker (2003) suggests that religious involvement contributes to the spiritual formation of Black adolescents. Their spirituality, she implies, forms through significant relationships with family and peers. Parker examined spiritual understandings of Christian African American adolescents in the context of racist, sexist and classist communities. In doing so, she implied that many youth articulate and perform a spiritual understanding that negates Liberation Theology (Cone, 1990). Although the majority of her study's participants were active in traditional religious activities (i.e. church, Bible study) and spoke religious language, they did not articulate a belief in God's ability to obstruct social injustice; neither did they feel an individual, spiritual or moral obligation to labor for equality.

Spiritual Development and Adolescent Girls

Research suggests that the spiritual development of adolescent girls is unique. In the mid-20th century, Pierre Babin (1965) suggested that adolescent boys and girls hold different conceptions of God, stating, "The boy sees in God a point to attain; the girl sees a relationship to realize" (p. 47-48). Babin further explains the context in which the religious and spiritual formation for girls occurs:

> The religious universe of the girl seems to be organized around a person-to-person relationship with God… The girl does not so much seek in religion a logical and coherent system, which would permit her to dominate the world and impose her law on history. Rather, she seeks harmony in dependence, a support and stabilizing accord in her relationship with God. Her feminine need is not so much to dominate nature (as is the case with men), as it is to live and give life (p. 61).

Babin's perspective of spiritual development for girls reflects development studies that focus on social and emotional development of adolescent girls. According to Brown and Gilligan (1993), female identity formation takes place in ongoing relationships, while male development entails individualism and independence. I point out that much of the forthcoming literature centers on the spiritual development of non-Black girls. Thus, it does not account for socio-cultural factors that impact the spiritual understandings of African American girls.

In what has been recognized as a cardinal work on the spiritual development of adolescent girls, Patricia Davis (2001) examines the spiritual formation and knowledge of over 100 girls of various religious, ethnic and regional backgrounds. During this four

year research project, Davis set out to determine the ways that spirituality shapes girls' understanding of themselves and their world and contributes to their strategies for surviving in their communities.

Throughout this work, Davis emphasizes the relational and cultural aspects of spiritual development for this group. She says:

> A girl's spirituality is never separate from the environment in which she grows. It develops out of relationships with important people and communities as well as with God. Girls' spiritualities are also always shaped and influenced by the cultures in which they develop. The ways in which a culture views girls, their families, their ethnicities, their intellectual abilities, their sexual orientations, their social expectations, and their religious traditions directly affect the ways in which girls' selves and spiritualities take shape (p.9).

In her work, Davis suggests that healthy spirituality for adolescent girls is cultivated within relationships and cultures that affirm who they are becoming as they mature. Additionally, she suggests that religion ambiguously forms their spiritual understandings. For instance, the majority of her participants credited their church with enhancing their spiritual growth and cultivating awareness about God. Yet, most of them also criticized it for discouraging critical thought and politicizing religious beliefs. Thus, Davis suggests that the spiritual development of girls is both cultivated and stifled by religion.

The work of Kujawa-Holbrook (2001) builds upon that of Davis (2001) and Babin (1965) to explore the spiritual understandings of adolescent girls and examine models of

mentorship that supports the spiritual formation of this group. Under the auspices of a larger project entitled 'Girls and Religious Leadership', Kujawa-Holbrook interviewed 32 young women between the ages of 12 and 18 over a 3-year period. Half of the girls were young women of color, half considered themselves Christian, and half identified as Jewish, Buddhist, and Unitarian.

Like Davis (2001) and Babin (1965), Kujawa-Holbrook (2001) suggests that the spiritual development of girls is built upon a relational foundation, however, unlike Davis, most her participants conceptualized "God" as a presence as opposed to a person. Furthermore, Kujawa-Holbrook makes evident the parallels between spiritual development and other areas of development for adolescent girls. For instance, she states:

> It has become almost common knowledge that girls and women are primarily motivated to maintain relationships because their sense of self is entered around their relationships with others…Spirituality becomes the way a child's life reflects the relationship she has with God, people, and the world. It is both individual and communal, and it is the communal aspect of spirituality that can be more pronounced in girls (p. 306).

Kujawa-Holbrook extends the work of Babin and Davis by introducing the influence of socio-cultural factors on the spiritual development of adolescent girls (i.e. gender, race, ethnicity, social class, abilities, etc.). She states, "Children and adults develop spirituality in a way that is consistent with their gender, race, ethnicity, social class, abilities, limitation, etc. Spirituality reflects the values and attitudes of people as well as their historical and socio-cultural values" (p. 302). Furthermore, when reflecting

on her methods of data collection, Kujawa-Holbrook makes known that most of the girls in the study struggled to find language that reflected their spiritual understandings. Additionally, many felt uncomfortable about articulating their spiritual philosophies aloud. Thus, Kujawa-Holbrook suggests that role models and mentors who are sensitive to the needs of the girls are valuable. Mentors, she suggests, will encourage the girls to cultivate their spiritual voice.

Spiritual Development and African American Girls

As demonstrated by the work of Davis (2001), Babin (1965) and Kujawa-Holbrook (2001), more literature highlighting the impact of socio-cultural factors in the spiritual development of girls is needed. Research that centers the spiritual formation of African American girls in light of their cultural understandings and sociopolitical realities (Parker, 2006b) presents the role of spirituality from a unique perspective.

Studies exploring the spirituality of African American female adolescents tend to focus on its potential to help prevent unwanted or unproductive behaviors. For example, Doswell, Kouyate and Taylor (2003) suggest that spirituality plays a significant role in delaying early sexual activities and promoting self-management. They suggest that spirituality encourages and enables African American female adolescents to anticipate, control and constructively manage peer pressure and temptation found in the school environment. Similarly, Belgrave et al. (2000) imply spirituality's correlation with decreased relational aggression and suggest its capability to encourage the rejection of negative stereotypes and low self-esteem. Spirituality, in these studies, is positioned as a component of African American cultural, which leads to an increased self-understanding

followed by the production of positive attitudes and behaviors. Both studies were conducted in an after-school program created to increase the knowledge of Black, middle school, female students around African American cultural values.

According to Sanders (2005), developmental issues for African American adolescent females are best understood using a multiple-lens paradigm that includes gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. Similarly, Parker's (2006b) research on the spiritual development of girls from historically marginalized groups implies that their spirituality intersects with their experiences of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism. Like Kujawa-Holbrook (2001) and Davis (2001), Parker (2003) signifies affirming relationships with God, family and friends as cultivating spiritual identities that produce resiliency. Parker (2003) notes the contribution of grandmothers, mothers and "othermothers" in passing down spiritual principles and tools to prepare African American adolescent girls to combat, survive and be productive amid intersecting oppressions. According to Parker, spiritual development produces within Black girls a loyalty to God and others. As their spiritual and self-understandings increase, so does their determination to fight for social change. Parker notes:

> Loyalty is an aspect of black girls' spirituality when the welfare of those they are in relationship with takes precedence, when they are devoted to a cause in order that others may thrive…Black adolescent girls are loyal to God and humankind when their lives demonstrate devotion to the cause of eliminating economic, political, and racial domination. This commitment and act of fidelity to the cause

> of overcoming domination emanates from assurance and expectancy in God and God's promises (p. 96).

Parker's work emphasizes the outcomes that result from spiritual development that is impacted by socio-cultural factors of race, class and gender. Additionally, she suggests that the unique lived experiences of African American girls yield distinct spiritual understandings and resulting behaviors that differ from those of non-Black girls. Like Davis and Kujawa-Holbrook suggest, spirituality of African American girls is developed in strong relationship with others. However, for African American girls, their spiritual understandings lead to spiritual praxis, or the socio-political integration of their spiritual knowledge into their contextualized daily activities (Hull, 2001).

Spirituality in the School Experiences of African American Girls

In this final subsection, I focus on the impact of spirituality in the school experiences of African American girls and youth. Much of the literature that focuses on the spirituality of Black children, youth and young adults is quantitative and highlights the experiences of elementary school and college students (Christian & Barbarin, 2001; Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor, & Lewis-Coles, 2008; Watt, 2003). Other research explores the impact of spirituality in the lives of African American female adolescents (Parker, 2006b). Both of these bodies of work are explored below, and its presentation also includes the impact of religion.

In the realm of education, the quantitative work of Walker and Dixson (2002), Jeynes (2003), Steward (1998) and Christian and Barbarin (2001) suggest that spiritual knowledge and religious participation are related to higher academic achievement for

Black youth. These studies imply that participation in spiritual and religious practices develop behaviors that are conducive to academic success. For instance, Walker & Dixon (2002) highlight the relationship between religious involvement and higher academic performance for African American college students, specifically when compared to non-religious peers. And, similarly, Christian & Barbarin (2001) determined that religious participation largely corresponds with non-aggressive behaviors in Black elementary school students.

Watt (2003) attends to the spirituality of African American female college students on a predominantly white university campus. She suggests its ability to psychologically protect this group during undesirable and oppressive situations. In this study, the students' spiritual beliefs and practices served as a coping mechanism that cultivated agency and resilience during troublesome situations in their personal lives. Additionally, symbols and rituals allowed them to cope with and push through racist and sexist messaging pervasive on the school campus. Watt's work suggests the ability of spiritual knowledge to cultivate philosophies by which students may govern school related stressors.

Belgrave and her colleagues (2004) position spirituality as an Afrocultural expression (Boykin, 1983). Afrocultural expressions are ways of expressing oneself that are informed by the traditional African cultural heritage of African Americans. Belgrave suggests that spirituality facilitates positive identity development, specifically in Black female adolescents. Positive identity development, in turn, contributes to their school

success by guiding behaviors and practices that are conducive to learning in the school setting.

Furthermore, Norton (2008) presents one of few qualitative studies that focus specifically on the role of spirituality in the classroom setting. Norton's work suggests that the spiritualities and spiritual knowledge of young children helps them negotiate behavior within their school environment. In this study, she examines the impact of music as a spiritual practice for a Black, male, first grader. Spiritual practices describe the ways that people read, write, speak, create and act in order to maintain a connection to immaterial forces. Norton determined that gospel music, which was informed by his Christian affiliation and churchgoing culture, shaped the student's spiritual knowledge. This, in turn, guided his academic beliefs and practices, as well as relational interactions with peers and adults in the classroom. This study suggests that classrooms are spiritual places for children where their spiritualities can be either affirmed and/or marginalized. Additionally, Norton recommends that educators seek to understand the influence of socio-cultural positionalities (i.e. race, class, gender) in shaping children's spiritualities in order to create more equitable childhood classrooms.

Summary

The available literature exploring the spirituality of African American female adolescents highlight its significance in their daily realities. Much of the research, which comes from the field of psychology and is quantitative in nature, suggests that spirituality and religion protects this group from participating in potentially anti-academic and risky behaviors (Belgrave et al., 2000; Doswell et al., 2003). Spiritual understandings and

religious involvement contributes to their resilience and often allows them to cope and overcome adversity and school challenges (Belgrave et al., 2000, 2004; Watt, 2003).

The spirituality of this group is formed and performed in contexts shaped by intersections of racism, classism and sexism (Parker, 2006b). Thus, their spiritual understandings often allows for socio-political integration of spiritual knowledge into their daily activities. Literature suggests that spirituality and religiosity facilitates educational resilience within school settings (Christian & Barbarin, 2001). Most of the research exploring the functionality of spirituality in the school setting of African American female students focuses on the experiences of pre-adolescents and college-age youth.

Missing from the available literature is research that centers the spiritual development and knowledge of African American female adolescents as a distinct group. The adolescent stage of human development presents conditions and challenges not experienced by females of other age groups. Qualitative studies are needed that explores the development and practice of African American female adolescents' spiritual knowledge. According to these developmental processes and factors, academic ideologies, practices and behaviors may be more comprehensively understood.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Context

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the role of spirituality in the school experiences of African American female adolescents. Specifically, it asks: (1) In what ways are the spiritual beliefs, practices and values of African American female adolescents utilized and performed in the school setting?, (2) What function do these beliefs, practices and values play in their school experiences?, and (3) What factors contribute to the spiritual development for this group?

Based on the available literature, this study makes the following assumptions:

1. Spirituality is an essential component of African American culture, one that is both produced by and produces cultural understandings (Stewart, 1999).
2. Spirituality consists of the conglomeration of beliefs, practices and values that contribute to an individual's understandings of themselves and their world in relation to transcendence and a supreme being (Stewart, 1999; Williams).
3. An individual's spiritual development influences affective, behavioral and cognitive processes that guide agency and leads to context-specific outcomes (Mattis and Jagers, 2001)
4. Spirituality is in a constant state of development and is produced within social, emotional and cultural contexts (Scott, 2006).

With these questions and assumptions in mind, I explore the methodology employed in this study. To determine the design of this investigation, including methods and procedures, the research setting, and my research philosophy, I took into account: (1) the participants' shared positioning as members of a historically marginalized, frequently

ignored group based on their race, class, gender and age; and (2) my multiple identities as an African American, female researcher who was employed in a position of leadership at the research setting during the time of the study and is personally connected to both the church and the pastor. To begin, let's look at how the participants' positioning impacted this study's methodology.

Black Feminist Epistemology

This project privileges the subjugated knowledge of African American adolescent females. To this end, it draws upon black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000) and critical youth studies (Best, 2007) to guide its approach. According to Harding (1987) epistemology constitutes an overarching theory of knowledge. It determines the standards used to evaluate commonly held assumptions and the reasoning behind them. In research, epistemology determines the questions that merit investigation, which groups are understood to be valid knowledge producers, how research will be conducted, which interpretive frameworks will be used to analyze findings, and how any constructed knowledge will be used (Collins, 2000). Black feminist epistemology offers Black women's subjugated position as an outsider-within, along with their unique lived experiences and perspectives, as valid criteria by which to produce knowledge (Collins, 2000). Collins offers four characteristics of research that is guided by black feminist thought. This methodological perspective challenges traditional, often discriminatory, male-dominated processes of knowledge construction. A Black feminist epistemology recognizes the importance of the participant's: (1) lived experiences, (2) participation in

dialogue, (3) expressions of caring (i.e. empathy and compassion), and (4) maintenance of personal accountability for the knowledge claims made.

Using black feminist epistemology as a guide, this study employs qualitative research methods to facilitate the self-definition and self-valuation of African American female adolescents. This approach accounts for and counters positivist and patriarchic leanings that too often undermine the knowledge construction of historically marginalized groups. Qualitative methods emphasize “the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is being studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (Collins, 1999, p. 8). They permit women to express their experiences fully and in their own terms (Fonow & Cook, 1991). While some scholars in the mainstream academic community argue that qualitative methods are unscientific and yield biased evidence, feminist scholars point out the potential of all methods to yield data informed by politics and subjectivity. Mies (1991) argues that all researchers posses a standpoint by which data is collected and analyzed. The lack of inclusion of women’s lives, histories and struggles in dominant science evince the need for gynocentric approaches. As Mies (1991) declares, “If we do not want to consent to our own scientific nonbeing, then we must have a basis upon which we can stand, from which we can be sure of reality, and from which we can judge theories opposed to our own” (p.66). Qualitative research methods provide such a foundation for feminist research.

Critical Youth Studies

In addition to black feminist epistemology, this study draws upon the work of critical youth researchers (Best, 2007) to develop an ethically sound methodological agenda that considers the different ways that age intersects with power and knowledge production and dissemination, as well as the consequences of such intersections for research practices. In an age-segregated society like the US, and more specifically, within the African American community, there exists an adult-child framework of interaction that emphasizes the certitude of adult knowledge while delegitimizing that of children and youth. Best (2007) contends that the taken-for-granted character of this authority structure and the various worldviews that are related to it create unique problems for participant observations with children. She states, "The authority adult's command and structures of power are deeply entangled, inasmuch as their authority flows from and is bolstered by a set of institutional and ideological arrangements" (p.12). Children and youth are typically positioned as passive actors, as opposed to independent agents who possess their own cultural understandings and epistemic viewpoints.

According to Best, any study that centers the knowledge of youth must acknowledge and account for the structural and institutional relations that legitimate adult authority and produce differences in the roles adopted by children and adults in social settings. It must also acknowledge the disparity of resources that each group collectively holds. Thus, I maintain the four tenets of critical youth studies within this project. They include: (1) A constant concern for and considerations of the complexities of power and exploitation in the research encounter, (2) An acknowledgement of the connection

between power and knowledge, and more specifically, the researcher's ability to shape and construct realities of youth through the accounts that we provide, (3) A desire to conduct ethical research that empowers youth and children and to improve their lived conditions, and (4) A commitment to a "radical reflexivity" that interrogates points of difference that intersect our lives and those that we study (Best, 2007, p. 9).

In an effort to work against adult ideological standpoints (Thorne, 1987), I attempt to demonstrate a deep respect for the views of the youth and position them as experts of their own lived experiences and youth and school culture. Additionally, while I acknowledge that as an observer and eventual narrator of these girl's lives, I will be producing and disseminating knowledge that feeds into the regulation of girls' voices (Brown, 1998), I attempt to include them within the research and analyses processes. They are not merely participants within the study, but rather, are positioned and referred to as "advisors" throughout the study.

The second consideration that I made when determining the methodology for this study was the multiple positions that I held during this study's tenure. As previously stated, I was an African American female researcher, employed in a position of leadership at the research setting. Additionally, I am personally connected to the research setting and its leadership. To begin exploring the impact of my positioning as native researcher (Villenas, 1996) as well as an "outsider within" the patriarchal space of the church (Collins, 2000), I start by describing the setting.

Setting and Participants

Light on the Hill

The greater part of this study takes place at Light on the Hill Church, a 15,000 member, predominately Black church located in Southern California. Light on the Hill sits among warehouses and office buildings in an unincorporated district of Los Angeles County that borders the cities of Compton and Gardena. As one of the largest black churches in greater Los Angeles, the church reports an average attendance of 7,000 people on any given Sunday. The stated mission of the church is "to serve as an agent of reconciliation, leading individuals back to God, themselves, each other and the world via an holistic approach to ministry – spiritually, socially and psychologically[1]". According to the church leaders, "reconciliation" refers to the process of restoring severed relations between individuals who are in community with God and each other. The church fulfills this mission through a myriad of programs and events designed to appeal to the different demographics within the church and surrounding areas.

While Light of the Hill is presently located in an unincorporated warehouse district of Los Angeles County, its organizational habitus and reputation was formed as a neighborhood church rooted in a low-socioeconomic, South Los Angeles community comprised primarily of Black and Latino residents. At the time of the church's inception in 1939, South Los Angeles– then known as South Central Los Angeles – was emerging as the heart of the Black working and middle class in Southern California. However, with the 1965 "Watts Riots" came a departure of the Black middle class to northern regions of Los Angeles and an idea of South Central as an anarchic district filled with ungovernable residents (Renwick, 1993). The South-Central-as-Urban-Decay theme took

[1] Dedication celebration booklet - 2004

shape in the 1970's with the decline of the area's manufacturing base and continued throughout the 1980's as widespread unemployment, poverty and street crimes contributed to the rise of the street gangs, and subsequent drug use, for which South Central has become notorious (Estrada & Sensiper, 1993). By the 1990's, when the current pastor of Light of the Hill began his tenure, South Central's reputation was widely known as one of the Los Angeles' most dangerous places to live.

Longstanding leaders and members of Light on the Hill take pride in the church's historical role as a refuge for the underserved in the South Los Angeles community. For example, during the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, the church, which stood blocks away from the epicenter of the uprising, offered shelter to displaced community members as well as food, safety and rest from the turmoil. Additionally, as part of their yearly agenda, the church continues to offer resources to community members in need, as well as conduct programming intended to educate and inspire its members and surrounding community.

Ecclesiastically, Light on the Hill exhibits a charismatic African American church liturgy, complete with an expressive worship style that appeals to the emotions (i.e. crying, laughing) and kinesthetics (i.e. dancing, swaying, clapping) of its participants. It also includes a performative style of preaching that engages the hearers and encourages communal participation (Floyd-Thomas, Floyd-Thomas, Duncan, Ray, & Westfield, 2007). While Light of the Hill is affiliated with the Pentecostal Apostolic denomination, the leaders and members embrace a non-denominational philosophy, which is characteristic of many mega-church ministries. It was in this setting that I recruited my

participants, collected most of the data, volunteered as a youth leader, worked as a part-time employee and participated in communal worship.

The Youth Ministries and Recruitment

The primary contributors to this study were recruited out of the four church youth groups that support the spiritual and/or social development of female adolescents: (1) The Cutting Edge Youth Ministry, (2) The Essence of Dance Praise Team, (3) Sarai's Mentoring Program, and (4) The LAPD Cadet program. The first two groups are exclusive to Light on the Hill; they were started in the church and continue to focus primarily on the spiritual and social development of its members. The third group began at LOTH and expanded into a non-profit, community-based organization that remains affiliated with the church and its various resources. The fourth youth group is a community program that partnered with the church in order to build upon its resources and social capital. I will briefly present more information about each youth group.

The Cutting Edge Youth Ministry is the primary youth-centered group at Light of the Hill. Made up of programming designed to facilitate spiritual development among adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18, this group's mission is to "promote and develop a spiritual maturity that leads to personal, relational and educational success". Cutting Edge is led by an adult Youth Pastor, 12 adult volunteer staff members and a Youth Advisory Board comprised of seven high school students who help to develop and guide the group's weekly events and special activities.

It is within the Cutting Edge Youth Ministry that I recruited the majority of the contributors to this study. The contributors consisted of the advisors, as well as their

peers, family members and church leaders. Within the youth ministry, I conducted an 18-month ethnography, which included participant observations during weekly activities and events (i.e. Bible study, Sunday services, tutoring), special events (i.e. Vacation Bible School, special concerts and fundraisers) and social outings (i.e. bowling, skating, and football games). As part of the ethnography, I conducted interviews with the advisors, as well as their parents, peers and leaders and gathered content and artifacts. Because most of the girls who participated in the remaining three youth groups also participated within the Cutting Edge Youth Ministry, I recruited within but did not observe those groups regularly.

The Essence of Dance Youth Praise Team, one of the four groups from which I recruited advisors, is a subset of the church's general Praise Dance Team and is designed for children and teenagers, ages 5 – 17. While the group is open to both boys and girls, it is comprised primarily of girls; only two boys regularly participated in their weekly activities and special events. Sarai's Mentoring Program is a faith-based, mentoring program whose mission is to "promote progressive ways of showing women and girls the essence of virtuous living for mental, physical and spiritual well-being"[2]. The organization fulfills its mission by training adults and pairing them with youth in a mentor-mentee relationship. The role of the mentor, as well as that of the mentoring program, is to guide the girls through spiritually and socially enhancing experiences that will provide them with tools for successful living, such as positive decision making skills, Christian character development, education preparedness, and social etiquette. Lastly,

[2] Sarah's Daughter's website – www.sarahsdaughters.net/about/the-program

the LAPD Cadet program is a youth training program initiated by the Los Angeles Police Department. It offers youth an opportunity to develop positive life skills and character traits, such as discipline, leadership, and academic excellence. This group uses the church as a satellite space and meets once a week.

I recruited the 22 advisors to this study by making announcements during the larger gatherings of each group, such as Sunday and Wednesday youth services, LAPD Cadet general meetings, Sarah's Daughters Mentee Gatherings and Spirit of Dance Choir rehearsals. Those who signed up received a letter introducing the study, along with an attached detailed outline. The following week, I called everyone who signed up and received a letter to further assess their interest and answer any questions that they or their parents may have had.

I chose this setting to conduct my fieldwork for a number of reasons. First, the African American church remains a key site of spiritual, cultural and social development for many Black women and youth in America, despite its traditionally patriarchal organizational habitus (Gilkes, 2001). This historically Black institution continues to offer empowerment, support, and genuine leadership opportunities to the African American women and girls who participate in this communal space (Collins, 1989). This study, then, imagined the church as representing a counterspace to the oppressive school setting of which the girls would speak during our gatherings. The church allowed them to deconstruct their school experiences and conceptualize their spiritual identities from a position of power. It is in this setting, and more specifically within the youth-oriented

groups, that I recruited the advisors, carried out ethnographic research, and conducted in-depth group and individual interviews.

Second, the church's size and diversity potentially offered the opportunity for me to work with a group of African American girls having a wide array of school and spiritual experiences. While all of the participants admitted to attending the church at least once, it was not mandatory for them to be members in order to serve as advisors to the study; neither did they have to embrace the Christian tradition, although the majority of them did. Additionally, the larger congregation yielded a large number of advisors, which allowed me to better understand school culture and its possible intersections with spirituality through the eyes of the African American female adolescent.

Native Researcher and Insider-Outsider Negotiations

The final reason I decided on this research site is because I am familiar with this setting, and this setting is familiar with me. Not only am I a member of Light on the Hill church, but my family members and I have also held various leadership positions there for almost 20 years. My father has been the senior pastor of Light on the Hill since 1994; shortly after, my brother joined him as the Chief Financial Officer. During the time of the study, my brother served as the Chief Operations Officer, and I reported to him and my father in my position as the Director of Ecclesia. In this role, I created and managed programming designed to facilitate spiritual growth and development for individuals and groups within the congregation and surrounding community. I, also, governed the body of auxiliaries and ministries that implemented spiritually-oriented programs and activities

designed specifically for the various social and cultural groups within the congregation, such as the Woman's Ministry, Men's Ministry, Senior's Ministry and Youth Ministry.

Ten years ago, I was the Youth Pastor of the Cutting Edge youth ministry. In fact, my work with this group encouraged my current doctoral pursuits. Over the course of three years, I created spiritual and academic programming for the youth, taught religious classes, mentored youth leaders and interacted with parents. As a result, I came into this research setting with a general knowledge about the ministry and good understanding of the inner-workings and organizational habitus of the environment. My abundance of social capital helped me gain access to the youth, acquire trust quickly and build a strong rapport among the girls and their parents.

About halfway through this study, I became pregnant with my first child. The visual imagery of my pregnant body added to the established rapport, as it increased my likeability among the participants and a perception of vulnerability and innocuousness among the parents, leaders and youth. My pregnancy became an accessory to data collection, as it often invited insightful exchanges that revealed sentiments about complex social issues. Common questions and ordinary conversations about my unborn baby often led to discourses around gender and racial inequality among the youth.

I benefitted from my status as a native researcher in this space; yet, my positioning also presented challenges that impacted attempts at data collection. First, while in the field, my identities and roles were in a constant state of negotiation. Second, while I held multiple positions of power within the research space, I also experienced the subjugation commonly experienced by Black women in the Black church (Grant, 1995).

During this study, I acknowledged my power to influence the spiritual understandings and behaviors of the participants, as well as exploit their culturally-constructed subordinate positionings. Thus, I attempted to make clear the lines of distinction between each role. For example, as part of my research design, I recruited and observed young ladies within the church's Youth Ministry. However, as part of my job, I was responsible for approving all youth ministry related requests – requests that necessarily impacted the spirituality of the girls that I observed. Additionally, as part of my position, I regularly evaluated the ministry and offered recommendations for ministry improvement. During these times, I offered general recommendations related to structure, as opposed to content, in an effort not to invalidate the study.

The lines between researcher, Director of Ecclesia, former Youth Pastor and even, pastor's daughter often blurred in the eyes of the youth leaders, participants, their parents and myself. At times, my mission was not clear - was I sitting in the youth sessions to evaluate the ministry as Director, observe my participants' actions as Researcher, or support the spiritual development of the youth as a volunteer or extension of my father, the pastor? While conducting research, I was often stopped by youth leaders asking about the status of various youth requests or making complaints about ministry-related functions and parents wondering whether I was being repositioned as the Youth Pastor.

Negotiating these various roles became a constant, and at times laborious, activity for me as documented below:

> *It's going to take a conscious effort for me to mentally separate my long-standing membership and familiarity within this community from my role as a researcher.*

It's so easy for me to fall back in line with what I am used to doing and with who I am used to being, without "making the familiar strange" and interrogating the cultural phenomena throughout. Do I have to prioritize my role as researcher above that of Director of Ecclesia, pastor's kid or even youth worker? How can I distance myself from those who approach me as they used to know me when I'm still me? At the end of the day, I can't separate the personal from the political, the professional or the academic. People dear to me relate to me as I relate to them. My roles are quickly solidifying as that of friend, youth leader, church leader, and researcher – in that order. Fieldnotes – 1/8/10

Much like Pedersen (1998), who also conducted research in her home community, the boundaries between my life and the field nearly disappeared, as I seemed to always be "in the field." This ongoing process of data collection and stimulation led to many explorations of the intersections between my research, work and personal life. Instead of distancing myself from the participants and this study, as is commonly suggested by traditional anthropologists (Marcus, 1998), I used my subjectivity, which was informed by my proximity to the setting, to add to the validity of the work. Foss and Foss (1994) suggests that using researcher's personal experiences as research data offers the researcher a heightened level of consciousness that may reveal insights into the impact of socio-cultural factors inherent within the research setting. Thus, in this study, my field experiences included any phenomena that contributed to the spiritual development, beliefs and practices of the study's participants

The second challenge that I faced in the field as a Black female studying the lives of other Black females in a Black male-dominated setting is reflected by this question posed by Jeffries & Generett (2003): "How does one understand the 'other' when she is the 'other' and few have been able to articulate a definition of 'other' that is acceptable to her and from which she can understand the process?" (p.3). I admittedly held a position of power in this setting as researcher, employee and member of the pastor's family; yet, I also experienced marginalization in my home community as a woman - and much more, as a relatively young female leader - within this traditionally patriarchic setting.

In 1982, Grant declared:

> It is often said that women are the 'backbone' of the church. On the surface, this may appear to be a compliment, considering the function of the backbone in the human anatomy… It has become apparent to me that most of the ministers who use this term are referring to location rather than function. What they really mean is that women are in the 'background' and should be kept there: they are merely support workers (p. 141).

Grant's interpretation of the traditional positioning given to Black women in the Black church – that of holding up the vision, as opposed to contributing to a re-vision of spiritual and religious development – often rang true in my field experiences. My position as Director of Ecclesia, a position that had only been occupied by men, allowed me entry into the traditionally male spaces of decision-making in the research setting; however, my gender and age regularly took away from my ability to make sustained structural change. At times, I was even complicit in my own subjugation (Villenas, 1996).

These experiences as a gendered outsider-within (Collins, 2000) enhanced the frame through which I explored the development and role of spirituality for African American female adolescents in this site. Yet, I made attempts not to project my own experiences of sexism unto them or use it as a lens through which to understand their experiences. This distinction was important because the participants did not understand the church to be a patriarchic space or claim to experience sexism, although their experiences often implied it.

Reflexivity

As previously stated, this study's methodological concerns related to the multiple roles that I held during my tenure in the primary research setting; these roles positioned me as both colonizer and colonized (Villenas, 1996) throughout my study. While I assumed spaces of privilege in the Black church setting, which brought with it an abundance of social capital and power, I was also marginalized as a Black woman working and researching in a traditionally androcentric space. Thus, throughout the processes of data collection and analysis, I made efforts to explicitly acknowledge the power dynamics and differences that I both encountered and participated in by injecting a feminist-oriented, self-reflexive approach into the knowledge construction process.

As a feminist practice, reflexivity is "the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality, as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome" (Berger, 2013, p.20). During this process, the researcher turns her lens back on herself to take responsibility for her own situatedness within the study and

considers the ways that her positionality might impact the setting, the participants, any collected data and its interpretation (Harding, 1987). In this study, reflexivity is demonstrated with the use of first-person language to allow the reader to follow the various positions that I occupy. Additionally, as will be evident in the following chapters, I provided detailed explanations of decisions made during the study along with rationale for such decisions (Berger, 2013). And, lastly, during the study, I encouraged open dialogue between the advisors and me and welcomed questions from them as I questioned them. I share those situations throughout this study (Collins, 2000).

While reflexivity did not unproblematize the overt and latent exploitative dimension that often accompanies the research process and, more specifically, ethnographic approaches, it aimed to foreground the thoughtfulness used during the data collection process and my approach to constructing and narrating knowledge on another person's behalf (Pillow, 2003). Reflexivity in this study challenged the view of knowledge as objective and knowledge production as independent of the researcher producing it (Harding, 1987). Additionally, it helped address the double edge sword that comes with conducting research in one's home community (Villenas, 1996).

Methodology

Reinharz (1992) declares that:

> Feminists embarking on important research projects are like people setting out on important journeys. As the journey continues, they draw upon different methods and tools… Being a researcher-traveler means having a self and a body. It means

> abandoning the voice of 'disembodied objectivity' and locating oneself in time and space (p. 211).

By exploring the role of spirituality in the school experiences of African American girls, I set off on the road less traveled (Frost, 2009), which is evinced by the paucity of research documenting this phenomenon. As a result, I employed multiple methods of qualitative data collection, which came out of my responsiveness to the participants and the unique challenges that resulted from studying such a nebulous topic. Additionally, the use of multiple methods encouraged thoroughness in this investigation, as each employed method added a layer of information and data that validated or refined that, which was previously used and/or collected (Reinharz, 1992).

As part of my proposed methodology, I set out to conduct a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) in order to understand both the systems of cultural formation that facilitates spiritual development and the various ways that these understandings play out in the school setting for Black female adolescents. After spending a significant amount of time as a participant observer in one site (i.e. church) and regularly, yet unofficially, visiting another (i.e. school), however, I determined that the nature and impact of this group's spirituality, including their spiritual beliefs, practices and subsequent behaviors, were largely imperceptible. In other words, it was difficult to tell when and how their spirituality was forming and/or playing out in social settings simply by observing their actions and behaviors. Thus, for me to collect data, and eventually produce knowledge, based solely on a method that predominantly depends on the

observations and conclusions of the researcher presented a challenge to the validity of proposed theories and the epistemological foundation of this work.

As a result, I extended the research design to include open-ended, in-depth group and individual interviews in order to more fully understand spirituality at play in the school setting. Interviews allow researchers access to people's ideas, thought, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher (Reinharz, 1992). While single-site ethnography illuminated cultural systems that contributed to the girls' spiritual development, group and individual interviews that highlighted their personal stories allowed me to triangulate ethnographic data, as well as explore the impact of their spiritual understandings on their school experiences through their eyes. While it could be argued that group and individual interviews fall within the category of "ethnographic methods," I present them as distinct methods of data collection used to understand a different set of phenomena. Moreover, while the ethnography takes place in a church setting, this study is not characterized as a church ethnography. Rather, it is a qualitative study that uses mixed methods of data collection, including ethnographic methods, in order to thoroughly explore the study's proposed questions.

Three primary methods of data collection were used to fulfill the purpose of this study. They include group interviews, in-depth interviews and ethnography. My conceptualization of these methods builds upon Reinharz's explanations of feminist methodology and methods.

Methods of Data Collection

Interviews

At the heart of this project was the utilization of open-ended feminist interview research (Reinharz, 1992). According to Reinharz (1992), this method explores women's views of reality and allows the researcher to generate theory. By maximizing "discovery and description" (p.18), interviews produce information that is not standardized. This allows the researcher to make use of differences among people while constructing knowledge. In this study, two types of interview methods informed data collection and analysis: (1) Group interviews, and (2) Individual interviews. Both types of interviews illuminated the personal stories of the participants.

Open-ended Group interviews

I initiated group interviews as a way of exploring preliminary and general ideas around several topics significant to this study that were held by the participants (Morgan, 1997). These interviews informed my understandings around transcendence, spirituality, God, faith, religion, schooling, and gender inequities for this group. These group interviews became a tool that informed the frame by which I developed and conducted individual interviews, wrote field notes while observing the youth in the research setting, conversed with parents and other participants, and analyzed content. Exploratory group interviews led to the operationalization of the concept of spirituality and allowed for shared understandings among the advisors.

Additionally, these group interviews encouraged dialogue and support among the advisors while they theorized and theologized about God's influence in their lived realities. The group interviews became a semi-structured rap session, which was part informational and, at times, therapeutic, as the girls often talked through past and current

school and personal challenges. My role within these sessions was that of facilitator, as I would attempt to steer the conversations towards the pre-determined questions without overly exerting authority. I attempted to encourage dialogue between the girls and me by disclosing personal stories and ideas upon request and not cutting short conversations that organically emerged.

Each of this study's 22 advisors took part in the group interviews. Each interview was conducted in my office at church and lasted an average of 60 minutes, although some were as short as 12 minutes or as long as 90 minutes. Discussions were audio-taped. The 22 advisors were randomly divided into five groups consisting of three to five girls; each group participated in at least three interview sessions.

Individual interviews

The purpose of in-depth interviews in this study was to collect personal narratives from the advisors. Personal narratives allow people to talk on their own terms about what has been significant in their lives and verbalize insights, feelings and interpretations about their stories (Mertens, 2010). According to Foss and Foss (1994), the telling of personal experiences allows individuals to articulate, and possibly, re/vision their participation and positioning within an event, which commonly brings to light unique, and often overlooked, perspectives. During these interviews, the girls shared lived experiences around their upbringing, schooling and spiritual development. Out of these stories emerged insights into the impacts of socio-cultural factors on their lived realities, spiritual understandings, spiritual practices and school behaviors.

Six advisors participated in individual in-depth interviews. The interviewees were recruited from the open-ended group interviews on a volunteer basis. Any girl who wanted to share her lived experiences about her spiritual development, spirituality and education could participate in the interview. The interviews lasted for an average of 60 minutes and took place in the setting of the girl's choosing. Some took place over the telephone, and others were conducted face-to-face in my office or in a restaurant. During the interviews, I asked direct questions about the girls' household structures, spiritual and religious socializers, memorable childhood and school experiences, challenging childhood and school experiences, and the role of their spirituality in each situation. Spending time as a participant observer and facilitator of the group interviews prior to these interviews built trust that was needed for thorough conversations to take place.

Ethnography

According to Reinharz (1992), "Feminist ethnography is consistent with three goals mentioned frequently by feminist researchers: (1) to document the lives and activities of women, (2) to understand the experience of women from their own point of view, and (3) to conceptualize women's behavior as an expression of social contexts" (p. 51). To explore the development and practice of spirituality for the African American female adolescents within my study, I conducted an ethnography within the Cutting Edge Youth Ministry at Light on a Hill Church. Ethnographic data was collected through participant observations, fieldnotes, document analysis and semi-formal interviews with the participants and their youth leaders, parents, church pastors and friends. During this

time, I volunteered as a youth worker by offering support during weekly services, special events and outings.

As a feminist ethnographer, I sought to challenge techniques designed to maintain space between the researcher and the researched. As previously mentioned, I injected myself into the youth activities, many of which are examined in this study. As a youth worker in this space, I answered Biblical and religious questions from the youth, provided counseling and prayer upon request, chaperoned the youth during social outings, attended youth meetings, choir and dance rehearsals, and Youth Advisory Board meetings, and interacted with parents about their children and the youth group. In each situation, I paid particular attention to the spiritual beliefs and practices that were being taught and performed, as well as any interplay between the girls in the group and the other youth group members and leaders.

As a feminist participant observer, I attempted to point out inequalities in practices that I often observed, while making an effort not to over exert authority. As a "complete participant" (Reinharz, 1992), I upheld the standards and doctrine of the religious setting, even if I did not entirely agree with them (i.e. issues related to heaven, hell and homosexuality). When I could, I avoided teaching Bible study or Sunday services and, instead, offered peripheral support.

As part of the ethnography, I collected and examined cultural artifacts. Cultural artifacts are products of individual activity, social organization and cultural patterns within a cultural space and may be presented as written records, visual texts and cultural symbols (Holland et al., 2003). Cultural artifacts collected within this setting included

Bible passages that were frequently used, youth church copy (i.e. brochures), youth-inspired projects (i.e. vision boards, poetry books), and media used during messages to instill knowledge about spiritual and religious principles (i.e. movies and games).

Data Analysis

Before collecting and analyzing data, I made an effort not to privilege or presume outcomes. Instead, I drew upon grounded theory analysis strategies to build theories that were grounded in the data around spirituality and education collected from the African American female adolescents (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Data analysis started during the data collection process. Amid the group and individual interviews, as well as the ethnography, I began reflecting on initial impressions and patterns and formulating theoretical ideas, which I shared with the participants for immediate feedback and interpretations (Mertens, 1995). I began the process of transcribing the audio recordings while still in the field. This process led to the formation of initial insights, led to additional questions and made apparent gaps in my data collection. After completing the data collection process and transcribing audio recordings, I open coded each piece of data by closely examining what was spoken or performed and categorizing them into distinct phenomena (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Afterwards, I looked for patterns and began to formulate relationships between categories that may fit into developed story lines.

Closing the Study

The relationship that I have with the advisors to this study is founded upon my role as youth leader, church leader and friend. Thus, advisors are more than merely "data-providers" (Oakley, 1999). They are a part of my home community. Because of this, I felt

a great responsibility to close the study without discontinuing relationships that grew stronger with increased interactions. At the close of the study, I made known to each advisor my desire to remain in touch. I offered my assistance with school and college preparation, including writing letters of recommendation and assisting with homework. I also ensured that each advisor had my contact information, in case they desired a mentoring relationship.

In the focus group sessions, a bond was formed between the advisors through reflecting communally on their personal experiences. In many ways, the group interviews became a supportive community in which each advisor remembered and re-visioned lived experiences that shaped their spiritual and self-understandings. During the last day of each group interviews, we had a small celebration. Even though we were still in the confines of the research setting, we enjoyed cookies, chips and punch. Members of each group were encouraged to share any final thoughts about the group and their experiences and were given the chance to exchange information.

In this chapter, I attempted to accomplish four things. First, I presented epistemological understandings that shaped the methodology employed in this study. Next, I described the research setting and its participants. Third, I reflected upon and accounted for my positioning as a native researcher. And, finally, I presented the methods used to collect data, analyze data and close the study. In the next chapter, I present narratives of the six advisors who participated in the in-depth interviews. I examine the factors, people and lived experiences that influenced their spiritual development and the ways that their spirituality shaped their school experiences.

Chapter Four: Presentation of Spiritual Profiles

In this chapter, I present spiritual profiles of six advisors to this study. These profiles were generated during in-depth interviews and provide an organized look at the factors impacting the advisors' spiritual development. Additionally, these profiles provide insights to the dialogic relationship between the advisors' spiritual development and their lived experiences, with particular attention given to those occurring within the school setting. Inspired by Mattis and Jagers's (2001) framework by which to study spirituality in the lives of African Americans, each profile has a similar structure and offers information around each advisor's: (1) family background, (2) spiritual and religious socializers and experiences, which have been instrumental in transmitting spiritual understandings, (3) lived experiences, which have impacted or was impacted by their spirituality, and (4) school experiences, which impacted or impacted by their spirituality. Spirituality is comprised of the beliefs, practice, understandings and values that connects an individual to unseen forces and allows that individual to create self-understandings in relation to unseen forces. Spiritual understandings refer to spiritual knowledge that is shaped both by social interactions and lived experiences, which guide an individual's cognitive, affective and behavior outcomes.

The spiritual profiles of the advisors make clear the dialogic relationship between components of spiritual development and resulting performances (Mattis and Jagers', 2001). Although spirituality does not operate universally according to a prescriptive or causal relationship, the profiles suggest that a connection exists between the girls' spiritual understandings, their ideas about school and their practices therein.

These profiles explore the significance of lived experiences in the development and performance of the advisors' spirituality. Womanists scholars suggest that it is according to these experiences that Black women construct knowledge about the role of God and unseen forces in their daily lives (Williams, 2006). As a traditionally marginalized group whose members live and operate on the periphery of society, the individuals have developed understandings of themselves and their world in relation to a divine being. These understandings play out in concrete ways and produce specific cognitive, affective and behavior outcomes.

I introduce each profile by presenting demographic and school information about the advisors. I offer knowledge that was gained through personal interactions with each girl and their affiliates in the research setting. This knowledge is presented as stories, field notes or observations about their personalities, mannerisms or involvement, primarily in the church community. In each introduction, I also offer themes unique to that profile for the reader to attend to. Their stories demonstrate the idiosyncratic nature of spirituality and its intersections with the advisors' lived experiences, specifically in the school setting.

Each profile consists of a narrated sketch that illustrates the development and performance of their spirituality. In line with the components of spiritual development and performance presented by Mattis and Jagers (2001), each profile is divided into four sections which highlights their family background, spiritual and religious socializers and experiences that have transmitted spiritual knowledge, memorable and challenging lived experiences that have impacted and was impacted by spirituality, and school experiences

that have impacted or was impacted by their spirituality. I recognize the fluidity of these categories and do not position them as mutually exclusive. In order to center the advisors' voices, the profiles rely heavily own their own words. I serve as narrator throughout each profile, which allows for reflexivity and additional guidance. All of the advisors constructed God according to traditional, Black, Christian theological perspectives, which position God as a male. In our conversations and in this text, I mimic that representation.

Keisha and Sheila – Spirituality as Cultivating Resistance

On any given Sunday, you will find 17-year old Keisha and her 16-year old sister, Sheila, on center stage at the youth church. They may be singing on the praise team or in the youth choir, demonstrating interpretive worship through dance, giving an announcement about upcoming youth events, or offering a Biblically-inspired exhortation to the youth. As secretary and president of the Youth Advisory Board (YAB), respectively, Keisha and Sheila organize activities for Sunday and Wednesday youth services and lead the YAB in planning special events. Additionally, they serve as the primary consultants for the Youth Pastor and represent the youth voice at church wide events.

Keisha and Sheila are the daughters of Pastor Darrell Crawford, the Children's, Youth and Young Adult Pastor at Light of the Hill. As such, they have inherited his extraordinary charisma, talent and leadership abilities. I took notice of Sheila's exceptional talent during an Easter program that showcased the artistic abilities of the children and youth. During the program, the youth ministry performed an interpretive

dance that illustrated the life's journey of a girl who was struggling with acceptance and looking for unconditional love. Sheila played the role of the girl. In her dance routine, Sheila's passionate interpretation merged her emotions with trained dance techniques, which earned her and the team a standing ovation from the audience. Sheila is not only known for her artistic abilities, but also for her compassion. She has been known to give the last of her food or money to other youth with a demonstrated need.

My first observation of Keisha's leadership ability occurred during my first stint at facilitating a youth Bible Study with no other adult volunteers present. While I apprehensively taught about the significance of discipleship to a room full of apparently uninterested, yet talkative middle and high school teenagers, Keisha decided to police and correct their behavior. Below is a portion of my field notes that documents the moment. These notes have been edited for clarity.

> *Keisha does not play. Tonight she got the youth together in a way that I could not. It was remarkable to see. I was struggling through my Bible study message in a room of teenagers who clearly did not want to hear it. Their disinterest was evident by excessive and loud talking, throwing foreign items at each other and taking multiple trips to the bathroom and the "big church". On top of that, I did not have a microphone to compete with the chatter. I had done everything that I knew to do: I asked them several times to be quiet, I gave my tried and true "teacher look", and I even moved youth around to find a suitable configuration that would be least distractive. After doing all of these things, I made the decision to just plow through my message and get it over with. Keisha, however, was not*

having it. About halfway through my message, Keisha, from the front row, turned around and said loudly - it really wasn't a yell – "Ya'll get quiet back there!!! I'm trying to hear! And, y'all need to be paying attention, too! She's trying to help us. Cut all that out!!!" And, they did. After she finished scolding them, she turned around and smiled ever so sweetly at me. I was dumfounded for about five seconds then continued with my message. From this experience, I gather that: (1) Keisha is bold in her convictions and actions. She is a self-initiator and doesn't need permission from anyone to do what she feels is right. (2) She is very well respected as a leader by her peers. Nobody looked at her crazy. Nobody questioned her audacity in demanding respect from them. They listened to her, as if she has either done this before or has earned the right to do it. (3) Keisha demands respect for herself and everyone around her. Do not play with her.

Keisha and Sheila attend University High School, a charter public school located on the campus of Northeast Community College in South Los Angles. Their high school offers college courses that allow them to attend class with college students and earn transferrable college credit. University High School is comprised predominately of Latino and Black working-class and poor students.

At the inception of this study, Keisha was a senior at University High, and Sheila was a junior. Yet, when these narratives were constructed, Keisha was starting her freshman year at the University of California – Los Angeles, and Sheila was entering her senior year. As a high school senior, Keisha held multiple school leadership positions. She was cheerleading co-captain, as well as a member of the student council.

Additionally, Keisha created a tutoring and mentoring program – Students 4 Students – while maintaining a 3.7 GPA. During Sheila's senior year, she was also co-captain of the cheerleading squad. Additionally, she was the student body president, part of the school site council, a student union board member and was crowned homecoming queen. As a senior, Sheila also started the school's first Christian organization - the New Life Club. Both girls attribute much of their success to their personal development, spiritual development and relationship with God.

The profiles of Keisha and Sheila highlight the importance of family in initiating spiritual awareness. Additionally, it highlights the role of spiritual socializers in transmitting spirituality and religious cultural understandings. Specifically, the girls' grandmother initiates their spiritual awareness, while their relationship with their father shapes expectations around their relationship with God and the roles they should play as Christians. This profile suggests the significance of constructing, what is referred to as, a "personal relationship with God". It is through this personal relationship that spiritual understandings impact the girls lived experiences and challenges. Lastly, this profile presents a glance at spirituality's role in cultivating resistance to school practices and ideologies that may be perceived as psychologically damaging and academically unproductive.

Family Background

Until the ages of 11 and 12, Keisha and Sheila were raised in a small Louisianan town surrounded by family. It is in this setting that the girls became aware of unseen

forces and began making connections between family, spirituality, religiosity and education. Keisha shared that:

> I had a lot of people to take care of me. I had my grandmother and my biological mom, her side of the family, and my dad's side of the family. Growing up, they always supported me from all aspects of life, whether it was homecoming, making sure I was at church every Sunday, making sure I was well dressed, well mannered, making sure my grades and everything were well. I think spirituality played a big part, as well, because I was always brought up in the church from day one. When I was able to get out the house, the first place I went to was church. My family was church oriented. Like, my grandmother was choir director. I even began ushering at a young age. My grandpa played the piano. A lot of people in my family sing. So, church was always that foundation that played a big part of my life.

Keisha and Sheila's parents were young and unmarried when they were born; both parents were 19 years old. During this time, they were raised, in large part, by their paternal grandmother, who was religious. Because of their grandmother's religious commitment, the girls were heavily involved in church and attended church regularly. Sheila explained:

> She had us in church every Sunday. We grew up there. We've always been involved, always part of the youth groups and everything. Like, our house was literally down the street from the church. We were always there.

I asked Sheila if she liked going to church so much. In her response, she suggested that it was a cultural practice – something that she did not necessary like doing, but a tradition, which was commonplace to her household. She stated:

> I liked church growing up. I mean, it wasn't really like I enjoyed it, but it was something I did. It was something I was used to. It was something I was familiar with.

After Keisha and Sheila's father matured, he gained full custody of the girls. They lived with him and his wife during the week and with their biological mother on weekends. Sheila positioned her father as the disciplinarian, while she viewed her mother as "a bit more unstable with her money and her religion and her life, in general". Sheila recalled relocating to different houses while they lived with her mother. She also remembered observing contradictions in her mother's spirituality and her daily practices.

> Her actions did not always reflect her beliefs because she knew God and believed in God. But, she was still sort of living a youthful life and trying to still enjoy herself.

Early Spiritual and Religious Socialization and Experiences

Keisha's and Sheila's father became a senior pastor of a Baptist church that was heavily influenced by Pentecostal traditions. It was common for members of their church to participate in supernatural or otherworldly experiences, such as speaking in unknown tongues and being "filled" with the Holy Spirit. Observing and participating in these supernatural experiences marks what the girls referred to as their first "spiritual

encounters," which confirmed their belief of God's existence. Keisha described her first supernatural experience:

> I was at church with my family, and the pastor of that church prayed for me and wished the Holy Spirit upon me. And, the experience that I had that day made me believe even more that God was there. It was a physical feeling that I felt within me that I can't even begin to describe with words. But, from that day on, I knew that God was always in my life. I knew for myself that He was always there. And, from that point on, I started praying more often. And, I just felt within me that there was never a doubt that God is here for me and that God is real. Ever since that age of 11 or 12 when that feeling fell upon me, I knew from that day that God was there.

Like Keisha, Sheila recalled her first discernible spiritual encounter as a supernatural experience where she spoke in unknown tongues for the first time. For her, this also confirmed God's existence.

> This pastor came to our church. And, he said, whoever hasn't spoken in tongues before, come forth. And, I really didn't think anything was going to happen to me, cause I've seen it all my life, and it had just never happened to me. So, then, it happened. And, it showed me how real it really was. Until then, it was just something I witnessed. But after, it was something I lived, something I felt, and something I just knew to be real for myself.

For Keisha and Sheila, these spiritual encounters initiated their development of a "personal relationship" with God. I asked Keisha what a personal relationship with God looks like. She responded:

> It's like something I value, someone I protect and who protects me. It's almost like a human relationship with a person that you love. It's being able to be open, being able to be guided in the right direction. Ummm, it's…it's being able to trust and believe. Being able to rely on something that you can't physically see with the eye.. So, when I say I'm building my relationship with God…it's being able to consider him as a friend, not just a God, but as a friend, and as a father, and as a guide.

Keisha also understood her personal relationship with God through the dynamics of her relationship with her father. Her interactions with her physical father impacted her expectations of God as her "Godly father". She stated:

> My dad's always been there my whole life… with him being an awesome father, I learned what I'm supposed to expect with God. I see how my physical father is a protector, how he's a provider, and how he's somebody that I can just be honest with, and he's always had me. Like, he always took care of me. I never lacked anything. So, if my physical father is like that, my Godly father must be something much more bigger because that's his father, too. And, he's been imitating the ideal standard that God sets, you know. So, it's like, I see...I see my biological father in a more physical state, and, I see God more as in a spiritual

> state. No, he's not physically there, but, those standards of what I expect and those values are still coming from him.

Lived Experiences

Keisha and Sheila's most challenging childhood experience occurred when their father uprooted their family from Louisiana to California when they were 11 and 12 years old. Not only did they leave their supportive village of family and friends, but they left their relatively calm school to attend a South Los Angeles school that was widely known in the Los Angeles Area for its high rates of violence and crime. Sheila's spiritual understandings around God's divine will did not align with her observations of her new environment, and she questioned the providence of God (Brunner and Wyon, 1952). She stated:

> We initially moved because my dad said that God told him to. And, I just didn't understand that. I was like, if it was God's purpose, why are things so bad? Why was the environment so bad? Why were the people so bad and mean and... I didn't really understand the connection between God's will and the current situation…I hated it and I wanted to go back so bad. It was just terrible.

The girls' new middle school presented an entirely different experience from what they were accustomed to in Louisiana. Sheila described the school as "terrible", the kids as "bad", and an imagined idea of the world that she entered as "cruel and dangerous." She encountered peer pressure like nothing she had experienced before. She explained:

> Out here, the kids were just doing everything…I remember when I first got there, and I saw kids walking around smoking weed and doing all types of things, it just really blew my mind.

While Sheila was overwhelmed by perceived anti-academic and unproductive behaviors in her new school environment, Keisha struggled with lacking familial support and desiring to be accepted by her new peers. In this new environment, Keisha felt like a cultural Other and struggled with wanting to fit in, while holding on to her values and cultural understandings.

> Like I said earlier, my family had always been there. They'd always been a village. I felt really alone and misunderstood, and I started to question my misunderstandings. Like, I felt so different to the point that it was hard because I didn't have that very environment and very foundation that I was raised upon. I was put into a world where everything was different. California was totally different from Louisiana. And I remember I spoke differently, and I looked differently, and I dressed differently. And, that played a big role in my challenging experience - trying to be accepted because I felt different from everyone else. I went from being the girl who’s really nice and well known around the neighborhood to this strange girl in your classroom that you don’t know nothing of. So, I started trying to be accepted because I felt different from everyone else.

Existing as the cultural Other at school allowed Keisha to personalize her relationship with God. Additionally, Keisha recognizes synchronicity between her spiritual and

personal development - as her spiritual identity continued to form, so did her self-identity. She states:

> My relationship with God played a huge role in my life at that point. It wasn't no more of what your dad believes in or what your mom believes in. It's what you believe, you know. So, at that point, I started attending youth church at Light on the Hill with Ms. Lorraine. And, I think it caused the growth spurt for my relationship with God. Like, it took me to a whole other level because I had no one else there who I felt understood me. And, the more I go to youth church, the more I learn more about God and the more I learned about myself.

For Keisha, attending youth church provided a cultural space that countered that within the school. The messaging received at church countered that which she received in her school environment. Thus, the organizational habitus at the youth church provided Keisha with a counternarrative that she transported to school. This allowed her to resist the culture presented at school.

> From that point on, I understood that I was created to be set apart. I was created to be different. So, all the things that I looked at earlier as a negative, I started to look at it as a positive. It was a privilege to be different from others because that's how God created you. I was forced to go out on my own at that point and discover God myself. [At church], I felt like I didn't have to impress nobody or look like nobody else. And, I was just learning about myself. It helped me understand that it was ok to be different. It helped me understand if God be for me, who can be against me. It helped me understand those scriptures and how that played a part of

> my life. Even at my school, it helped me understand how to feel more comfortable and at ease. It took a while but it got to a point where I didn't care as much. Ok, I accept that. I look different, I act different, and I speak different but it's okay to be not like everyone else.

While Keisha had to overcome feelings of alienation at her new school, Sheila knew from the start that assimilating into that environment was something that she never wanted to do. "With that group", she states, "I could never conform cause I was so against it that I wouldn't even allow myself to do anything that they were doing." Sheila's spirituality, which was shaped largely by her father's sermons and youth church experiences, led her not only to resist the immoral, anti-academic practices taking place at school, but to act to transform them.

> My Christianity really played a role in that situation because I used to hear my dad's messages, and I would take all of that in and try to apply it once I was in school. Like, he preached this one sermon about not allowing what's going outside of you to get inside of you because then it would bring you down. And, how as Christians and believers, we were created to live above those things and to help others, so, if we're down, we're unable to help them. So, I used that, and I tried to help the gang bangers who were at my school and who were just doing all types of bad things. I started putting up posters with scriptures on them. Like, I really tried to make a difference in that environment because I know you have to be the change you want to see. And, I didn't like what I was seeing, so, I tried to do something about it.

I asked Sheila if someone encouraged her to put the posters up or if it was something that she felt she just needed to do.

> Putting up the posters around school was something I really wanted to do. My dad always preached about – umm, what's that scripture? ‘As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he'. I was so moved and influenced by that message that in the moment I thought that everyone in the school can become better than what they are and everyone can become who they really want to become. Like, they don't have to settle for this type of living. I wanted everyone to get the word because, of course, people can't go to church. Everybody wasn't brought up in my type of household where we go to church every Sunday. So, I guess I was trying to get the church to them, in a way.

While the experience was unpleasant, Keisha and Sheila’s spirituality helped them, not only to overcome the situation, but also make meaning of it. They both now believe that moving to California was the best move for them because of the increase in academic and social opportunities, which would not have been available in Louisiana. Additionally, the experience developed their spiritual understandings. They both believe that the move was a part of “God’s plan” for their overall life’s journey. Sheila expounds:

> I believe that the experience of moving from Louisiana to California taught me that God is in control of everything. Even though I didn't understand it at first, and even though I didn't like it at first, it showed me that He really does have a plan for my life. And, if I just follow Him, I’ll be going down the right path. I’ve grown closer to God. I have a better relationship with Him, like, a more personal

> relationship with Him. Also, I now know that college is a necessary part of my life, and in order to get there, I have to do well now. I know college is part of God's plan for my life. So, yes, I think it's just all working out the way it should. That's how I know that experience was the best choice for us.

Spirituality and School Experiences

Keisha and Sheila attribute their school success to their connection with God. They both apply their understandings of spiritual principles to their behaviors and practices. Sheila's knowledge around the "will of God" leads her to believe that God has a desire for her to be prosperous. In order to do that, she must achieve academic success in high school and college.

> Christianity influences my behavior and actions because I believe in order to be the woman God wants me to be, I have to do well in school and earn the right degree to live my life to its fullest potential. My spirituality impacts me on a daily basis, whether it's if I'm alone and studying for a test, or if I don't have a class and am outside in the lunch area by myself. I'll think about God or talk to Him. Even the way that I respond to situations, the way I respond to conflict and everything at school is because of my spirituality.

Similarly, Keisha feels like her spirituality fuels her personality and academic identity to produce practices and beliefs conducive to academic success. Talking about her will to academically achieve, she states:

> I have always been very ambitious and determined. And, the Bible says that God gives you the desires of your heart. So, for me to feel that way, it had to be from

> Him. In everything I do, I give it my all. I would not accept anything less. I've always chased perfection and I am a hard worker. Like, if I got a B, I was super mad. I would go to the teacher and see what I could do to change that. My friends, they didn't understand. They'd be like, 'You got a B. It's okay'. And, I'm like, no I have to have all A's or its not accepted. That perfection and just having everything right, I think that all came from God.

Keisha's most memorable school experience was being a founder and president of Students 4 Students (S4S). She believes that God predestined her to start the program in order to help her peers. Keisha's spirituality promotes a spiritual identity that positions her as a physical extension of God's deity that may be used to carry out God's desires, specifically, in the school setting.

> Starting the tutoring program was something that I felt was laid upon my heart to start. I can't even describe where...well, I know the desire came from God, but I don't even know how it started. That was my most memorable experience because I felt like I was doing something good for my environment - putting something positive out there. And, I felt very proud of the end result, which was students attending tutoring and getting mentored. I feel like I completed something that God put the desire in me to do. I think that God is always looking for people's availability. It doesn't matter who you are, if He can use you, He will. So, I feel good knowing that I was somebody that He can use.

In the same vein, the process through which Sheila secured her position as student class president is her most memorable school experience because she felt like it was an

accomplishment that was predetermined by God. In other words, she felt like it fit into God's divine will for her academic career. During the process, she pushed past several situations that cast doubts on the possibility of her win. Yet, she endured because she felt it was something that God predetermined for her. Sheila's spiritual understandings and her corresponding belief that God has a plan for her school success resulted not only in optimism, but also perseverance.

> When I ran for student body president, I really felt like I was supposed to be the student body president. Like, I just knew it, you know. I just knew that's what God wanted me to do. There were, like, 5 other candidates. And, I was initially discouraged because I didn't realize so many other students wanted it so bad. So, then I started thinking, well, what if this isn't what I'm supposed to do. But, I went through with it, anyway. After the grades came out, 3 people dropped because you had to have a certain GPA. So, then it was me and 2 other people - this guy and this girl. And, the guy was a really popular black guy, and the girl was a very popular Latina. So, I didn't really know how it would turn out. The lady who's over the senior advisory board really liked me and the other guy. So, she talked to us and wanted both of us to be part of the committee, at least. It seemed like she was really trying to get me to try to run for something else, just to guarantee that I would be a part of the committee, even if I'm not in that role. But, I knew that I really wanted to be the president. So, the guy said, 'Well, I'll just run for vice president, and I'll let her run for president'. I was very grateful for that. So, it was me and the other Latina. And, she's very popular, and our school is

> 70% Latino. So, I didn't know. But, the next day, I was told the girl wasn’t running anymore. She just decided not to do it anymore. And, that's when it was confirmed. Like, I knew that God had this position for me; I just didn't see it as possible at first. But, then at the last moment, it came through and I was very grateful for that.

In this situation, Sheila’s achievement of Student Body President resulted from a variety of factors, including the unsatisfactory GPA’s of other students and a classmate’s decision not to further pursue the position. However, for Sheila, the situation confirmed her belief around the infallibility of God’s ultimate will. Because of this belief, she was motivated to continue with the process, though it seemed possible that she would not win. I asked Sheila how she recognizes God’s will in her everyday experiences.

> I know that God has something for me when things in my life seem to add up. Even if I don't like it in the moment, it always seems to add up. Like, I always see the purpose in each situation. I always look for the purpose in each situation. It's like, after anything that happens, I go, ‘Why did God have me go through that? And, then I really believe - it's kinda like Jeremiah, where God knew him before he even created the world. And, it teaches you if God created you, then He already has a purpose for your life. The fact that you were created is evidence that God has something He wants you to do on this Earth.

Dominique – Spirituality as a Supplement to Human Agency

I remember Dominique from my tenure as Youth Pastor about ten years before this study took place. During that time, she was in the Children’s Church but would often

find her way to the youth services. She was young but well-mannered and attentive, so we would let her stay. Back then, Dominique impressed everyone with her curiosity and maturity. She appeared genuinely interested in understanding religious and spiritual principles, almost to the same extent as the teens.

At 17-years old, Dominique remains open to the foundational concepts of Christianity but refuses to call herself a Christian. "The rules and regulations, they can be unfair," she says. She also feels that many Christian tenets as interpreted by most church leaders encourage undue judgment towards people with different Biblical interpretations and spiritual backgrounds. As a bisexual, Dominique has repeatedly been condemned by Christian adults who tell her that her sexuality and Christianity cannot co-exist. Thus, she refuses the label, Christian, and prefers to identify as spiritual. She occasionally attends youth church to connect with friends and maintain a major component of her upbringing.

Dominique is a senior at Grant High School, a predominantly White school that she feels is "too calm." At the beginning of the year, she transferred to this school from Washington High because of elevated rates of violence and a concern for the safety of her 14-year old brother. At Washington High School, Dominique was on the volleyball, track and swim teams. She also held a 3.5 GPA for most of her high school career. As she prepares to complete her final year, she regrets the times that she slacked in school and the extent to which she lost touch with those who could help her with recommendations and mentoring.

During the focus group sessions and in-depth interview, Dominique was open with her personal experiences. When she shared the joys and pains of her life in the group, the poignancy of her words silenced those who listened. Dominique was also analytical in her responses, seemingly constructing ideas about the intersectionality of educational, spirituality and personal development as she spoke.

Dominique's story demonstrates the significance of adversity in developing spiritual understandings of African American girls. Like most of the other advisors, Dominique's spiritual awareness was initiated by interactions with family, and more specifically, her grandmother. Yet, the harsh realities of her life and those around her generated powerful ideas about the necessity of self-reliance in enduring and overcoming struggle. Thus, Dominique seemingly emphasized the role of human agency in her spiritual understandings and positioned God as supplementing any human frailties.

Family Background and Early Spiritual/Religious Socialization and Experiences

Dominique was raised by her grandparents in a working-class community in Compton, CA, until the age of seven. It is here that she began forming a spiritual knowledge base and identity that acknowledged a non-material presence. Her grandmother made her participation in religious activities mandatory. Attending church and praying was part of their weekly rituals. Dominique stated:

> Every Sunday we went to church. And, my grandmother was secretary of the church, so anything dealing with the church, she was there which means I was there. And, at a young age, I was really involved in it, more than my siblings were and my cousins were.

In church, Dominique was deeply involved – singing, dancing and socializing with the other kids on a regular basis. Additionally, her grandparents incorporated prayer into her daily activities, particularly those that were routine and essential to her well-being. She explains:

> They instilled in me prayer. I can tell you that. Before every meal, I prayed. It didn't matter where we were at – even if we were just eating hot dogs. 'Say your blessing, say your blessing, say your blessing.' And, before I went to sleep, I would pray 'The Lord's Prayer.' And, they taught me how to be polite. I was very, very polite.

At the age of 7, she went to live with her mother and father in a less affluent and more violent neighborhood in Compton, CA. With that transition came a change in her religious and spiritual socialization and experiences that shaped her spiritual and self-understandings. For much of her childhood, her parents did not attend church, nor did they acknowledge God or a spiritual realm on a consistent basis. When she became a teenager, however, her mother began to more consistently display her religious and spiritual beliefs. Dominique suggests that now her spirituality is not predicated upon her church attendance. Instead, she can be spiritual "within [herself]".

> After I left my grandma, I lived with my mom and dad. And, it was just me and them - we lived on Compton Blvd[3]. And, once I was with them, I kinda stopped going to church. It was more like, Sunday is just Sunday to me. So, I wasn't as

[3] Compton Blvd. is a street in Compton, CA., which connects Compton, CA., to Long Beach, CA. It is known for its violence and prostitution.

> spiritual as I was. And then, when I turned about 13 - my 8th grade year - I started to get more involved in church again. I started going back to the way I was, ‘cause, my mom started getting spiritual. She's always been spiritual, but she's always been kinda private...like conservative spiritual. But, when I turned 13, she became more open with it. She began to take me and my siblings to church. My father didn't do it, but he wasn't really into it. So, he just stayed home. I joined the youth ministry and, since then, I’ve kinda been more spiritual than I have, and when I do fall off of church and may stop going to church, I still, like, remain spiritual within myself. I still pray and read the Bible from time to time.

When comparing the experiences of growing up at her grandparents’ house with those of living with her parents, Dominique recalls stark differences between the two environments. While she positioned her grandparents’ house as “calm”, she viewed her parents’ home as “different”. Her father was a drug dealer with a serious demeanor who sold drugs out of their house, and her mother was a bartender at a strip club. The two household environments impacted her personality and self-understandings in different ways. In response to a question asking what it was like being in her grandparents’ neighborhood and household, she responded:

> Most kids my age were really ghetto and loud. And, I was really loud, like, bubbly and goofy. I was goofy. (laughs) I was probably, like, the immature kid. I was so goofy - I was always laughing. I really wasn't too ghetto. I wasn't about fighting. I was more, like, let's go play Barbie’s or something. As I got older, it was a different vibe, but the things that they instilled in me are instilled in me

today. It was a really calm, chilled, happy house. They gave me what I wanted - what I needed. I never went without. I wasn't spoiled, though. They taught me how to be humble at a young age. I was very, very humble.

I asked Dominique what it was like at her parents' house.

At my parents – I don't know; it was ok. I preferred being at my grandparents' than there. My parents' house was cool. It was a different lifestyle. Like, my mom – her occupation was odd. Like, my mom and dad's occupations – Like, my dad was a drug dealer, which was just fine. He made his money. That's what I realized. We went through that for a while. He supported us. He was a good dad. He made sure that nobody bothered us ever. Like, everything was okay. There were a couple of times that the lights were off or hot water wasn't on or electricity wasn't working. It was times like that, but he always found a way. And, my mom, she was, like, a bartender - a bartender at a strip club. So, she was maintaining it. She had an actual job. And, he just kinda did his drug dealing from time to time. He sold drugs out of the house.

Dominique felt that her father's occupation and serious demeanor forced her to mature more quickly than she would have liked. Yet, she also acknowledged that her father cultivated within her street savvy, wisdom and strength that guided her personal, academic and spiritual identity development and experiences. She stated:

I told you, I was immature. So, dealing with that, I came to be way more mature than I thought I would ever be at that age. When it came to my grades, I was very smart in school - popular, always, at every school I was at. Even though I was

> really, really goofy, my dad was really serious. He's a really serious cat. And, he didn't like the goofiness. So, I kinda had to get out of that character, and try to be as mature as I possibly could. I can say I grew up too fast. So, it's like – I don't know. I just say they made me who I am today. Everything I seen then, like, it made me who I am. And, I'm street smart, I'm intelligent, and it's because of him, because of my grandparents, because of my mom.

Dominique would engage in spiritual practices during times of stress. Yet, while she believed in God, she had not developed a spiritual understanding that could speak to her daily realities. During this time in her development, she compared God to other mythical characters of which she was already familiar, like the tooth fairy. She did not perceive the image of God that was often promoted in by religious and spiritual socializers in the context of her personal and family struggles.

> There were times where I would be stressed when I was younger because I grew up on the streets with my mom and dad. Like, I would pray. I would talk with my grandma. She would pray with me. And, you know, I never really thought prayer worked. I just thought it was all, like, a tooth fairy thing. Like, I know that there's a God, but I also know there's a tooth fairy. So, I thought, maybe God is similar to a tooth fairy. That's what I thought adults believed - that God was their tooth fairy. Of course, I believed in Him. My spirit told me, like, it's gotta be right. But, I was like, I don't believe this God works. You just pray to this God and it just comes true? Like, I'm praying to God and I hoped something would happen, but I

> would be like, oh, that's not gonna happen, ‘cause I been praying I'd win a million dollars and that's not here yet. (laughs)

Lived Experiences

The summer that Dominique graduated from middle school, she, her mother and younger sister did not have a place to live. They ended up staying in women’s shelters that eventually led them to an area in downtown Los Angeles well-known for its large homeless population. This was her most challenging childhood experience.

> I remember going on a trip down there to see if it was for real. Like, this is for real a homeless row. I didn't want my mom there, I didn't want my sister there, I didn't want to be there at all. But, [my mom] was like, ‘We have to go there.’ And, eventually, we did have to go there. My mom went down there twice - she and my little sister who was just born. She was like a year old. And, I went.

The experience greatly impacted Dominique’s personal and spiritual development. It marks the first time she recalls “really” talking to God.

> At that time, I learned to be really, really strong. And, I took adult things in the way that my mom showed me. Stuff that I shouldn't have to worry about, I worried about like crazy. And, that was my first time, like, really talking to God. I remember talking to God, trying to figure out what was going on. And, every temptation would come over me. I was rebellious at that age. Me and my dad wasn't conversating at all. I was introduced to marijuana then. I was really trying anything that you could possibly think of at that age. There was a time when I

> was, like, let me kill myself, dear Lord. And, it felt like all types of ghosts and evil spirits were in those places.

The experiences of Dominique's childhood uniquely shaped her spirituality. While she recognized the influence of God in her ability to overcome struggle, she emphasized the significance of human agency to rise above. She explained how spirituality gives language and a frame by which to understand challenges and triumph:

> During the younger half of my life, I witnessed struggle, and I've also witnessed prosperity. And, I saw that there was nothing that people didn't eventually come out of. So, I knew there was always an ending to whatever struggle I went through. Then, when I got around 12 or 13, I started putting the pieces together with my spirituality. And, I was just, like, you have to go through something to get to where you want to be. And, I would take the pieces from church – 'cause I was in church more - and, I would use what was said to me. I used certain scriptures and put it towards what I was going through.

Spiritual Development and Sexual Orientation

Dominique's sexual orientation also informs her spiritual understandings. She first felt an attraction to girls when she was in elementary school, and by middle school, she self-identified as bi-sexual. In 9th grade, she started dating her first girlfriend to whom she was committed for two years. While her family knows about her sexual orientation, they don't particularly agree with it, specifically her grandmother whom Dominique avoided up until her grandmother's death. To maintain amicable peer and familial relationships, Dominique avoids bringing her partner around her family. At times, during

family gatherings and special occasions, such as her upcoming prom, she will recruit a "cover-up" – a boy who she positions as her significant other.

Dominique has encountered heterosexist discrimination at Light on the Hill. As a result, she stopped attending the church in order to find one that would be more accepting of her lifestyle. Because of the judgments place on Dominique by Christians due to her sexuality, she does not identify herself as a Christian, although she upholds foundational Christian beliefs regarding God, Jesus, and salvation. Additionally, while Dominique resists Christian-based oppression and rejects the idea of the church as countercultural space, she seemingly reinscribes other oppressive Christian standpoints based on her religious socialization. She stated:

> They're like, 'Oh, you can't call yourself this if your that'. So, I'm like, well then I'm not a Christian at all. I never said I was a Christian. I just always said that I'm a very spiritual person. And, you can't judge me for what I like. I'm not going to go to Hell for liking girls. I was just like, you know, every sin is equal except for committing suicide. So what can you do? I mean, maybe I'll grow out of it, but I don't want you to guilt me into growing out of it, you know? I go to church to get away from the outer society. I go to church and get the same thing there. I'm just like, that's bull crap. I don't want that.

To get a better understanding of how Dominique reconciles her sexuality with her spiritual and religious socialization, I asked her how she thinks God feels about her sexual orientation. Her response indicated a belief that God impacts sexual preferences according to God's divine and unique will for each person's life. Additionally, while

Dominique expressed a lack of certainty in the appropriateness of her sexual desires, she acknowledged her continued relationship with God as indicating God's approval of her lifestyle. She explained:

> I really have different views on it. I feel as if, like, if He didn't want me to be this way, then I wouldn't. 'Cause, like, God has a path for us all. And, if it's not for me, then eventually, that feeling that I have for girls will leave me. I still pray on me liking girls. I still wonder if, like, if it's really something that I should be doing. And, yet, I still like girls, and blessings are still coming to me. They're still coming to me. It's not preventing me from doing anything that I haven't been doing. Like, He still loves me. He still speaks to me. I still have my personal bond with God. So, really, I don't think that there's anything wrong with it. So, it's like, I'm just going through something right now, hopefully. Like, you know, I don't want to marry a girl. I want an actual family with a man. It's just something I'm going through now that, hopefully, will leave maybe one day. And, if I feel the same, I won't find myself marrying a woman. I won't do it.

Dominique has experienced discrimination at school due to her sexual orientation. She recalled instances of students and teachers disrespecting her after discovering that she is gay. Dominique recounted a teacher at her school who harassed her for being with her girlfriend by constantly asking her why she was "messing with that girl." This same teacher assumed that Dominique was an academic underachiever because of her sexual orientation. It was not until Dominique was preparing to leave the school that the teacher learned of her academic success. Dominique also described an incident where, as a high

school freshman, she almost got into a fight with another student who harassed her and her girlfriend in the hallway between classes.

> It was this girl who was kind of like - not a bully, but she was really loud and obnoxious. And, I kissed my girlfriend before she went in class. And, she was like, 'Oh, so we got LESBIANS at the school?!' She was so loud. She was like, 'What the F*%$, blah, blah, blah'. And, you know, I had to stop. I had to stop, and I looked. And, I was like, well, there seems to be only one [lesbian couple] right here, and that was me and Josiah. So, I looked at her, and I said, 'Oh, there's a problem? Is there a problem?' And, she tried to walk up to me. The people around – my friends – they knew how it was. I got quiet, and she was walking up to me. It was gonna go down. It was gonna go down something crucial cause she's a big girl. And, I couldn't be threatened by her bigness, so I was gonna take off on her before she got the best of me.

Before punches could be thrown, a teacher grabbed Dominique and pushed her into a classroom. She got in trouble for being involved in an altercation. I asked Dominique if she felt like her spirituality or relationship with God helps her get through discrimination caused by her sexual orientation. She paused and said that she does not know how to answer that question. I rephrased the question and asked if she felt like she could lean on God to get through those kinds of things. At first, she said that she draws upon her spirituality to overcome those things. But, then, she admitted to feeling mentally and physically strong enough to "handle" discriminatory acts herself. Eventually, she admitted that in the midst of discriminatory acts that may be physically or

psychologically threatening, she would not think to draw from her spirituality. She explains:

> I trust God with everything I do. Anything and everything I go through, like, if I feel that my body and my spirit can't handle it, then He's the next step. That's who I call on. And, I do that for everything. Personally, I feel like I can handle dealing with discrimination, if it's not on a racist, violent level like back in the day. I feel like I'm mentally strong for it. I'll just walk away from the situation or say what I have to say and walk away before I get too angry. And, if I do get angry...honestly, I'm strong enough to, like, battle with you verbally. But, if it goes to the left...I don't know, I don't really think it would go as well as it should. Like, my first immediate thought wouldn't be to get help, it would be, I'mma kill this mofo. (laughs) Honestly, I wouldn't be that strong where if I'm in the heat of the moment, I would just call on God.

Dominique primarily relies on the human agency cultivated in large part by her upbringing and father to overcome discrimination at school. Her spirituality is a secondary source of strength – a back up when her primary source, which is herself, is inadequate. I ask Dominique how she overcomes school discrimination. She responded:

> I just - I get over it. I never allow anything like that to hold me back. Like, to me, it's not that big of a deal. It's like, either you're gonna like me or you're gonna hate me. I could care less if you like me or hate me because where I'm going, y'all not gonna be there with me. I was taught that from my dad. I've learned to realize that regardless of whether you like me or hate me, I'm gonna do what I have to

> do, and you're not gonna stop me from it. Me being gay is not going to prevent me from being the next president. Like, I'm gonna do what I want to do.

Spirituality and School Experiences

Academically, Dominique feels like she is a "pretty good" student. As a senior, she feels the pressure of gaining entry into a good college and finding ways to fund her undergraduate studies. At times, Dominique looks back at some of her academic experiences with regret and feels like she could have made better grades if she did not participate in extracurricular activities. I asked Dominique if her relationship with God plays a role in her identity as a student or her academic practices. Initially, she responded that it does not, but later admitted although that she typically does not recognize God as impacting her academic performance, God actually does. God, she suggested, provides the fuel for her agency. She stated:

> I just know that He's in me. You know, isn't there a piece of God in everybody? And, that's the way I feel. Like, that's how I carry it. So, I don't say, 'Oh, He's the reason that this happens'. I know for a fact that He's the reason I am the person that I am today. Like, He's in everything I do. Like, say there's a test. I'll be like, 'Oh, I'm gonna go chill'. God will go, 'Ok, go study'. And, I'll go study if the God in me is telling me to. But, I never give Him the recognition for it. But, I should, though. I just say, oh well, I know I have to go study.

Dominique knows that God is speaking to her at school when she is overcoming peer pressure. For example, during finals week the previous year, she credited God with helping her bypass pressure from her friends to participate in anti-academic behaviors,

such as smoking weed and ditching school. Prayer was the spiritual practice that she employed to connect with God during those situations. She explained:

> I’m not one of those kids who just smokes weed all the time. I’m not gonna say I never done it in the past, but it was actually finals week. I swear I’ve never seen so much marijuana in my life. Like, everybody was just like, ‘Dominique, let's go smoke!’ And, I was like, ‘Are y'all stupid?! It's finals! I gave myself one little puff at the end of the week. (laughs) And, I got through it without any of those distractions. [God] helped me! I was praying, like, all week. ‘Cause I didn't think I was going to pass any of my finals. Well, I knew I was going to pass the majority of them. But, in my AP classes, I was going crazy. So, I prayed on them. Then, the marijuana kept coming at me, and I was like, ‘God, just help me focus. This is my week to focus.’ I prayed at the beginning of the week and I prayed throughout the week.

In those potentially difficult situations, prayer seemingly facilitated Dominique’s ability to resist peer pressure. Her spiritual beliefs and practices became a school resource that contributed to her educational resilience. During our conversations, Dominique seemingly understood her identity as a dichotomy that consisted of a “powerful side” and “weak side”. She believed that connecting with God through prayer allowed her inherent strength to override her weaknesses. Spiritual forces supplemented her human agency, which positively impacted her school success. Dominique explained:

> It takes a lot to get me discouraged. The only way I can get back up there is through prayer or through, like, connecting with Him spiritually. So, like, when

> I'm praying, I feel like that's my outlet to feel better about situations. It's like, 'Ok, Dominique, you can do it.'. 'Cause, when I pray, I feel Him speaking to me. Or, I look at it like this. When I'm going through something, and I pray, it's Him speaking to me, or it's the part I lost that's speaking to me. It's like I have two sides of me. I have the powerful side of me and the weak side of me. And the weak side of me is praying right now. And, when I pray, I hear either God or I hear the powerful side of me saying, 'Dominique, you can do this. You can push through. Remember scriptures. Remember this. Remember that. All the things you've went through. You push through!'. That's just prayer. That's just me praying. That's just me believing in me, believing in what I can do, believing in what God can do.

Jordyn – Spirituality as Generating a Sense of Purpose

At 16-years old, Jordyn is the oldest of three children. As such, she is often responsible for taking care of her younger siblings while her parents work. Around church, Jordyn is often seen with her 11-year old sister, who tends to follow her everywhere, including this study's focus group sessions. Mature in her demeanor, Jordyn typically does not attend youth church. Instead, she goes to the "big church", or main sanctuary, on Sunday and some Wednesdays. She believes that the youth who attend the youth church are not serious about God, which is evinced by the jovial environment.

Jordyn is a member of the youth dance team. Because of her skill and passion for dance, she is frequently asked to dance with the adults in the main sanctuary on Sunday mornings. Jordyn is also a mentee in The Sarai's Mentoring Program (SMP). SMP

connects pre-adolescent and adolescent girls with adult females in one-on-one mentoring relationships. Jordyn is often acknowledged as the face of SMP because she tends to represent the group during church wide events. She and her mother believe that joining SMP in 2009 was one of the best things she could have done. Jordyn credits SMP with building her self-esteem, in part by connecting her to positive African American women whose images counter those that are often promoted in the media. Additionally, she states that SMP became a "lifeline" for her during some of the roughest years of her life.

Academically, Jordyn holds a 3.14 GPA. She says that although she was a successful student in middle school, she slacked off during her freshman and sophomore high school years. Jordyn attends Harrison High School, a predominantly white and Asian upper middle class public school located in Manhattan Beach, CA. In an effort to increase diversity among their student population, the school allows students from other neighborhoods to attend. Being an African American female student from a working-class community has shaped her school experiences in this environment in unique ways.

This profile recognizes spirituality's ability to generate within African American girls a sense of purpose. It suggests that by understanding God's providence – or, God's foresight in guiding human beings towards a predetermined plan - that the significance of education can be established. Jordyn's sense of purpose was generated following a failed suicide attempt. As a result, she interpreted her inability to kill herself as God showing her that He has devised a plan for her life. Jordyn's newly found sense of purpose directly impacted her school and academic experiences.

Family Background

Jordyn grew up with her mother, father and two siblings. While she claims to have had a fun childhood, it was also a chaotic one due to her father's overuse of alcohol. Jordyn credits her mother and grandmother with raising her and her siblings without much of her father's support.

> My mom took on the role of doing everything - taking us to practice, dance practice, basketball games and anything we really needed. She took on the role of mother and father. Of course, like my dad still contributed financially, paying the household bills and things like that. But, as far as being there, as far as a father having a father-daughter or father-son relationship, it was never there. My mother was our backbone and everything. So, that was hard for us to adjust to. Cause having him live here and not being able to have that relationship that you really want to was really hard.

For Jordyn, having a father living in the home without the probability of building a relationship with him produced a lot of anger. Moreover, Jordyn's mother was diagnosed with lupus, which led to additional challenges at home. During these times, Jordyn's grandmother would step in to help.

Spiritual and Religious Socialization and Experiences

Jordyn was socialized in a Baptist church tradition. She attended church regularly with her parents "because they told [her] to go" and was heavily involved in youth activities. The first time that Jordyn felt a personal connection with God was while performing a liturgical dance at church. Liturgical dance is an expression of worship in which the dancers relay spiritual messages that typically flows out of the musical

selection. These dances may be spontaneous or choreographed. Jordyn stated that during this incident, her belief in God's existence was confirmed. Jordyn's connection with God established a sense of protection.

> The first time I really felt that connection with God was when I was praise dancing. At the time, I felt like everything else I was going through or been through - it's like, at that moment I was meeting God. Like, I think that's the first time I heard him. The first song that I danced to was 'Now Behold the Lamb' by Kirk Franklin and the Family. And, I think that's when I started growing closer. Like, at that moment, that's when I felt that connection for myself with God, like, that one-on-one relationship. I think that before my relationship was through my mom with him. Cause, I was going to church with her. It was kind of like a tradition to do - like, go to church on Sundays. But, at that moment, I feel like it was just me and God. I didn't have to go through my mom to get it to him. I don't know if it was the song that did it or what, but at the moment, I felt closer to God than I ever had before. From that point on, I've felt like God has my back. Like, I have his full protection. Like, I have my personal bodyguard.

Lived Experiences

Jordyn's two most challenging experiences occurred while she was in high school. Both involved death, and both greatly impacted her spiritual development. The first incident occurred during a period of her high school career where several of her friends died.

> In high school, I had a lot of friends who passed away due to certain things, like drugs, and lot of things like that. So, for me, of course, that was hard to deal with, especially knowing that my family had dealt with that kind of thing. At that time, I questioned God, like, why was God taking away people that was in my life. What was I supposed to learn out of this? I really started questioning Him as far as what his purpose was in that.

The second experience highlights her own attempt to take her life.

> The second thing is when I tried to commit suicide. I think that was the most challenging experience for me. I think it was a mixture of things building up since I was little, like with issues with my dad. And, I lost one of my best friends during that time. We had known each other since kindergarten, really. And, my dad was out of work at that time, so, we were clashing a lot. And, at that time in my life, I was, like, tired emotionally - tired of holding on to this pain. And, at the time, I didn't know how to release what I was feeling or talk about my emotions or anything like that that I was feeling. So, for me, I thought suicide was the best way to go.

The day after Thanksgiving, Jordyn swallowed a large dosage of ibuprofen pills. Yet, instead of absorbing the pills, her body rejected it, and she ended throwing it all back up. Jordyn understood that incident - her inability to kill herself - as God confirming that her life has a special purpose to fulfill. She stated:

> I took it as God saying, 'No I have more work for you to do. And, what you're going through right now is just a test. So, I need you to stay here because I have stuff for you to do.'

In response to that incident, Jordyn started a blog where she shares about the childhood challenges that she has endured and the lessons that she has learned. Since then, she stated:

> Great things started happening with my writing and by me telling my story about my childhood and stuff. I feel like God was pushing me to share my testimony to save somebody else or to let somebody else know, Hey, I've been through the same thing. Who your family is doesn't mean that's how you're gonna be or, like, just stuck in that environment. You don't have to become, like, a product of your environment. You can just step beyond the boundaries of the expectations or the stigma that has been place upon you.

Surviving the suicide attempt and recognizing a divine life's purpose also increased Jordyn's drive to do better academically.

> Me surviving also made me want to work harder in school and do more. Before it happened, I didn't take anything really seriously in life, as for school and things like that. But, after that, I was like, whoa, I must have some greater purpose. So, after that I started buckling down in school. I started going to church a lot more - Bible study, all kinds of things - just to get my life back where, really, I should have been going. I got serious about going to school and college and things like that.

Jordyn's experiences led to new understandings about life, God and her spiritual identity. Among those understandings is the belief that God is always present and that everything happens for a specific purpose.

> What I've learned about God is that His word is really true when He says He'll never leave you nor forsake you. That is really true. I think sometimes we're just so blinded by our problems that we don't see that God has been there the whole time and that there are reasons why He's putting you through this. Like, either it's a lesson or a blessing coming out of it. So, I think I have learned that God is there all the time, and that there is a reason why we go through certain things in life.

While Jordyn recognized the importance of spiritual socialization, she emphasized the need to form a connection with God that is personal and unique. This formation, she believed, comes from enduring the harsh realities of life. She, also, admitted to building upon and renegotiating initial spiritual understandings to reflect the "way [she] lives her life."

> You know when you're younger, your parents give you that foundation - that spiritual foundation - that you kinda need. And, as you go through some things in life, you kinda build on those beliefs and make them stronger and personalize them for yourself. In the short time I've been living, I've been through so much. And, the foundation that was instilled in me when I was younger, I've just kinda built upon those and altered them to the way I live my life.

Spirituality and School Experiences

Academically, Jordyn admitted to being a "pretty good student" at the time of the study. She explained that at the beginning of her high school career, she was not displaying academic effort, but within the last year, she had gotten "back on track." When I asked Jordyn whether her spirituality has contributed to her identity as a student, she initially got quiet. I rephrased the question and asked if any of her understandings about God or her spiritual practices contributed to the way she understood herself as a student. She said that she'd never really thought about that, and then paused once again. Looking to gain knowledge around the ideas that shape academic self-understandings, I asked Jordyn why she felt it was important for her to go to college.

> For me, going to school and going on to college is more like the whole not becoming a product of your environment kind of thing, 'cause I went to elementary school with friends who dropped out of school, had kids and things like that. And, of course, when you associate yourself with those people, people have the same expectations for you or they think maybe you'll have the same path. So, for me, I was kinda breaking away - like, I'm gonna do more. I'm gonna go off to school - medical school - and have a career then and a family later. In my family, I am the first to go to college, which means, I am setting an example for my younger cousins who are, like, 6, 7 and 8 now. So, I think it was just that I was setting a new pathway for my siblings, nieces, nephews, and cousins that are, like, under me.

In this passage, Jordyn did not mention the impact of purpose on her schooling. Yet, a few minutes later, she spoke about it as influencing her academic career. Because she

believed in God's divine purpose for her life, she felt like she was obligated to succeed academically. At the time of the study, Jordyn was uncertain of her career goals, but she felt like school would prepare her for God's ultimate plans.

> Due to the relationship I have, I think I have a greater purpose in life. I don't know if it's going to be in my career field or writing and mentoring. So, for me, when I go to school, it's just helping me prepare myself for that so that I can have an intellectual base when the time comes that God has something really big for me to do. I'll be intellectually prepared for it. So, I think that's why school is a pretty big deal for me. It's one of my main priorities.

As an African American female from a working-class community, Jordyn regularly encountered racism, classism and sexism from the students and teachers on her affluent, predominantly White high school campus. An incident occurred her freshman year that introduced her to explicit racism that she had never before experienced:

> I was walking down my locker hall – and, during lunch and nutrition, the locker hall is super crowded. I had accidentally bumped into this kid. And I was like, 'Oh, I'm so sorry.' And he was like, 'You need to watch where you're going, nigger. You don't belong here. Go back to where you came from.' And, I was like (pause) Oh, so you want to act ignorant today. Okay. And, I was like, I could not believe it. I went and told all my friends, like, this is what happened to me. And they were like, 'Nooooo!' And come to find out, I wasn't the only one who had experienced something like that.

Also, Jordyn explained that during President Obama's 2012 presidential campaign and subsequent victory, racial tensions in her classroom were high. Racism, classism and racial stereotyping were practiced by her fellow classmates openly and without reservations. Jordyn described another demeaning, racially-charged incident that occurred during an icebreaker activity in her history class.

> You know how when you're learning about each other and you do the whole icebreaker thing and you have to say the food that you like. For me, I like seafood. And, one of the guys said, 'You don't eat fried chicken and drink Kool-Aid all day?' I was like, (pause). And, I laugh a little bit 'cause it was funny, but I was like, 'No'. And he was like, 'So you don't eat watermelon?' I eat it, but I don't eat it on an everyday basis. It's just -- they have that thing like all we do is eat fried chicken and drink Kool-Aid and eat watermelon. I was like, 'We eat more than that. Like, we go out to eat, you know?' And, he said, 'To Denny's?' And, I was like, 'No, I go to BJ's, and Cozymels', and, you know, just started naming off a list of restaurants. He was like, 'Mmmm' (grunting sound). I was like, that is so crazy.

I asked Jordyn how she responded to those incidences of racism – if she told a teacher or school leader or if she only told her friends. She responded:

> I think I just told my friends about it, 'cause, I don't know, I just had that feeling like I was gonna have to deal with more of this. So, it wasn't no point of just, like, going off on him or cussing him our or anything like that. It's like, ok, this is going to happen a little bit more, and, it did happen a little bit more, especially

during election time when Pres. Obama was running. And, I think that I just kinda ignored it. That was pretty much it - I just ignored it. I didn't run to the principal or anything like that, or a teacher. Because at that time, there was no point of trying to get a teacher because, most of the teachers feel the same way. Like, we had a black scholars union. And, we had, like 20 teachers fight against that -- having a black scholars union. So, most of the teachers felt the same way as the students did. They just didn't come out and say it.

I asked Jordyn if her spirituality or faith in God helped her to get through it at all. She admitted that she didn't think that it did and, instead, spoke about the role of her self-confidence and strength in overcoming discriminatory situations.

> I wouldn't say - not really. I think – ummm, I don't know. I was more comfortable in who I am at that time. So, what he said didn't really affect me because I was more secure and had more of an idea of who am personally. His words didn't have, like, a real impact on me. They shocked me because I'd never went through that. My middle school and elementary school was predominately African American. So, it shocked me. But, it wasn't anything that made me go home and cry or anything like that. So, I don't see how spirituality played a role in that.

While Jordyn credited her sense of God's divine purpose as generating a personal will to do well academically, she did not acknowledge its impact on fighting socio-cultural discrimination that she endured at school. Furthermore, Jordyn's spirituality seemingly helped her build community among her classmates. She specifically noted its instrumentality when she was comforting friends and family over the death of her friends.

> My spirituality came in when my best friend died. Once he died, I felt – ummm, a part of me felt mad at God. But, then, a part of me leaned on Him for comfort at the same time. So, I think it helped to know that He was there for me at that time. It kinda comforted me and made it a little bit easier to deal with what was happening and things like that. I think having faith in God, also, kinda helped me help the families that were going through it. I met with some of the families that came to the school, and I think it helped me to help them. I don't know if you'd call it minister to them, but, kinda give words of encouragement and things like that. That's where it came into play.

The times at school that Jordyn thought most about God was when she was about to take a test and when she felt like she was in danger. Additionally, she thought about God when she experienced triumph. A couple of weeks before this interview took place, Jordyn graduated from high school. Regarding these times, she stated:

> The times that I would think about God were when we would have lock downs at school. I mean, also, a little bit before a test or something like that, but mainly, when the school is locked down. At times, people would come on campus shooting and stuff. And, I would start praying and stuff like that. And, some of the kids are not fully there mentally, so they do all kinds of things. Like, we had one kid try to blow up the school. And, plus, our school is pretty much, kinda like, an open campus. So, we had people coming off the street into the school and things like that. So, during those times was when I really think about God. And, also, when I graduated - when I walked across the stage. I was like, well, it's been a

crazy four years, but God pretty much brought me through it all. Even though it was hard, I made it through.

Angela and Chantel – Spirituality as Framing Distinct Academic Identities

Angela and Chantel are sisters who joined the study from the LAPD Cadet program. Though I met them in the Cutting Edge Youth Ministry, at the time of this study, they attended services in the main sanctuary. From our first meeting at a Wednesday night Youth Bible study, the girls expressed interest in taking part of this project. However, a transition in the youth church leadership, including the replacement of Pastor Jonathan, led them to stop attending the youth services.

At 17 and 16, Angela and Chantel are extremely knowledgeable. Pastor Jonathan noted that they both "stood above the norm" and had a "different level of understanding" than other kids in the group. Additionally, the girls stood out among their peers because they attended the services faithfully without being pressured by their parents. Both girls credited Pastor Jonathan with cultivating their spiritual understandings.

Angela and Chantel are students at Roosevelt High School, a low-socioeconomic school located in an urban community that is frequently celebrated for its magnet school and athletics program. On paper, the school appears diverse, as it draws students from various communities in both Los Angeles and Orange County. Yet, the magnet program is homogeneously White and Asian, and the neighborhood program is primarily Black and Brown, which have led to internal segregation. Angela is a student in the neighborhood program, and Chantel is a student in the magnet school thus their school experiences are vastly different.

Angela has a 2.5 GPA and professes to be a “student of life” more than an academic achiever. Frankly, Angela hates school and feels like it takes away from her freedom. In fact, during focus groups and interviews, she often compared it to jail. As a senior, Angela feels pressure from her family to attend college, but she does not have a desire to do so.

Chantel, on the other hand, is an A & B student. She is enrolled in the magnet program and has been on the honor roll each semester. Although she is a self-identified “nerd” and “bookworm”, she admits to not having much of a social life at school. And, at times, her family feels as though she lacks street sense.

Angela and Chantel’s story highlights two things: the importance of family in cultivating spiritual understandings and the role of spirituality in framing distinct academic identities. Both girls have stated that family is the most important aspect of their lives. They grew up in a large immediate and extended family that assisted their mother with raising them. Angela and Chantel, also, credits interactions with their mother and three sisters as strongly influencing their spiritual beliefs and practices.

Though Angela and Chantel grew up in the same household and were socialized around the same spiritual principles, the girls have different understandings around the role of spirituality in their academic pursuits. Both girls believe in God, and more specifically, that God has a divine purpose for their lives, yet they employ this knowledge differently. Chantel draws upon that philosophy to push towards academic success, while Angela uses it as motivation to pursue non-academic goals.

Because Angela and Chantel have several shared experiences, which have shaped their personal and spiritual development, I present their narratives together. However, by doing so, I do not suggest that their spiritual understandings and practices are the same.

Family Background

Angela and Chantel were born in New Mexico. They lived with their mom, dad and two older sisters until Angela was three and Chantel was four. At that time, due to an altercation between their mother and father, they relocated to California to live with their grandparents. Angela explained:

> We moved to California when I was three because our father had kicked our whole family out of the house. We had nowhere to go but to California to stay with my grandma. Maybe three years, we lived with my grandmother in her three-bedroom house. So, it was my mom, my grandparents, me and Chantel, my older sister Kiandra, and my other older sister My'kel, and my mom was pregnant with Marina at the time. So we were all living in my grandmother's three-bedroom house, and my mom had four kids and was pregnant with one. My mom was looking for a job, and I remember my grandmother watching me and my younger sister, Chantel, 'cause we were too young to be in school.

After Angela and Chantel's mother started working, she began looking for another place for her and her five daughters to live. They eventually moved into another three-bedroom house with their cousin and her two daughters, who are around the same ages as Angela and Chantel. Their older sisters and cousin took care of the young girls while Angela and Chantel's mother worked to provide for their family. Angela stated:

> Even though we were in such a cramped area – there were so many people in one house - it was fun. We had our cousins living with us. I don't remember any bad times. Mom was always at work, and my older sister would take care of us. And, like, it wasn't any issue for us. I had my two younger sisters, Chantel and Marina, so it was always a good time. Like, I don't remember a struggle because my mom was always working hard, making sure we had everything we needed. And, she had help from my two older sisters who helped her out and my cousin who lived with us.

Chantel, also, enjoyed living with her extended family. She positioned her older sister and grandmother as "othermothers" who helped raise them.

> I thought living here was pretty good. Actually, my older sister Kiandra - the one that's 28 now - she did a lot to help raise us considering my mom was working most of the time. So, I would really say that we were raised by my oldest sister and my grandmother. They helped out a lot, and they helped shape us, especially our older sister. We really look up to her now because she's been so in our life. And, she's just like, a great role model - like, a second mom, almost.

Spiritual and Religious Socialization and Experiences

Angela and Chantel's family had a major impact on the girls' spiritual development. Growing up, their grandparents made mandatory their participation in religious and spiritual activities. Chantel explained:

> My family is very God-fearing. We used to go to my grandparents' church when we were little. That's where we were baptized and they tried - especially my

grandmother and grandfather - they tried to keep us in church and keep the family there. My grandparents were very spiritual.

Chantel and Angela also credited their sisterhood with contributing to their spiritual development. Chantel highlighted the significance of community in spiritual and religious practices.

> We're all so close, and we love God so much - we enjoy going to church. When we go to church, we go together. And, we pray together. When things get hard, we pray together. And, we listen to gospel music. I would say that we develop spiritually together.

Angela agreed with Chantel, and highlighted the impact of communal problem solving and accountability in spiritual development. She stated:

> In a lot of situations, when things really get rough for us, we have each other. Like, we do so much together. They're the ones that I ask what to do when I want to give up. When I have no one else to talk to and no one else to lean on, I go to them, and I ask for advice. And, they always tell me, oh, just pray about it. Every answer is, just pray about it. And, like, when things get really bad, we join hands together, and we know that God is in the midst. So, we always pray together, we go to church together. We keep each other spiritually grounded.

Lived Experiences

Angela's most challenging childhood experiences relate to her relationship with her mother. Growing up, her mother constantly compared her to her sisters and never felt that she measured up. She explained:

> Everything I did, my mom would compare me to either Chantel or Marina. Like, if I'm not doing something right, she'll say, 'Well, you're not like them'. Because I'm the oldest, it hurts to be compared to someone younger than you. It's very challenging, and, it's hard. Like, when you're trying your hardest, and you're still not good enough, and they are good enough, it's just hard.

Angela credited a developing relationship with God for helping her cope with her mother's potentially destructive criticism. She suggested that her spirituality facilitated positive development of her self-identity, which inhibited the internalization of negativity.

> I got over it when I started getting closer to God because I was like, if my mom doesn't see the good in me -- like, there's this song by Marvin Sapp, 'God Sees the Best in Me'. And, that's where my spirituality comes in. When no one else, like, my mom doesn't think I'm good enough, and my family doesn't think I'm good enough, God thinks I'm good enough. And, that's what I rely on - knowing that God thinks I'm good enough for him, and he sees the best in me.

Chantel's most challenging childhood experiences stem, in large part, from growing up without her father or the presence of a father figure.

> One thing that I never really admitted to was the fact that I never really had a father figure in my life. I don't hate him or anything; it's just challenging to realize that I didn't have a father.

While Chantel did not go into detail regarding her feelings around the lack of a father-daughter relationship, she admitted that her connection with God allowed her cope,

stating, “God is my spiritual father, so I don't – I don't really need him.” I asked Chantel to elaborate on what she means by God being her spiritual father and how that plays into her daily experiences. She responded:

> It helps me a lot because when I talk to God, I feel like I’m talking to a person. So, it helps. It's just very helpful. So, when I seek God, I might not always hear - I don't really hear Him. I can honestly say that I’ve never heard him, like, speak back. But, I know that God is there for me, and I know that He'll never give up on me.

The challenges endured by both girls have helped to shape them into the young ladies that are today. Angela believes that relying on spiritual knowledge that perceives God as believing she is good enough has increased her resilience.

> It definitely has strengthened me because I probably would have fell weak to the pressure of, like, the expectations of being the top in school and having the best grades and all this other stuff. I could have fell to the pressure, but I actually grew stronger and didn't care and didn't let it break me down. I let it make me stronger, and it applies to life. If I might not be good enough for some man or might not be good enough for a job, I’m not gonna let it break me down. I’m only gonna let it make me stronger and make me strive for the best, you know? It gives me strength. I know that I can do nothing without God. And, I am nothing without God. So, all I can get is my strength from Him. Because He is strength, then He's my strength, you know. Because He is strong for me, then I am strong. So, I do get my strength from Him.

Chantel, also felt like her past experiences and spirituality have shaped her spiritual and self-identity. She believed that God guided her like a father would, and her challenges made her “better”.

> When I talk to [God], I might not hear His voice directly, but if I have to make a decision, I talk to Him first, and I get a clearer vision on which way to go. Everything I’ve been through has made me who I am today. It's made me better. It pushes me forward. It makes me want to prove doubters wrong. Not having a father, it is what it is. I mean, I have God. God is my father, so it's even better.

Spirituality and School Experiences

As a student, Chantel believes that she is academically successful. She applies herself and takes all available opportunities to increase her knowledge and grades. Chantel believes that her spirituality and spiritual practices impact her academic success. For example, she discussed the role of prayer in her achievement.

> I pray before every test, no matter what. Even if it’s, like, an easy test, I just pray. It's not a ritual, but, it is. Like, it doesn't matter even if I know the information or not, I just pray just because. I mean, I seem to always pass them. It's been working for me. (laughs) So, that's what I do. And, if I fail a test, I just say, I tried my hardest. And, if I ace a test, I thank God for it because who else could have done it, especially if I don't know nothing about it. Like, I’m in AP English, and we have English tests all the time about stuff I did not read. I didn't read, and I still get a c. I don't know how that works, but, when I pray, it just seems to work.

The worst thing about school for Chantel are the ‘horrible, horrible, horrible teachers’. I asked her what makes them so bad, and she responded:

> I’ve been told some ridiculous stuff from some teachers that is unacceptable. Oh, I’ve been called stupid, I’ve been called a slut, I’ve been ignored. (laughs) My one teacher, he messes with me every week. He doesn't really look at my work. He's been after me. I'll be trying to take a test, like, can I please take a test so I can get a grade, and he just doesn't say anything. Like, he ignores me. And then one of my teachers, he'll email my mother about silly stuff. Like, I have to go to conferences about how I was sitting in my chair. Or, about how I was chewing my gum. Or, about, like, singing a song. Like, I have some teachers who are ridiculous.

Chantel’s most difficult school experiences occurred during the school year prior to this study. She had an extreme case of pneumonia, had to miss school for about a month, and her teachers did not excuse her missed assignments. While some teachers tried to help her make a plan, others did not make any attempts to help her as she tried to catch up on all of her incomplete work. As a result, Chantal received her first failing grades. Chantel drew upon spiritual practices to get through that situation. Specifically, she spent a great deal of time praying. “When I was sick”, she stated, “that's when I prayed the most. Spirituality makes me who I am. I pray for everybody. I pray for my teachers. I pray for my enemies. I just do it with prayer.” Additionally, prayer helps Chantel cope with school stressors and makes her feel less nervous about unpleasant situations.

I'm always happier after I pray. If I'm upset -- well, I don't know if I would say happier, I just get calmer. I'm just like, 'Don't even trip. Just relax.' It's like, God is like my chill pill, or whatever. If I'm really upset, I'm like, You know what… – and some people think it's crazy - but, it's like, You know what, God. Is she gonna get away?! Like, I'm telling you God, you might want to take her away from me. It's just, I just calm down, like, don't even trip. I don't know. It just - not relaxes me, but it calms me down.

Though Chantel generally likes school, Angela does not care for it or feel like she is a good student. In fact, she says that she wouldn't identify herself as an academic student at all because "that's not who I am." She explained:

I just don't feel it. Like, school is just dumb. Like, I know I have to go to higher education; those are the pressures of my life right now. Like, everyone is telling me I need to go there so that I can be something. But, that's just not who I am. I don't want to do that. At school, my focus is not on school. My focus is just not there at all. I don't know, I'm just not a good student academically. I'm a student to life. I like learning about life, but that academic stuff just isn't me.

I asked Angela about the role that God plays in her academic aspirations at school. She does not believe that God plays an active role in her academic life.

I know that God wants me to apply myself at anything that I do. And, He's telling me that education is the key. I know that school is what everyone needs. And, I know that God knows that. But, if I make a mistake in school, I don't feel like He's gonna, like, be disappointed in me.

Instead, Angela justified her disassociation from school by stating that her divine purpose is not based on her academic success.

> I just know that I have a higher calling than going to school. I just know that my life is not there in school. I know that everyone is like, if you want a good job, then you're gonna have to go to school. But, I don't feel like that's for me. I don't know how to explain it. I just don't feel like God is in my academic life. My purpose does not involve school.

Trying to pass her chemistry class the previous school year was Angela’s most challenging school experience. During this time, she struggled to give adequate attention to the class or put forth the effort needed to be academically successful. As a result, she ended up failing the class. Angela feels like God allowed her to experience growth from the situation and made it possible for her to retake the class the following year. She stated:

> As I look back on it, I realize that God did not allow me to fail the class. I mean, He allowed it, but He wasn't like, I want you to fail. He was like, well, this is what you're going through on your journey. So, if you are going to fail this, then I’m going to let you fail it. But, I’m going to let you get back up from it. Because, when I failed the class, I was like, dang, I have an F. How am I ever going to go to college? And, now, I’m taking the class, again. And, God let me redeem myself. And, now, I’m doing much better in it.

Angela and Chantel both think about God when they are at school. Chantel thinks about God when she is about to take a test or needs motivation to do her work. During those

times, she will listen to gospel music or pray. Angela's positions God as a friend and advisor when she is having challenges in her classes. She stated that she thinks about God most:

> …when I have things on my mind. Like, whenever I worry about something, I think about it. I just think about God, like, how he's just a friend, and I just talk to him like a friend. And, like, whenever I'm having issues. Like, I'm really having trouble in my AP stats class now. So, every single day in AP stats, I get in there, and I pray. And, then, I write a letter to him in that class. And, just ask him, tell me how to be successful in there, and God, I'm so confused, and I don't know how I'm gonna be able to get my grade up in there. And, I just ask him every day to help me find a way to improve myself in that class. So, whenever I'm struggling during class, I just take a moment to pray to him and talk to him and let him know my worries and concerns. After I pray, I do what I need to do. Like, if I feel I don't know what to do, I'll continue to do my notes, and I'll continue to ask questions in class. Like, '…faith without works' - I've got to do my part.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the profiles of six advisors to this study. I offered narratives from their in-depth interviews to demonstrate interactions between their spiritual development - including spiritual and religious socialization and lived experiences - and their school practices and experiences. While everyone's story was unique, each profile offered a similar structure by giving insight to each advisor's: (1) family background, (2) people and experiences that have been instrumental in

transmitting spiritual understandings, (3) lived experiences that have impacted or have been impacted by their spirituality, and (4) school experiences that were impacted or have been impacted by their spirituality. In this section, I summarize the data presented. In the following chapter, this data will be analyzed with that collected from group interview sessions and the ethnographic portion of the study. This section is divided according to each component presented in the profiles.

Family Background and Spiritual Socialization

Almost every participant in this study made claims of being raised in a "supportive" or "close" household. The participants came to this determination based on the level and quality of interactions with family members. While the advisors' households varied in size, each had long-lasting influence on their personal and spiritual development.

Four of the six advisors grew up in households with their mothers. Two of the six were raised with their father. One grew up in a house with her mother and father. Yet, regardless of the presence or absence of parents, grandmothers played a significant role in each of the advisor's personal and spiritual development.

Most of the advisors lived with their grandmother at some point in their childhood, and all of them stated that their grandmothers helped to raise them. Of special significance, five of the six advisors credited their grandmother with initiating their spiritual awareness. In each profile, the girls discussed daily and weekly performances of religious and spiritual, ritualistic activities (i.e. prayer, church attendance) that were often made mandatory by their grandmothers. These women, most of whom held a leadership

position or was greatly involved in a predominantly Black church, provided examples of how spiritual practices can be applied to daily life and challenging situations. For example, Dominique recalled praying with her grandmother over the phone when she and her mother were homeless, while Chantel and Angela witnessed their grandmother "rely on God" to heal after their cousins death. By observing and participating in spiritual rituals and practices with their grandmothers, the advisors picked up on the culturally-constructed spiritual habits, beliefs and practices that were valued within their home community. During this process, spirituality was culturally transmitted through interactions with significant others.

The role of the father provided interesting ideas around the impact of family on the spiritual development of African American females. Each advisor's relationship with her dad directly or indirectly impacted her spiritual understandings. Of all the advisors, Keisha and Sheila were the only two to report having a favorable relationship with their father. Not only was he a consistent, physical presence, but he also interacted with them positively and constructively. Keisha credited her father with providing an example of what a thriving relationship with God should look like, as well as expectations about God's role in her life. Sheila recognized her father's sermons as influencing her decision to attempt to transform her school.

For most of the other participants, their fathers - in their physical or emotional absence - also impacted their spiritual understandings. For example, Chantel suggested that the absence of a father figure for most of her childhood turned out to be positive. In his absence, she grew to acknowledge God as her "father", which has made her a "better

person”. Chantel relied on God to direct her as she pursues academic and personal success. As a result, she stated, “not having a father, it is what it is. I mean, I have God - God is my father, so it's even better.” Additionally, Dominique admitted to having a rocky relationship with her father; however, she also recognized his influence in shaping a strong and resilient mentality and distinct spiritual identity. While Dominique recognized God’s influence in helping her cope with and overcome school challenges, she understood God’s influence as supplementing, not dominating, her personal agency.

Lived Experiences and “Going Through”

The component that seemed to be most influential in shaping the spiritual self-understandings of the advisors to this study were their lived experiences. The daily realities of the participants were significantly influenced by intersections of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism. Such intertersectionality brought on challenges that the advisors learned to endure and overcome, and as a result, they gained distinct insight to role of God and spiritual principles in their individual lives.

Many of the girls in the study referred to the process of overcoming struggle as “going though”. It was by going through challenges that the girls began to develop a “personal relationship” with God. The advisors described the concept of having a personal relationship with God in two ways. The first reflected a personal desire to perform spiritual and religious practices in informal ways that countered ceremonious presentations. In other words, while many of the girls would participate in traditional spiritual practices, such as praying and reading the Bible, their desire to have a personal relationship with God encouraged them to do so in ways that made sense to them. The

second way that this personal relationship with God was conceptualized was as a personalized connection with an unseen, Supreme Being that was developed according to their individual human qualities and social conditions. This image of God and subsequent spiritual understandings were custom-fit to their unique situations, which allowed them to interact with God without limitations.

For the advisors, personal relationships with God were developed during times of adversity. As Keisha stated while facing school challenges, "…it was no more about what your dad believes in or what your mom believes in. It's what you believe…" Dominique and Jordyn pointed out that the first time they "really spoke to God" was during the times of their most challenging childhood experiences. The remaining girls also gained personal insight about the role of God in their daily realities while they coped with their unique challenging situations.

The Role(s) of Spirituality in Education

The profiles suggest that the advisors recognized their spirituality as shaping specific cognitive, affective and behavior ideas that contributed to their school experiences. These ideas, such as the idea of God having ultimate control and fueling human desires, produced specific school ideologies and behaviors that led to concrete outcomes. For example, after her failed suicide attempt, Jordyn drew upon the idea of divine purpose to refocus on school and better her grades. Sheila and Keisha built upon the idea that God desires for them a successful future to be intolerant towards academic underachievement. Keisha offered that, "…In order to be the woman God wants me to be, I have to do well in school and earn the right degree to live my life to its fullest

potential." For Dominique, the idea that "God has a path for us all" reconciles her bi-sexuality with her spiritual understandings and allows her to freely express her sexual preferences at school, and even fight to retain it. Interestingly, while Angela believed that God had a divine purpose her, she also believed that it did not involve school. Thus, the idea of divine purpose justified her underperformance in the school setting.

Most of the profiles suggested that spirituality influenced the academic desires of the advisors. Additionally, the advisors employed spiritual practices to facilitate their school success. Yet, the girls' acknowledgement of spirituality in their school experiences was not consistent in two ways: 1. During times of social discrimination, only one of the girls, Sheila, used her spirituality to promote change, and 2. When it came to academic achievement, specifically in the grades that they made, half of the girls credited God with helping them achieve those grades, while the other half focused on their personal abilities and agency.

All but one advisor discussed moments of social discrimination in the school setting. Sheila and Keisha felt ostracized for being culturally different. Dominique faced homophobic discrimination and harassment. Angela, Chantel, and Jordyn endured racist and sexist practices from students and teachers. Yet, only one advisor, Sheila, drew upon her spirituality to actively promote social change on her campus.

Sheila used the sermons presented by her father to display positive messages around the campus. Though she did not know who would be impacted by it, she felt that it was a necessary task to promote social change. For Sheila, the messages that she received at church directly impacted her academic ideologies and behaviors. They were

school resources that she believed could transform the anti-intellectual mentalities of her fellow classmates, and thus, the entire school campus. Sheila's spirituality seemingly led her to an understanding that her "way of living" was better than those of her classmates. She also believed that her classmates were not being who they "really wanted to be." At the same time, the lifestyle that she believed was right, which seemed to be influenced by her Christian background, helped her resist anti-academic, discriminating messaging while she attempted to build community in her school environment.

The stories of some of the advisors suggested that spirituality is protective buffer at school. Yet, other stories did not acknowledge its influence in allowing them to cope with school challenges. For instance, Keisha drew upon spiritual messages to make meaning out of feelings of cultural rejection, and Chantel relied on prayer to deal with teachers who treated her unfairly. However, Dominique and Jordyn did not draw upon spirituality to resist or cope with discriminating practices. Instead, Dominique relied on her personal strength to endure heterosexism at school, as she felt mentally and physically strong enough to personally handle it. Although Jordyn credited spiritual understandings as contributing to her academic pursuits, she did not draw upon those understandings to resist racism that she encountered in the school setting.

For each advisor, spirituality was a source of strength and resilience. Their spiritual beliefs and practice helped them make particular sense of their lived and school experiences. In the next chapter, I draw from these profiles to analyze themes related to the spiritual development and performances of African American female students. In the

analysis, I also include findings from in-depth interviews, group interviews and ethnographic data.

Chapter Five: Data Analysis

In the previous chapter, I presented the profiles of six advisors to this study. Each profile offered significant factors that impacted their spiritual development and subsequent cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes in the school setting (Mattis and Jagers, 2001). The experiences, responses and negotiated identities of the students provided examples of the impact of spiritual development in the school experiences of African American female adolescents. The advisors' profiles suggested the importance of lived experiences - and more specifically, overcoming personal adversity - in their spiritual development and, thus, school outcomes. These profiles were constructed primarily from in-depth interviews that explored the factors that most impacted their spiritual development and daily realities.

In this chapter, I present and analyze emergent themes, which were generated from the advisors' profiles, as well as the focus group sessions and ethnography. I, also, examine intersections between spirituality and education for this group. Spirituality refers to the conglomeration of beliefs, practices, understandings and values that connect an individual to an unseen force, forces and/or immaterial reality. Spiritual understandings allow individuals to make meaning of themselves and their world in relation to that spiritual reality.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section contextualizes schooling for the advisors, which was largely influenced by socio-cultural factors and school demographics. While the school experiences of each advisor were partly shaped by intersecting oppressions of racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism, their

experiences differed according to the school's social makeup. Emergent themes highlight portrayals of the girls by teachers and classmates as anti-intellectual and sexually deviant. Additionally, the data brings to light the role of patriarchy in reproducing social inequalities of Black female adolescents.

The second section of this chapter explores factors that contributed to the spiritual and religious development of the advisors' spiritual identities. Two interacting processes primarily shaped this development: (1) spiritual socialization, or training, that took place in social interactions with significant others who are identified as spiritual socializing agents, and (2) participation within their everyday, lived experiences that took place in racist, sexist, classist and heterosexist contexts. Spiritual socialization refers to the process by which the advisors acquired initial spiritual beliefs, behaviors and practices that were valued by their home community (Haight, 2002). Spiritual socializing agents transmit culturally constructed knowledge around the meaning and function of spirituality in their communities. An overwhelming number of advisors reported that their spiritual awareness and socialization were initiated and cultivated by family members, and more specifically, their grandmothers (Parker, 2006). Additionally, many credited church participation, as well as church messaging, as impacting their spiritual awareness and behaviors at school.

The advisors lived experiences also shaped their spiritual understandings and subsequent school beliefs and practices. Specifically, emergent themes highlight the connection between the process of enduring and overcoming challenges and cultivating personalized spiritual understandings. According to the advisors, the process of

overcoming challenges led them to individually connect with God in ways that were customized around their distinctive socio-cultural conditions. Ultimately, these customized spiritual understandings largely impacted their experiences at school.

The final section of this chapter explores the role of the advisors' spirituality in their school experiences. This includes their conceptions of God, which were most influential in their ideas around education and behaviors at school. I present their God-talk (Baker, 2000) using the unique perspectives of Black Liberation and Womanist theology around God's sovereignty, transcendence, immanence, and providence (Cone, 1990). The section also highlights the importance of spiritual practices in the girls' school experiences and focuses on prayer as their most salient spiritual practice. Prayer refers to various ways that the advisors verbally or non-verbally communicated with God. I present the girl's conceptions of prayer, in light of their personalized relationship with God and explore the situations in which the girls most commonly prayed.

Finally, this section of the chapter highlights the advisors' school experiences as they applied their spirituality to the school setting. Specifically, it pays particular attention to the role of their spirituality in community building at school. Although each advisor suggested that their spiritual beliefs impact their desires to assist their classmates, they also imply its tendency to generate divisions.

Negotiating Intersectionality at School

Understanding the socio-cultural factors in which the participants experience school is foundational to exploring the application and role of their spirituality in these settings. From listening to the stories of the advisors about their school contexts, several

themes related to their experiences, perceptions and reactions emerged. The three most salient factors highlighted: (1) the role and negotiation of intersectionality (Collins, 2000), (2) the complexities of female relationship, and (3) the positioning of Black girls as anti-intellectual and sexually deviant. I begin by summarizing structural and demographical information of the girls' schools.

As with all students, the school experiences of African American female adolescents are often determined by the structure and demographics of their schools. The majority of the girls in this study attended large public schools in urban areas. The largest public school had a population of almost 5000 students and the smallest public school consisted of 1367 students. A few of the girls attended public charter high schools, and one advisor attended a private high school far from home. All of the advisors to this study were from working-class or poor neighborhoods. The majority of the girls attended their less resourced and relatively low-achieving neighborhood schools while several others drove or were bused to more affluent schools in middle to upper-middle class communities.

Differences in the girls' school experiences were impacted by the racial makeup of their learning environment. About half of the participants went to schools that were mostly populated by Latino and Black students, and the other half either attended schools comprised predominantly of White and Asian students or went to schools that reflected near equal racial diversity between Black, Hispanic, White and Asian students.

While the daily school experiences of each participant varied according to the school that they attended, almost all spoke to the influence of race, class, gender,

sexuality and patriarchy in their daily school realities. In most conversations, it appeared that the sociocultural factors intersected (Collins, 1989) to produce experiences that were unique to Black female students. For example, the following conversation took place between Angela, Chantel and their sister Marina during a group interview. It emerged from a discussion around their perceptions of schooling and the challenges that they regularly face, particularly as Black female adolescent students from a poor neighborhood. The three sisters attended three different schools with varying structural compositions. Though Angela and Chantel's schools were on the same high school campus, they had little interaction in the learning spaces. Angela was a part of the predominately Latino and Black neighborhood school, while Chantel was in the school's more affluent magnet program, which consisted primarily of Asian and White students. Marina attended a predominantly White and Hispanic middle school. Yet, the presence and intersections of race, class, and gender was part of each girl's school experience.

> Angela: Girls are judged on everything that they do. Everything! If you wear, like, a little provocative outfit, you're automatically called names...
>
> Marina : …H-O-E. Especially, African American girls…
>
> Chantel: And, now, they made a name up for us called a "ratchet".
>
> Marina: That's an African American ghetto girl.
>
> Angela: Oooh, noo. Oh, my god. They've got a name for us… (whispered with a chuckle of disbelief)
>
> Tifani: Where did that come from?
>
> Angela: I don't know, but it's a name to call...

Chantel: A ghetto African American, Black girl.

Angela: I told my friend about that. My friend, Mike - he say he don't judge people, but he go around calling girls ‘ratchet’. And, it's not like they call Chinese girls this. It's not like they call White girls this. It's just what they call Black girls. And, it's other Black guys calling Black girls this.

Chantel: And, what's worse is, jealous girls do it, too…

Angela: Like, a white girl could have on the same outfit. But, I guess because her hair is real or whatever, it doesn't matter. A Chinese girl could have on the ugliest, stupidest outfit ever, and the Black girl has on some weird sandals or something, and, they’re like, ‘Oh, she a ratchet’. Just call her names because of what she has on. The White people could do the same thing, but there's no name for them.

Chantel: It’s crazy they made up a name for us that's called ‘ratchet’. And, like, they say it in a joking way. But, it's not a joke…

Angela: That's so offensive...

Chantel: That's offensive and, like, I don't know, it's just rude.

In society and the arts, the word “ratchet” is used in various ways. In one sense, the street jargon describes a poor, needy female who regularly exchanges sexual favors for money and expensive things (Stallings, 2013). Usage of the word typically evokes stereotypical images of the “welfare queen” – an African American woman who uses her children to manipulate systems of power in order to obtain superficial desires (Collins, 2000). This mythical black woman is poor, promiscuous and materialistic.

The students at Angela, Chantel and Marina's schools, however, seemingly used "ratchet" synonymously with the more established colloquial term "ghetto". Geographically, the word "ghetto" describes a poor, underserviced, heavily populated neighborhood, which houses people who are often homogeneous ethnic minorities. However, as a socially constructed image, the term focuses on imagined negative characteristics of people who live in those areas. People described as "ghetto" are positioned as poor, lazy, ignorant, materialistic, boisterous and outlandish. And, the "ghetto woman," who is typically perceived as African American, is stigmatized as causing her own poverty.

Socially constructed controlling images, such as "welfare queen" and "ghetto woman" justify the continued subjugation of African American females in the United States (Collins, 2002). This newer term, "ratchet", is a product of those racialized and sexualized images and is being used to reproduce inferior social statuses of Black female students. Not all Black girls were identified as "ratchets". Their physical appearance became the signifier that divided the students into socially constructed, hierarchized groups. Not only did boys label the girls as ratchet, "jealous" Black and non-Black girls did, too. This finding gives a glance at the, often complex, social relationships between females in the school setting (Merten, 1997)

"Messy" Female Relationships

When speaking about their school challenges, the advisors often pointed to their relationships and interactions with other girls as being unpleasant. In fact, most of the girls preferred to befriend boys because they felt like other girls could not be trusted. The

majority of the advisors positioned girls "messy." "Messy" in this context described girls who were willing to betray friendships, often through deception (i.e. lying, talking about friends behind their backs), in order to gain popularity or the attention of a male.

I first recognized this sentiment among the girls and boys who participated in the youth program at Light on the Hill. At times, I would find myself in groups of girls who would be speaking negatively about other girls in the program largely because of conflicts around boys. The boys in the youth program recognized this phenomenon and, at times, exploited the girls' skepticism about one another. The boys often accomplished this by relaying false messages and initiating intimate relationships with multiple girls that occupied the same spaces.

During a Bible study where the girls and boys were separated by gender, I shared my observations around the complexities of their female relationships. I shared my observation of the girls' tendency to be skeptical of each other and questioned the reasons for mistrust. My acknowledgement of the phenomenon and subsequent conversation led to interesting insights.

> Tifani: Since I've been out here, one thing that I've noticed is that there seems to be some sort of rivalry, competition or something between girls. Is there something going on between females here?
>
> Girls: Ummm, YESSSSS!!!! (girls get extremely excited)
>
> Tifani: How many of you all have a lot of female friends?
>
> Girls: Not a lot! Not a lot!
>
> Tifani: Why not?

Girls: ‘Cause, they MESSY!

Tifani: What do you mean by that?

Denice: Girls are messy because they'll talk about you behind your back

Cynthia: Like, they’ll talk about each other, like, ‘Oh, look at that girl right there…’ And they’ll take stuff you say and take it out the group.

Tifani: So, why do you think it's so hard for girls to get along?

Girls: It's too much competition!!

Denice: With girls, they want to be cute and all this other stuff to impress the boy.

Girls: Yeah!! It’s annoying, I hate that, etc.

The competition between girls that Denice, Cynthia and the other girls in the youth group spoke about on that evening was echoed in multiple research settings. In group interviews, in-depth interviews and youth Bible studies, girls continually communicated feelings of skepticism towards the possibility of having trustworthy relationships with other girls. The participants repeatedly told stories of being betrayed by girls that they positioned as friends. They also spoke of being treated unkindly by girls whom they perceived as jealous and desirous of the affection of a boy or of school popularity (Merten, 1997).

In a conversation with Deshonna and Sheila, Deshonna recognized the competition of female classmates as yielding to inherent patriarchy within the school’s organizational habitus (Bourdieu, 1990; Horvat & Antonio, 1999). Patriarchy is defined as a “system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby, 1989). Deshonna suggests that girls reproduce patriarchy at

school by competing with each other in an attempt to win the attention of boys. The following conversation occurred in response to a group interview question that asked how the school experiences of girls could be improved.

> Deshonna: I'm telling you, if everybody had positive attitudes and everybody got along, school would be much easier. But at school you always have to think about - like, you always have to watch your back. You can't trust anybody at school because anybody can trade on you that fast just to fit in somewhere. I'm telling you. At my school, you have the girls that have to wear less clothes to get attention - You know, you have the boys who are football players, you have basketball players who get on my nerves because they try to act top notch because they're tall. And, I'm like, go sit down. I'm telling you, at my school, if we were all together, and we all had positive attitudes, it would be, just, amazing.
>
> Tifani: So, why do the girls think they have to wear less clothes to get attention? Where do they get that from?
>
> Deshonna: Honestly, I think - When they first get there, they probably have their own style. You know, they probably don't act like the other girls. But, when they see, like, I guess the guys not talking to them - oh, yes, they talk to the girls with less clothes – then, she's like, 'Oh, that's what I have to do to get in', and that's what they do to get boys. But, at the end of the day, I think the boys are gonna get what they want but after that they're gonna drop you because you're not wifey material. You're just looking good for now. So, what are you getting out of it? Nothing.

Deshonna recognizes competition among girls at school as a process that systematically maintains unequal power relations between males and females. Girls get sucked into this system as they become familiar with the attributes that yield “non-dominant” cultural capital, which will allow them to achieve status among their peer (Carter, 2003). Internalizing sexual scripts around Black female sexuality becomes the means for gaining, what Deshonna believes is, temporary acceptance. Sexual scripts are “blueprints” that help individuals organize ideas around appropriate sexual experiences and behaviors. In other words, they shape the sexual socialization of African American females (Stephens and Phillips, 2005) and create norms by which a group’s “sexual beingness” is evaluated by others (Simon & Gagnon, 1987). The reproduction of patriarchy in the school setting results from the transmission and internalization of sexual scripts around Black female sexuality in the school setting.

Negotiating Stereotypes at School

Patterns emerged that highlighted the intersections of racism and gender on the advisors’ school experiences. Specifically, they were often stereotyped according to imaginations of Blackness and/or Black womanhood. Of the six contributors who attended predominantly White and Asian schools, five recounted times that they were discriminated against or verbally demeaned by their classmates and/or teachers. Jordyn, in her profile, recalled being called a nigger and told that she did not belong at the school. Additionally, the students assumed Jordyn’s dietary practices based on long-standing, burlesque stereotypes that positioned African Americans as eating fried chicken and

watermelon every day (Lemons, 1977). Similarly, Marina recalled her classmates' construction of her identity based on these images.

> There are very few black people at my school, and, everybody thinks it's okay to call each other the 'N' word. And, I'm like, 'Did you just say that about me? You don't call me that...' (*Chantel, who was also in the gifted and talented program and is now in the magnet school, says that her white friends do the same thing to her*). I'm like, this is really uncomfortable. And, they'll be, like, 'Oh, since you're black, maybe you should know about this and that. Maybe, you're from the ghetto - so, I can say, you're from a gang. And, I'm like, 'Apparently, I'm not.' Or, like, I eat fried chicken on a daily basis. It's, like, stereotyping.

Like Jordyn and Marina, several of the participants reported to being stereotyped according to prevailing societal discourses around Blackness and Black womanhood. Hilton and von Hippel (1996) contend that stereotypes are more than beliefs about the characteristics and behaviors of members of certain groups. They are also theories about how and why certain attributes go together. Two common stereotypes about Black female students that the advisors frequently spoke of were ideas that positioned them as anti-intellectual and sexually deviant. According to the advisors, both teachers and classmates often promoted these ideas.

For instance, the majority of the advisors spoke of having tense relationships with their teachers. Three of them had been told by a teacher that they were going to end up pregnant before graduating, two had been called a slut and four were denied adequate academic attention, like help with homework and test preparation, even when they asked

for it. Erin, during an in-depth interview, discussed a teacher who punished her for exuding self-confidence in her academic abilities. Instead of encouraging the trait, which contributed to Erin's academic success, the teacher perceived her self-confidence as arrogance and felt the need to prove to Erin that she was "not better than everyone else." The teacher accomplished this by grading Erin's work harder than she did the other students' and creating obstacles, like minimizing or delaying feedback on assignments and tests, that Erin had to overcome. Chantel recalled being called "stupid" and a "slut" by multiple teachers. She also discussed their tendency to downplay her intellect, while spending an overwhelming amount of time focusing on her behavior. For example, one of her teachers was unwilling to grade her completed assignments and tests in a timely manner, yet constantly set up school conferences with her mother for minor behavioral infractions, such as singing a song at her desk or chewing gum in an unacceptable manner.

The advisors' stories about their teachers often reflected the work of educational anthropologists and sociologists who suggest that teachers of Black girls tend to focus more on their social demeanors and mannerisms than their intellectual and academic abilities (Fordham, 1993; Grant, 1984; Morris, 2007). Additionally, these scholars suggest that this group is often punished for displaying academic qualities that do not fit into mainstream society's mold of femininity, even if those qualities promote academic success.

The advisors' experiences with other students seemingly varied according to the demographical make up of the school's student body. Specifically, the school experiences

of the girls who attended predominantly Latino and Black schools differed from those who went to predominantly White and Asian schools. When speaking about their school experiences, the girls who went to predominantly White and Asian schools frequently commented on experiencing discrimination based on false perceptions of Blackness. The girls felt that other students assumed that they were lazy and gang members and that their lifestyles reflected those promoted by anti-Black media, film and pop culture. Advisors who attended predominantly Latino and Black schools often commented that they were handled according to perceptions around their sexuality. In these school settings, advisors were often positioned as sexually deviant or as having a strong sexual appetite. These beliefs guided their treatment by male and female classmates and became an obstacle for them to overcome.

In a group interviews session, the advisors explored the challenges that they faced as young, Black female students in school and society. Some girls spoke about having problems with teachers, others commented about enduring peer pressure, and still, others focused on their lack of internal motivation to academically succeed. However, as the girls began to collectively examine their school experiences, they recognized that a significant portion of their challenges stemmed from ideas around their sexuality and sexual desires. The following conversation suggests this phenomenon.

> Tifani: So, what would you say are the biggest challenges that you face as Black girls in school and society? Are they the same or do they differ?
>
> Dominique: The statistics. Pregnancy. The guys always trying to talk to us 'cause they think we're just easy.

Girls: Amen!

Dominique: What else? We're not gonna be nothing in the world…

Another girl in the back of the room: Or, we're just gonna be some pregnant chick…

T: Did somebody say that to you?

Dominique: Yes, I get told that to me a lot.

In a similar vein, Deshonna, an 11th grade student at Crockett High School, suggested that the pressure that she receives from her male classmates to have sex was her biggest school challenge. She explains:

Deshonna: Well, I heard that I'll lose my virginity as soon as I get to high school. And, I'm finally in high school, and they're like, 'You still got it?!' And I'm like, 'Why?! It's none of your business.'

Tifani: Who's telling you this?

Deshonna: Boys - all boys. And, they're like, 'So, when are you gonna give it up?!' When I'm married! And, they're like, so you're gonna be a 20-year old virgin? [And, I'm like] Why?! Why are you still questioning me? I don't even think about sex like that, honestly.

These conversations reflect the influence of socially constructed controlling images around Black girl's sexuality, which have been promoted and maintained in society. For Black adolescent females, these images have been shaped according to socio-historical images that have positioned Black women as hypersexual (i.e. jezebel, welfare queen). Controlling images create expectations around the sexual activities and desires of

African American female adolescents. Consequences of such images were evident in the advisors' stories. They often spoke about being sexually harassed by their male classmates who expected them to "want it", or have a desire to be sexually active. Many of the advisors also spoke about enduring constant remarks filled with sexual innuendos. In school, the girls were commonly solicited to have sexual intercourse, as well as invited and expected to sext.[4] Deshonna's experiences highlighted a setting where girls who rejected invitations to participate in sexual activities were mocked and ridiculed for sexual prudence. At the same time, girls who appeared to be sexually active, along with girls who attracted the attention of boys risked condemnation for sexual deviance. In a focus group session, Angela described her experiences as a girl that boys find attractive. She highlighted the overwhelming attention given to girls' sexuality when compared to boys.

> I really think it's hard for girls because I know that I've been called names before by other girls because of my appearance or whatever. Guys would like me, and so girls - like, people, would be like, 'Oh, she must be a h-o-e', or whatever. Girls are really judged. Like, guys can go out and have sex with whoever they want to. But, if a girl does it, she's called names, especially if you're a Black girl. Oh, they'll go HAM[5]. They'll be like, 'Oh that black b---, she do all this, she go around!' I think it's just really hard for girls during school.

---

[4] Send naked pictures of themselves via text messge.

[5] Slang for "Hard As a Motherfucker"

Interestingly, in this passage, Angela focused on the behaviors of girls towards other girls who attract the attention of boys or appear to be sexually active. She described a circumstance where her female classmates positioned her as a Jezebel due to her attractiveness to males. Collins (2000) refers to this type of activity as an attempt to police her sexuality and sexual activities. What's more, many of these girls who position Angela in this way are also Black, which suggests one of two things. Either the girls, as well as the boys, are knowingly perpetuating negative stereotypes that are used to keep Black women in marginal spaces, or the Black girls at Angela's school have internalized sexual scripts around Black female adolescent sexuality (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Spiritual Socialization and Development

Spiritual socialization and development refers to the cultural transmission and cultivation of spiritual beliefs, practices and understandings (Haight, 2002). These processes take place through implicit and explicit "training" by socializing agents as well as participation in contextualized lived experiences. Spiritual socializing agents are factors of influence, such as family and peers, who guide individual's spiritual understandings through interactions and according to culturally constructed knowledge. Through socialization and development, norms, dispositions and identities are formed that influence spiritual understandings of self and others. The conversation around the spiritual development of the advisors combined with the chapter's opening discussion of their school contexts sets the stage for the final section of this chapter, which will explore the role of spirituality in their school experiences.

Factors of Spiritual Socialization

God loves you with all his heart. ~Aunt
God is my savior. ~Mother
God is my shepherd, I shall not want. ~Mother
God will provide all my needs. If you need it, God will provide it. ~Various family members
Give all your troubles to God, and he will solve them. ~Friends
Don't be ashamed of him, or he will be ashamed of you. ~A Youth Minister
God is a king and is watching over us. ~Mother
God is with you wherever you go. ~Grandmother

These phrases represent spiritual beliefs that were significant to girls in the youth program; they were expressed during a girls-only Bible study session where we explored the impact of social interactions on their spiritual understandings. Beliefs most significant to the girls promoted ideas of unconditional love, provision, protection and acceptance. Not surprisingly, they were appropriated from conversations and experiences with family members and respected friends. Some of the phrases, the girls recalled, were stated in direct response to specific occurrences. For example, many of them recalled hearing "God will provide all my needs" during times financial hardships. Other phrases were repeated constantly by significant others for, what the girls regarded as, "no apparent reason". One of the young ladies recalled her aunt telling her daily, "God loves you with all his heart", and it was not in response to a specific experience; her aunt "just said it all the time". These spiritual beliefs helped shape the participants' spiritual understandings around the role of God in their everyday lives. The phrases influenced the ways that they made meaning of their daily experiences.

Spiritual socializing agents are influential individuals in the girls' lives who transmit knowledge around spirituality and the spiritual beliefs and practices that are

valued in an individual's home community. Accordingly, they cultivate a foundation upon which spiritual understandings around self, others and unseen forces can be constructed. Salient themes that emerged out the data emphasized the role of family in the spiritual development of the advisors. Specifically, their grandmothers played a significant role in initiating and cultivating their early spiritual awareness (Parker, 2006). Many advisors, also, credited church participation and church messaging as impacting their spiritual awareness and school experiences. It is appropriate to begin this discussion by presenting the ways that the girls conceptualized spirituality and God.

Defining Spirituality

When asked to define spirituality, many of the advisors expressed initial confusion. Most offered that they never thought about spirituality in an articulable way. To initiate conversations around spirituality and transcendence, the girls often told stories and drew images. They also participated in collaborative "brain dumps," where the group would brainstorm initial ideas around transcendence on paper in unstructured ways and elaborate upon them (Huntley-Johnston, Merritt, & Huffman, 1997).

Spiritual stories that the girls shared often included perceptible activity of invisible forces. The girls spoke of ancestral spirits inhabiting their homes and interacting with them and their family members. They also told stories of being overshadowed by spirits while they were asleep and being able to discern the spirits of others during social interactions. Some of the girls, when thinking about spirituality, recalled participating in supernatural activities, specifically in religious settings. Much like Keisha and Sheila shared in their profiles, these girls spoke of being filled with a "Holy Spirit", which is

believed by Black Pentecostals to be God manifested in spirit form (Floyd-Thomas et al., 2007). For many of the girls, those supernatural activities were confirmation of God's existence in their lives.

Conversations with the advisors around the concept of spirituality usually led to God-talk. God-talk is understood as a synonym of theology and refers to the interpretation of God's nature and role in individual's lives (Baker, 2000). Though the girls had varying understandings about God and spirituality - and, specifically, whether a person had to believe in a deity to be spiritual – their general spiritual understandings stressed two things. First, spirituality necessitated belief in an invisible force. Second, to be spiritual required a connection with an invisible force, which was apparent through an individual's daily practices, or lifestyle.

For many of the advisors, spirituality necessitated the belief in an unseen force. That unseen force did not have to be a deity, or god; neither did the force have to be constructed according to traditional Christian doctrines. The advisors generally labeled the force as "unnatural", "invisible" and "intangible." The concept of spirituality was also conceptualized around individual actions. In this sense, the advisors believed that spirituality was made known through an individual's rituals, habits and behaviors. Most of the advisors believed that an individual could be aware of, and even believe in, a spiritual realm and transcendence without being spiritual themselves. In fact, while most of the girls felt that everyone had a spirit, they also suggested that having a spirit does not make an individual spiritual. According to the girls, "being spiritual" required actions

that reflected their beliefs in a spiritual reality. “Being spiritual”, then, emphasized the role and positioning of an individual in a spiritual realm.

One group interview session led to examples that brought their understandings to life. The girls discussed whether or not an individual could be spiritual without acting on their spiritual beliefs. Dominique believed that being spiritual necessitated a lifestyle that reflected a connection to a spiritual realm. She presented an analogy to describe this concept.

> You can’t be a track star if you don’t run track. Like, I don’t think that’s possible. Like, you say you’re a spiritual person, that’s something that you do. Like, practicing spirituality has to fall into that characteristic. Because if I wanted to be an actor – [That’s like saying,] I’m an actor, but I don’t act. You can’t say that.

When spirituality was juxtaposed with religion, the majority of the girls acknowledged that the constructs interface, yet they also pointed out distinctions. Religion, the majority felt, related to communal, ritualistic practices that reflected a group’s spiritual beliefs, while spirituality signified an individual’s connection to a spiritual realm and/or deity. While religion was practiced in community, spirituality was acted out individually and believed to be personal.

The majority of the advisors contrasted “spirituality” with “being spiritual.” Spirituality denoted a belief in an unseen force and practices that connect a person to an unseen force. However, an individual’s belief in an unseen spirit did not presume that they participated in spiritual practices. “Being spiritual” reflected ideas of liberation and Womanist scholars who believe that the spirituality of marginalized populations is

necessarily tied to action (Hull, 2001; Wilmore, 2004). To be spiritual, an individual not only had to believe in an unseen force, but also live according to their spiritual beliefs and participate in spiritual practices. It is through those applied spiritual beliefs and practices that individuals begin to make sense of their positioning in a spiritual realm.

Family - Spirituality as a Requirement

Of the 22 total advisors that contributed to this study, 14 credited their grandmothers and six credited their mothers with initiating their spiritual awareness. Their grandmothers and mothers were also believed to have cultivated foundational spiritual and religious understandings, typically by making traditional religious activities, such as prayer and church attendance, a part of their daily and weekly routines. Through these activities, spiritual socialization took place, as culturally constructed knowledge around spirituality, and specifically the nature and function of God in the lives of the advisors', were transmitted. Interesting, most of the advisors felt that this cultural transmission was mandatory.

The large majority of advisors claimed that religion and spirituality was "forced" on them. In other words, they did not feel that they had a choice in the initiation or cultivation of their spiritual awareness. Time and again, girls spoke about being "born into" or "growing up in" certain religious traditions. They recalled learning about or participating in socializing activities, such as praying before meals and attending church, early in their childhood. Rebelling against these cultural practices would often result in discipline.

For example, in a group interview session, Dominique and Roxanne discussed mandatory church attendance as a factor that contributed to their spiritual socialization.

Dominique: My grandma forced religion on me. Like, I thought I was going to be like, F--- this, I'm not going to church ever again. But, instead, I went to it 'cause I felt like that was the only thing I could do.

Tifani (to the other girls in the group): How many of you would say that your family forced religion on you? 1, 2, 3, 4 hands... (all but one of the girls raised their hands)

Roxanne: Cause, if I don't go to church, I get in trouble. I get in trouble.

Dominique: And, you gotta be right, you can't wear sandals, you can't wear jeans, you gotta wear a dress.

Roxanne: For me, if I don't go to church, I'll just get in trouble. I can wear whatever I want to wear - like, nothing hootchie or nothing coming up here, like, at least be decent. If I go out on Saturday night looking cute, I better come to church looking cute, like I did on that Saturday night. If I danced at that party last night, I better be up at church dancing. Like, that's how my granny is. Like, 'Oh, so you wanna dance at that party yesterday, but you can't be up in church clapping and standing up and stuff. Oh, okay, I got you when we get home.' That's why I be up like (Roxanne stands up and starts clapping her hands and stomping her foot on the floor, much like she would during a church service, prompting everyone to laugh). I don't want to get in trouble at home.

Dominique and Roxanne were socialized to value church attendance. However, church attendance did not only refer to their physical presence at church. Instead, it included scripted activities and self-presentations, as well. Dominique and Roxanne could not wear certain articles of clothing deemed inappropriate for the church setting. Although their grandmothers differed on the clothes that signified disrespect of the church environment, both grandmothers socialized the girls to associate church with conservatism. For Roxanne, church attendance necessitated church performance. Church performance reflected displays of traditional, charismatic Black church animation, which tends to signify devotion to God, as well as membership within the religious community (Floyd-Thomas et al., 2007) Thus, Roxanne was socialized to equate those culturally constructed religious performances with displaying devotion to God and her church community.

During conversations with the advisors' family, who typically served as their primary socializing agents, the importance of the girls' development of a spiritual foundation and "personal relationship" with God often surfaced. For the family members, this personal relationship with God was signified by their child's performances of spiritual and religious practices, such as reading "His Word" and "talking to Him daily". The parents felt that these practices would result in individualized understandings of God's role in their children's lives and allow their children to develop a personal relationship with Him.

Additionally, many of the girls' parents suggested that their child's spirituality intersected with their school experiences. They felt that a relationship with God could

provide a protective buffer against challenges resulting from racism, classism and sexism. For instance, Erin's mother brought to light the discrimination that Erin faces as a Black female student at a predominantly White and Asian school. According to her mother, because Erin is one of a few Black students, she has been overlooked and neglected in the past. Erin's mother socializes Erin to believe in God's providential nature (Brunner & Wyon, 1952) so that she can cope with intersecting oppressions and navigate successfully through the school environment without compromising her cultural identity. Erin's mother shared a recent story:

> Erin wanted to try out for this dance troupe, and it's mostly Asian because she goes to school with a lot of Asians. There is maybe something like eight blacks at the school. So, she noticed how they were overlooked - the Black girls. They would only pick the ones that most identified with them, you know, being Vietnamese, Asian, or close to white or whatever. From what I've seen and from what I hear, if you don't compromise and try to be a different culture or meet their particular culture, they won't accept you… When you're raised in Christ and have direct access to Him, you have a vantage point as to what's going on - and specifically, what's going to happen and how to assess and react to different situations - you know, how to handle life, people, and circumstances.

According to Erin's mother, being "raised in Christ" – or being socialized around Christian philosophies at an early age - offers Erin an alternate standpoint by which to perceive, evaluate, solve and make meaning of unfair situations. Her mother suggests that

connection allows Erin to bypass discrimination at school while maintaining her cultural identity.

Interestingly, during this discussion, Erin's mother did not discuss spirituality's role in encouraging Erin to fight discrimination. It did not warrant her to confront the oppressing forces or attempt to dethrone it. Neither did it encourage Erin to liberate herself by finding another school to attend. Instead, for Erin's mother, spirituality accommodated discrimination by providing resources that allowed Erin to cope with and navigate the oppressive circumstances. This ideal aligns with some Womanist philosophies that emphasize the multiple dimensions of God. They suggest that God does not always liberate the oppressed but will provide resources to aid in the coping and survival of Black women (Williams, 2000).

The Youth Church – Community and Counternarratives

The participants often credited youth church with impacting their spiritual development. Youth church provided the advisors with a community where they could surround themselves with other youth and adults, whose spiritual and religious socialization largely reflected own. The youth church, itself, was a cultural space that acted as a spiritual and religious socializing agent. At church, the advisors learned how to present themselves as Black Christians, and through social interactions, they learned appropriate language, dress, symbols, beliefs and practices, that signified their membership to this group.

Additionally, according to the advisors, youth church allowed them to witness Black women in leadership positions. These women frequently availed themselves to

mentor the advisors who were interested in becoming leaders themselves. At youth church, the advisors received messages about Blackness and Black womanhood that countered the ones promoted in society and school. While I acknowledge the patriarchy that was pervasive within the inner-workings of the research setting, from the girls' perspectives, Black women were valued and respected.

Keisha credited the youth church and youth pastor with developing her identity and skills as a leader. Additionally, she felt that the church encouraged her to appreciate her individuality. Keisha's youth church experiences directly countered those within her school setting. After moving to California from Louisiana, she was Othered at school for displaying mannerisms largely unique to the Southern region (i.e. language, dress and conservatism). At school, her classmates pressured her to conform to the school's culture. At youth church, however, Ms. Lorraine – the youth pastor at the time – positioned Keisha's unconventional mannerism as a gift that confirmed her potential as a leader.

Womanist perspectives emphasize the unique creation of women. This line of thinking posits that women were made with distinct attributes in order to fulfill a predetermined divine purpose (Gilkes, 2001). Ms. Lorraine reified this perspective by appointing Keisha to lead the Youth Advisory Board. This allowed her leadership skills to flourish while being in service to others. Keisha credited her involvement with the church and Ms. Lorraine as facilitating greater personal and spiritual self-understandings that impacted her school experiences. Keisha stated that her involvement at youth church took her to a "whole other level" as she began to learn more about God and understand herself in relation to God in this cultural space. She explained:

> The more I went to youth church, the more I learned about God, and the more I learned about myself. And, from that point on, I understood that I was created to be set apart. I was created to be different. So, all the things that I looked at earlier as a negative, I started to look at it moreso as a positive - that, it was a privilege to be different from others because, you know, that's how God created you.

In this example, Keisha's spirituality understood her individuality to be a positive quality. It allowed Keisha to position herself in a way that provided physical and mental distance from her perceived anti-academic and undesirable school community. This example suggests, then, that spirituality has the potential to encourage students to avoid peer pressure and anti-academic status groups.

Finally, many of the advisors positioned youth church messaging as providing counternarratives, concepts and language by which to better understand themselves in relation to God. Counternarratives are "little stories" that oppose metanarratives that often shape and maintain false representations of historically marginalized groups (Giroux et al., 2013). These messages were typically presented in the form of sermons by youth pastors and leaders on Sundays and Wednesdays. Many of the girls believed that these messages countered those that disparaged Blackness and Black womanhood. While teachers and classmates positioned the girls as sexually deviant, undesirable and lacking the financial and symbolic capital needed to achieve, youth church sermons positioned the girls as divine beings who were protected by, empowered by and acted in partnership with God and Jesus Christ.

The messages that seemed to most impact the advisors positioned God as the source of their identity formation. These messages typically outlined spiritual knowledge that instructed them on how to govern themselves in their everyday experiences. Pastor Jonathan's messages were often credited with impacting the advisors' their spiritual understandings. Pastor Jonathan was the youth pastor that followed Ms. Lorraine's tenure. Conversations suggest that this message from Pastor Jonathan greatly impacted in the girls' lives.

> God made us into his image. He made us as this little bitty light, and we are little bitty gods, according to the Word. He said, "I made you in my image." So, God stood back and said, Wow, that's how I look. That's me - that's me. He took that spirit, and he created it, right. But, then he realized that [the spirits] couldn't work because they couldn't touch the Earth. So, he's like, I got an idea. I'll make a body from the Earth. So, that way, you can touch the very thing I want you to work in. So now, you have a connection to the Earth. But, I will give you my connection first. I will take my connection, and I will breathe it inside of this body; so now, you have me living on the inside of this body.... God got excited when he saw himself moving through the Earth. He gets even more excited to see that now [he's] able to do the things down here on the Earth. If God wants to bless somebody with some food or bless somebody with encouraging words, he don't have to come out of heaven and speak to the person. He's like, "Naw, I got all my people down there. I'll just put my spirit down in them, and we're good. I'm connected, she's connected, she got her phone bill paid, she got service, she can

call her, and I'ma tell her what to say – today, when we call her, there's gonna be a clear connection.

The messaging presented by Pastor Jonathan transmitted to the girls at least three culturally constructed components of spirituality, which largely reflects African cosmological thought (Mbiti, 1990). First, it positioned God as the supreme deity and the source of all life. As such, God occupies space within the girls' physical bodies and bestows upon them infinite power. Second, because of God's connection to humans, it positions the girls as divine beings. They are "little bitty gods" who represent God at school and in their communities. And, finally, the message emphasizes service as being the ultimate way for humans to act out their relationship with and please God. It is through service to others that God's divine plan is fulfilled.

Spiritual Development as "Going Through"

As reflected in the girls' profiles and during multiple conversations throughout this study, there appeared to be a connection between: (1) the ability of the advisors to endure and overcome harsh realities, (2) their development of a particularized knowledge about God and self that came out of that process, and (3) resulting thoughts, desires and behaviors that were informed by this newly developed knowledge of God and self. The advisors' stories often suggested that the process of enduring and overcoming adversity shaped the spiritual understandings that were transmitted through social and cultural interactions in order to better interface with the advisors' unique qualities and circumstances. The girls recognized this process of enduring adversity as "going

through." "Going through", they suggested, helped them to form a personal, more concrete relationship with God.

"Going through", in this study, denotes the process of enduring and overcoming challenges. Most Black females regularly experience this process as part of their lived reality in the United States (Davis, 1983). For African American women, these hardships frequently result from inherent racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism that permeate every aspect of their lives. The process of "going through" brings to light the strength, wisdom and problem solving abilities of Black women (Phillips, 2006). It emphasizes our capacity for coping with adversity while looking for solutions to resolve undesirable situations. Research suggests that African American women draw from spiritual knowledge and beliefs to help get through these challenges (Mattis, 2002). As we go through adversity, new knowledge about God's role in our everyday lives is produced (Mitchem, 2002).

The stories of the advisors often discussed their experiences in "go through" and, each time, implied that it produced personalized knowledge about God's role in their individual, contextualized lives. While many of the girls recognized the importance of having a spiritual foundation that was initially cultivated by early religious and spiritual socialization, they also saw the need of developing spiritual understandings about God and themselves that meshed their distinct circumstances.

The girls most often learned to go through by observing and interacting with significant women in their lives. Through these interactions, the girls gleaned understanding about the spiritual beliefs and practices that would facilitate their success.

Many of the girls, like Marina, spoke about calling or visiting with their grandmothers when they were worried about a situation. Their grandmothers would encourage them by reading Biblical scriptures and often end their conversations in prayer. Danielle watches her mother as she endures financial hardship. She witnesses how her mother positions God, others and herself during this time.

> When they're going through things, all you hear is, 'Oh, God did this, Jesus helped me with this, and this is how I got through it.'… My mother, she helps out a lot of people all the time, like, with money and stuff. And, I think to myself, like, Ok, so where's our money? What are we going to use if you're helping everyone? And, I just see her wallet empty. And, then, the next day, she's like, 'Oh, here's $20 for lunch', and gives my sister $15. And, no matter how expensive [something] is, she just gets it. And she's like, 'Oh, don't worry about it. God has my back' or whatever. And, the next day, she, like, still has money in the wallet, and we're still doing stuff, so…

Danielle is trained by her mother to understand, not only God's role during adversity – that Jesus will "help me with it" and that "God has my back" – but also to understand her own role when faced with challenges. While Danielle's mother endures the harsh realities of her life, she continues to build and maintain community by financially helping others.

Most of the girls shared stories about "going through" in their own lives. For example, Keisha and Sheila were forced to leave their home and friends and attend a school that they perceived as violent and anti-academic, where the girls became cultural

Others. Jordyn attempted to commit suicide after the death of close friends and rejection from her father. Dominique endured homelessness and a tense relationship with her father. Angela and Chantel endured multiple challenges related to their schooling and personal development.

In each situation, the advisors employed understandings that were initiated by spiritual and religious socializing agents. Yet, during the process, they seemingly interacted with God on a more personal level, which produced personalized spiritual understandings. Dominique stated that while she was at the homeless shelter, she experienced her first "real" conversation with God. Chantel and Angela, while going through, prayed in unconventional ways and at unconventional times for God's guidance and assistance. Jordyn, after her failed suicide attempt, discovered that God had a divine purpose for her life. And, Sheila and Keisha believed that their school challenges facilitated their divine-appointed leadership development.

The girls in this study suggest that "going through" is the space where spiritual identities are "authored" (Holland, 2003). Through challenging experiences, the girls seemingly created spiritualities that were distinct and significant to their unique situations and circumstances. As Keisha stated, "When you're going through, it's no more of what your dad believes in or what your mom believes in. It's what you believe." This space allowed the advisors to extend, and even reject, initial spiritual and self-understandings. The process of forming a personal relationship highlights the role of agency in spiritual development (Goodnow, 1992).

Concepts of God in School Experiences

The contexts in which the girls attended school and the factors that developed their spiritual understandings set the stage for examination of spirituality's role in the advisors' school experiences. Conversations with the advisors made clear the significance and impact of their theological understandings in the school setting. Theology represents a systematic approach to determining the nature of God and God's role in the lives of individuals (Mitchem, 2002). The theological understandings that most impacted the advisors' school experiences reflected tenets about God that are found in African cosmological thought (Mbiti, 1990; Paris, 1995), Black Liberation Theology (Cone, 1990) and Womanist theology (Williams, 2000). Three themes emerged, which positioned God as: (1) the source of all creation, or a self-existent deity that governs and connects all things, (2) immanent and Transcendent, or an entity that displays its supernatural power in a finite, material world, and (3) provident, or a foreseeing deity that provides guidance, care and protection to His creatures all of whom He has assigned a divine purpose.

God as Sovereign - "God has something to do with everything…" ~Chantel

The advisors' theological interpretation of God as the source of all creation was foundational to their school behaviors and practices. The girls imagined God as sovereign, and thus, in control of everything that happened to them at school. Such interpretations also positioned God as directly empowering them to be academically successful. The girls believed that God was limitless in His power and involvement.

Chantel’s interpretation of God as controlling her school experiences seemingly builds confidence in her academic abilities. When she is required to prove her knowledge, specifically when taking tests, her belief in God’s empowerment leads to a belief in her own abilities, even if she is not fully prepared.

> God has something to do with everything so, like - at school, if I know I’m about to have a test, I'm like, 'Alright, I have faith'. Like, I mean, I don't really know the information, but I have faith that God's going to get me through it. It's kinda like I'm believing in myself, but I'm believing in God.

Sheila also understands God as being in control of everything. This understanding gives her confidence at school. However, while Chantel’s interpretation of God’s power, and specifically of God’s empowerment, gives Chantel self-confidence in her own academic abilities, Sheila’s interpretation of God’s power gives her confidence in God’s abilities to intervene in her school experiences and produce academic situations to her benefit.

> Well, I already see God as in control of everything that happens to me. So, if I already see Him in that way, I feel like if I pray to Him right now, He's going to have the power to make whatever problem I have - whatever the issue is, I feel like He will have the power to make it right and make it the way I want it to be.

Both Chantel and Sheila position God as an outside force who shows them favor by intervening in their school experiences. On the other hand, Keisha positions God as creating her with the human attributes that generally lead to academic success. She believes that her “ambitious and determined” personality came from God in order for her

to do well at school. This gives insight to her ideas around God's providential nature (Brunner and Wyon, 1952).

> I have always been very ambitious and determined…. For me to feel that way, it had to be from Him. In everything I do, I give it my all. I will not accept anything less. I've always chased perfection, and I am a hard worker. I have to have all A's or its not accepted. That perfection and just having everything right, I think that all came from God.

Similarly, Dominique interprets God as the force that fuels her academic abilities - as the source of her existence, God has empowered Dominique to academically succeed. However, while Dominique recognizes God's power in her academic abilities, she does not always acknowledge God's influence in her school experiences explicitly. Instead, she seamlessly conflates her academic, spiritual and self-identities to author an identity that promotes a belief in her own ability to determine her academic destiny (Stewart, 2002). In response to being asked if she felt like her relationship with God played a role in how she saw herself as a student, Dominique responded:

> Ummm, not really. I just - I just know that He's in me. You know, isn't there a piece of God in everybody? And, that's the way I feel. Like, that's how I carry it. So, I don't say, "Oh, he's the reason that this happens." I know for a fact that he's the reason I am the person that I am today. Like, he's in everything I do. Like, say there's a test, and I'll be like, "Oh, I'm gonna go chill". God will go, "Go study"…Like, I KNOW it's the God in me telling me to. But, I never, like - I never really say - I never give him the recognition for it. But, I should, though. I

just say, “Oh, well, I know I have to go study”. Or, like, “It's important for me to go study.”

Dominique understands that a “piece of God” is in her, as God is in everybody. Thus, she does not distinguish between God’s ability and her own ability to facilitate her academic achievement. Additionally, unlike Sheila and Chantel, in these examples, neither Dominique nor Keisha recognizes God as a mystical entity that works alongside them and intervenes in their school experiences. Rather, God’s empowerment facilitates and fuels their sense of human agency.

These four sentiments reflect African cosmological thought (Mbiti, 1990), which positions God as creator of all things. As such, God is the ultimate source of existence and empowers all of creation. As their source of life, God is understood as working for them, with them and/or through them, as well as communicating with them directly or indirectly to facilitate their academic success.

Like Chantel, Sheila, Keisha and Dominique, the majority of the advisors credited God as being involved in their schooling. While some felt that God fueled their academic success, others felt like God intervened in their school affairs. Some of the advisors admitted to attending class only because they believed God policed them at school, and they feared that God would see them miss class and “get them in trouble.” On the other hand, advisors often felt like having a personal relationship with God gave them favor. God, they would state, would “look out for [them] at school” and help them avoid trouble.

An underlying assumption to God's limitless influence in their schooling was a belief that God wanted them to achieve academically, often by whatever means necessary. Success could happen through God's empowerment of their abilities, or through His manipulation of school activities. While most of the advisors recognized their personal contribution to their academic success, during times that they did not act academically responsibly (i.e. did not study for a test, did not turn in homework), they continued to believe that God would shape their potentially harmful situations for their academic benefit. This theological interpretation ultimately increased their confidence in themselves, their abilities and their success.

God as Transcendent and Immanent – "God helps me with tests" ~Deshonna

As was evident in conversations with the advisors, the girls believed that God was a transcendent being. Transcendence recognizes God's otherworldly nature and positions God as a supernatural entity that operates beyond the limits of human experience (Kaufman, 1981). At the same time, the girls understood God as inserting His supernatural power in their concrete school experiences. God's immanence, then, refers to His ability to concretely involve Himself as an infinite being in the finite affairs of humans existing in the material world (Brunner, 1952). This spiritual belief offers a counterargument to scholars that position God ethereally, and merely as an emotional panacea to those who are destitute (Frazier, 1964). Cone explains that God is infinite, yet expresses Himself finitely through His concrete involvement with individual's everyday realities. Cone (1990) states:

> "God is not that pious feeling in our hearts, nor is God a being "out there" or "up there"….The immanence of God is the infinite expressing itself in the finite. It is God becoming concrete in finite human existence. We are able to speak of the divine because the divine is revealed in the concreteness of this world" (p.76).

The participant's understanding of God included His concrete involvement in their daily school experiences. God, they believed, frequently "intervened on [their] behalf" by guiding their thoughts and actions through direct and indirect communication with them, as well as shaping situations in ways that were beneficial to their academic success. For instance, Sheila needed to print a school assignment one day. She did not have a working printer at home and needed to have it for her first class. Multiple teachers denied her requests to use their printers. Eventually, she found a teacher who was willing, but not able, to print her paper because the teacher's printer was broken. Sheila credited God with intervening in the situation after she and a friend prayed for the printer. God, she believed, fixed the printer on the spot and made it possible for her to print the assignment for class.

The participants felt that God influenced their schooling in two primary ways: (1) God helped them avoid peer pressure and anti-academic activities, and (2) God helped them with tests. The girls often understood God's involvement as taking place through their interactions with self and others. God, they believed, used other people to relay His messages to them, as well as spoke to them directly or intuitively and manipulated school activities and events.

During a group conversation, Marina spoke of her plans to miss class and smoke weed with her friends. Before she could go, she had to first attend her physical science class. In the middle of teachers' lecture, her teacher spontaneously began discussing the dangers of smoking weed and encouraged the students to avoid it. Marina took her teachers actions as a sign from God warning her not to miss class and smoke weed on that day, and she did not go.

Angela also shared about plans to skip class. She had not completed her homework and felt like it would be a waste of time for her to go. Instead, she made plans to go to the library. But, she felt that God was, through her conscience, telling her to go to class. She explains:

> Angela: There's this one time when I was so ready not to go to class. Like, [I told myself], 'Don't go, just don't. You know you didn't do the homework. Just, don't go. Just go to the library, and do your homework in there. Just don't go'. And, God was telling me, 'You better go to class. Just go to class'. Like, I don't know if it's my conscience or whatever, or if this is God, but He was like, just go to class. So, I was like, 'Ok, God said go to class'. And that day, there was a bust, and they went to the library and got all the people that were ditching.
>
> Girls: Ohhhhhhh...!
>
> Angela: I was like, Thank you, Jesus!! (laughs) I was like, I'm about to be right in there with all those clowns! And it worked out for my good!

Marina and Angela credited their decision not to participate in anti-academic behaviors to God's direct and indirect communication with them. In Marina's situation,

God used a teacher to discourage her from smoking weed. In Angela's case, God spoke to her directly. In both situations, the imagined "voice" or manifestation of God served as a mediating device that allowed the girls to self-manage their behaviors (Holland & Lachicotte, 2005).

The advisors often shared that "God's voice" helps them avoid trouble. It was through this "voice" that God guided their behaviors at school. The advisors were initially taught to recognize the voice of God through interactions with spiritual socializing agents. They were taught that God speaks to them directly through their cognitive abilities or indirectly through external signs. Renee's grandmother, for instance, demonstrated to Renee how God might communicate with her when she gets into conflicts at school. Renee explained:

> Say you was about to go fight somebody or something, and the first thing your mind tells you is 'She's not worth it, don't fight her'. My granny says, like, that's Him. That's Him telling you, like, she's not worth it, she's not worth your time, and the consequences afterward won't even be worth it.

Renee and her grandmother positioned the voice of God as her intuition, or an inner-voice, that assesses the "worth" of fighting in relation to impending consequences of those actions. Yet, they distinguish this voice from her personal cognition or thoughts (Luhrmann & Morgain, 2012). Erin stated that she can differentiate between God's voice and her thoughts because God's voice "will never steer you wrong. It is always pushing you to do the right thing".

The second situation in which the advisors felt God interacted with their school experience related to their ability to take tests. Specifically, an overwhelming number of advisors felt like God intervened in their testing processes by guiding their thoughts to the correct answers or, even, by manipulating situations to their benefit.

Chantel, like a majority of the girls, often spoke of praying before every test. Prayer, she felt, gave her confidence to do well because it invited God to assist her. During her pre-testing prayer, she would ask God to “give her the knowledge” that she needed to do well. Even when she did not feel prepared for the test, she felt like praying to God would increase her chances for success. Chantel explains:

> I pray, like, verbally before every test. Like, I don't know if they think I’m serious, but I’m like, 'You know what, God, I just really need to get this A. Like, I need it, God. Just give me the knowledge ASAP, please. Like, I really need it’. And they'll be like, 'Is she serious?', and I’m like, ‘Yeah, I’m serious’. And, I end up getting a good grade.

Chantel continues with a story to illustrate her understandings around God’s involvement in her testing. God, she feels, guides her thoughts to choose the correct answers.

Like, I totally thought I was going to fail this history test. I got an A on it, and I didn’t know anything about history. Like, it was a map. I tell you, I did not even know - it was on Asia, and I didn't know anything about that. So, I was just like, ‘I’m thinking that's Malaysia’, so I just wrote it on down. And, I got an 85, and I was so proud. And after that, I got up like, ‘Thank you Jesus’. And, I just prayed, and everyone else was like, what the...

Similarly, Deshonna discussed God's involvement in her testing. Like Chantel, she stated that God gives her answers by intuitively guiding her as she solves problems. Not only did God help Deshonna by guiding her thoughts, but Deshonna also understands God as manipulating situations for her academic benefit. For instance, Deshonna had to take and pass the CAHSEE, or California High School Exit Examination, in order to graduate from high school. Approaching the date of the exam, she did not feel confident in her abilities, as she had taken the test before and did not pass every section. However, this time around, Deshonna felt like God divinely orchestrated a situation that allowed her and her class to receive assistance on their test. Describing the situation, she explained:

> I took the CAHSEE Math because I failed it the first time. And I prayed, and I went to take it, like, 'God can you help me with it?' And, when I got there - I know the teacher wasn't supposed to do this, but she helped us. (Everyone laughs) The whole class was like, working on this math together. [I was like] Thank you Jesus!! (Everyone laughs) If we didn't have that teacher helping us, I think we would have failed. But, she was helping us. And when somebody knocked on the door, she'd sit down. But, I thank God for that day.
>
> Tifani: So, you think God looked out for you?
>
> Deshonna: Yeah, He took me to that teacher because He knew she was going to help me with it.

The given examples make clear the girls' understandings of God as transcendent and immanent and involved in their school experiences. They believed that God provided

for their academic achievement by directly or indirectly communicating with them. These stories demonstrate two assumptions that the advisors routinely made about God. The first related to their conceptions around having a personal relationship with God. God, they believed, wanted them to be academically successful by any means necessary and advocated for their success by being directly involved in their struggles. This belief may be derived from understandings around what it means to have God as a friend, which they also often spoke of. The girls also seemed to believe that their academic success was based on interacting with God in a reciprocal manner. In each situation, God was understood as responding to their needs only after they prayed. This implies that they might believe that their prayers initiated God's involvement in their specific situations, and if they had not prayed, God may not have assisted.

A second belief about God that the girls held relates to God as being biased towards them by showing them favor. In both situations, the girls suggested that God was willing to break the rules in order to assist them with their academic struggles. Chantel and Deshonna both admitted to not being prepared for their tests. Yet, they believed that God used His supernatural power to accommodate for their lack of preparation. Cone (1990) suggests that God gives favor to those who are marginalized and oppressed. Because God sides with them and their struggles, their challenges are God's challenges, as their "experience becomes God's experience" (p. 63). According to Cone, God's love for the marginalized is displayed through the favor that God gives to them. Thus, God's activities are not neutral, but rather are biased the good of the oppressed.

God as Providential – "I always look for purpose in each situation." ~Sheila

The majority of advisors felt like God had a divine purpose and plan for their lives. Many of them suggested that God guided their worlds, and everything within it, towards a predetermined end. They believed that God allowed everything that happened to them to occur for a specific reason and purpose.

Theologians describe divine providence as the foreseeing protection, guidance and care that God gives to His creatures (Brunner, 1952). Through His foresight, God guides and governs the universe for the good of those He created. Speaking of divine providence, Brunner (1952) states, "All that is, and all that happens, takes place within the knowledge and will of God ...Everything that happens has its final ground in God. (p. 155)." In other words, all experiences are allowed and ordered according to a divine plan and purpose. Cone (1990) extends this argument to account for the experiences and positioning of Black people in America. He suggests that the faith of African Americans in God's divine providence encourages this group not to accept White supremacist ideologies, but rather, visualize freedom and continue towards liberation in present realities.

The advisors' understandings around God's providential care seemingly encouraged them to visualize a prosperous future and work towards it in their current, often unpleasant, school realities in three ways. First, it encouraged a positive outlook on academic failure, as the participants believed that their challenges were meant to develop them into better students. Second, it helped them cope with academic and social adversity brought on by teachers and other students. And, finally, it encouraged many of the girls to

work hard in school to achieve academic success, which they felt would place them on their divine path.

Divine Providence as Facilitating Positive Academic Outlooks

Believing that God had an ultimate, successful plan for their lives encouraged many of the advisors to have a positive outlook on their academic failure and struggles. School struggles, the girls suggested, allowed them to cultivate a long-lasting and productive academic identity. Academic failure was often positioned as God's way of encouraging them to work harder. Many believed that God allowed failure specifically for their academic benefit.

Chantel and Angela believed that doing poorly on tests could bring about educational resilience. They both perceived school failure as God's way of pointing out their academic weaknesses and encouraging them to work harder. Chantel explained:

> When something bad's happening, I'm like, 'God is doing this so I can get better.' (She says this with a laugh). Like, if I get an F, I'm like, 'God gave me this F so I can get better.' (Everyone laughs) That's what I do, and I know it's not right because I'm just using it as an excuse, I guess. But, like, when something bad happens, I only look at it as God doing something better for me. And, then, when something good's happening, I'm praying, like, "Thank you, God". But, I'm thanking God either way, good or bad...

Chantel does not separate the sacredness of God's divine plan from the secular activity of completing a school assignment. While she sees it as an excuse, possibly because she did not adequately prepare for the exam, she responds to failure as

encouragement to be a better student. By stating that “God gave me this F so I can get better”, Chantel understands God as cultivating academic resilience through her personal shortcomings and, as a result, she better prepares herself for academic achievement.

Similarly, Angela feels like God allows her to fail tests in order for her to improve. She also implies that such thinking gives her a greater sense of personal responsibility in her academic efforts when compared to her classmates. This outlook, she believes, allows her to “deal with a lot of different things better than other people.”

> I feel like I can deal with things in a more peaceful way. Like, I’ll use this little weird example - like, if I don't do well on a test, people will go and blame it on themselves or blame it on the teacher or make excuses for it. But, for me, I see it like they don't see it - like, this is just a way for me - this is God just making a way for something better, you know. Like, [God is saying], “You didn't study, you didn't do this, so this is what you gotta do”, you know? I see it in a more positive way. Like, people be like, Oh, the teacher did this, she don't teach you right, and I just don't get it. But, ok, well, I failed this test. Maybe it's for a reason. Maybe it's telling me I need to study more. It lets me deal with things better in my own way.

Like Chantel, Angela understands failure as bringing about or allowing her development towards being a better student. She also feels like her spiritual beliefs allow her to deal with the realities of school in a more “peaceful” way than her classmates. Instead of blaming her failure on her teachers or “making excuses” as her classmates

might, she cultivates academic resilience through her beliefs that everything happens for a reason and for her benefit.

Divine Providence as Facilitating Academic Motivation

Many of the advisors felt that God wanted them to be successful in life. Attending college and having a desirable career, in their minds, generally signified this success. The advisors felt that in order to achieve predestinated success, they were obligated to do well in school. This belief motivated them towards academic achievement. For instance, Jordyn, who attempted suicide in 10th grade, took her inability to kill herself as evidence that God had "more work for her to do" while living. This newly discovered divine plan motivated Jordyn to refocus in school. Because she felt that she was predestined for success, and to help others, Jordyn prioritized her academic involvement to be prepared intellectually.

> Due to my relationship with God, I think I have a greater purpose in life. I don't know if it's going to be in my career field or writing and mentoring. So, for me, when I go to school, it's just helping me prepare myself more for that – so, I can have an intellectual base when this time that God has something really big for me to do comes along. I'll be intellectually prepared for it. So, I think that's why school is a pretty big deal for me. It's one of my main priorities.

Purpose served as motivation for many of the participants' academic success. Because they felt that God had a specific task for them to accomplish in the future, a large number of advisors felt obligated to achieve academic success. For instance, Sheila, in her profile, stated, "…I believe in order to be the woman God wants me to be, I have to do well in

school and earn the right degree to live my life to its fullest potential." And, Erqya stated that God pushes her to do her work "…because I know where I want to go in life. And, I don't need all these classes to go, but I need my grades to get there".

While beliefs in God's divine plan seemingly motivated most of the advisors to pursue academic success at school, those same beliefs about God seemed to have a conflicting effect on Angela. Angela felt that God's ultimate plan for her life did not require her academic success. Thus, her belief in divine providence was, at times, used to justify her academic failure. Angela stated in her profile that she did not like school. School, she felt, took away from freedom and stifled her creativity. She also admitted to often skipping class because she did not always see its relevance. Angela, in a focus group conversation, implied that her academic underachievement is due, in large part, to God's divine plan:

> Angela: I know that God wants me to apply myself at anything that I do. And, He's telling me that education is the key. I know that school is what everyone needs. And, I know that He knows that. But, it's not like if I make a mistake in school - I don't feel like he's gonna, like, be disappointed in me. 'Cause I'm - I just know that I have a higher calling than going to school. I just know that my life is not there, in school. I know that everyone is like, if you want a good job, then you're gonna have to go to school. But, I don't feel like that's for me. I don't know how to explain it. I just don't feel like God is in my academic life.
>
> Tifani: Ok, so you feel like your purpose doesn't involve school -- your purpose or destiny.

Angela: Yeah.

Whereas most of the girls drew upon beliefs of God's ultimate plan as requiring that they be successful in school, Angela did not "feel like God is in [her] academic life." While she believed that applying herself in school is morally appropriate, and understood that God would advocate for it, the accomplishment of God's ultimate plan for her life did not rely on her school success.

The theological perspectives of the advisors around the role of divine providence in their academic achievement and understandings encourages further consideration of the impact of future time perspective on academic achievement. Future time perspective is understood as "the mental representation of the future, constructed by individuals at certain points in their lives, and reflecting personal and social contextual influences" (Leondari, 2007). It is through this perspective that personal goals are constructed and possible selves are imagined. The advisors seemingly employed their spiritual understandings to around divine providence to think about future possibilities, which directly impacted their present school experiences.

The Role of Prayer in School Experiences

A large number of advisors participated in spiritual practices at school that shaped their school behaviors and activities. Norton (2008) defines spiritual practices as "the ways that people manifest, sustain and develop their spiritualities" (345). Through spiritual practices, connections with God and the immaterial realm can be cultivated, managed and reified.

The advisors often engaged spiritual practices during times of stress, adversity, doubt and confusion. These practices, they believed, allowed them to connect with God. The spiritual practices that the girls participated in at school most often included praying, writing, listening to spiritual and secular music, and moving their body in dance or exercise. Of these practices, most of the advisors spoke about the significance and use of prayer.

Of the 22 participants, 15 positioned prayer as the spiritual practice that they most employed at school. The advisors stated that they prayed for several reasons, such as to avoid fights, when they felt anxious, when they were faced with temptations, and when they were about to take a test. According to Christian and Barbarin (2001), children and youth interpret prayer as allowing for direct communication with God. While many of the advisors admitted to being forced to pray as children, typically in formal, ritualistic, ceremonious ways, they seemed to understand prayer in their youth as a personalized method of connecting with God.

During a focus group conversation around the spiritual practices used at school, Angela and Chantel, who admitted to praying often, described the evolution of their praying style. Their style of prayer does not reflect the culturally constructed, ceremonious format that they grew up reciting. Instead, it is one that is more conversational. Angela explained:

> A practice that I do is, I pray, but I don’t really pray. I talk. Like, it's like an actual person to me. I know you're supposed to be like, “Ok, God. I come before you looking for grace, asking for this and repenting for this.” But I don't really talk to

> Him like that. I'm more like, "Well, ok dude" -- well, not dude, but you know, I just talk to him. And, when I talk to him, I feel like it's just me expressing how I feel. Letting him know how I feel and what my needs are and things like that.

Chantel chimed in, sharing how she prays during the school day:

> Yeah, during the day, when something's bothering me, and like I'm going through something, I'll just talk to God, like, 'What's up?! Like, what's going on?!' Yeah, that's how I do it.

Like Angela and Chantel, many of the advisors admitted to praying to God at school in a conversational manner. At times they stated one-line prayers verbally. Other times they prayed in their heads. Some of the girls also revealed that God, at times, talks back to them typically through intuition and signs. Emergent themes around the impact of prayer at school for the advisors suggest that prayer primarily regulates emotions. It seemingly encourages the girls to calm down in unpleasant situations, as well as reduce aggression, fighting and ill-will towards others.

Prayer and Coping – "God is like my chill pill" ~Chantel

The advisors' profiles suggest that many of them attend school in racist, classist, sexist and heterosexist contexts. During times of concern and dissatisfaction, the girls credited prayer as helping to regulate potentially negative emotions towards teachers and other students. Chantel, for instance, suggested that praying at school alleviates her anxiety towards others and allows her to "calm down".

> I'm always happier after I pray. Like, if I'm upset - well, I don't know if I would say happier, I just get calmer. Like, I'm just like, "Don't even trip. Just relax."

> Like - it's like, God is like my chill pill, or whatever. Like, you know - if I'm really upset, [I'm] like, 'You know what, God - like, she gonna get away?!' Like, "I'm telling you, God, you might want to take her away from me". Like, it's just - I just calm down, like, I don't even trip. I don't know. It just - not relaxes me, but it calms me down.

For Chantel, prayer not only included talking to God, but also talking to herself in order to calm herself down. She used her conversation with God to regulate her emotions, seemingly through her participation in self-talk (Luhrmann & Morgain, 2012). In this instance, after Chantel prays to God, she tells herself not to "trip" or be emotionally or physically unsettled. She also implied that God would act as her surrogate and fix the unpleasant situation on her behalf (Williams, 2000). God, Chantel believed, was not going to allow her antagonist to "get away". Prayer, then, is used as a coping device that allows her to deal with unpleasant people and situations at school in a non-aggressive way.

On several occasions, the advisors suggested that prayer was therapeutic. They often spoke about "venting" and releasing their concerns to God as they prayed. Prayer, they stated, allowed them to get their concerns "off [their] chest" as they "let it out to God." In some instances, the girls portrayed God as a receptacle that received their "burdens" and lifted their "weights." Theological understandings that advisors held about God, as sovereign and providential, encouraged them to trust that He would respond to their prayers by bringing about a positive end. For instance, when Angela has academic

challenges, or does not understand academic concepts, she often prays. She asks God, who she positions as her "friend", to show her how to be successful.

> When I have things on my mind - like, whenever I worry about something, I think about God. Like, he's just a friend, and I just talk to Him like a friend. And, like, whenever I'm having issues - like, I'm really having trouble in my AP stats class now. So, every single day in AP stats, I get in there, and I pray. And, then, I write a letter to him in that class. And, just ask Him to tell me how to be successful in there, and 'God, I'm so confused, and I don't know how I'm gonna be able to get my grade up in there.' And, I just ask Him every day to help me find a way to improve myself in that class. So, whenever I'm struggling during class, I just take a moment to pray to Him and talk to Him and let Him know my worries and concerns. And, I put it in His hands and leave them there.

Angela communicates with God using different methods. She "talks to Him like a friend" and also writes letters. Angela is consistent with her prayers – she prays everyday when she gets to class. She is also intentional, asking God specific questions and for guidance and advice. Prayer seemingly takes the form of a therapeutic device, which leads to the regulation of her emotions. By letting God know her worries, she seemingly invites God into her academic struggle. Angela's prayers combine with her spiritual beliefs to seemingly alleviate her stress. Because Angela positions God as the source of all things and as desiring her success, she is able to "put it in his hands and leave it there," suggesting that she rids herself, at least temporarily, of her worries. Angela does not imply that prayer leads her to stop working. Instead, in an additional conversation, she

recognized her personal agency in contributing to her struggle and states that after she prays, she “has to do her part,” which entails asking the teacher for help and going to tutoring. Thus, prayer does not become a clutch, but rather a regulating device that cultivates a mindset for learning.

Chantel prays when she feels like she is treated unfairly at school, and Angela prays when she is having academic concerns. In both cases, the girls make specific requests that will contribute to their academic achievement. Prayer, alone, does not regulate their emotions, though. Theological beliefs about God’s role in their schooling and their lives contribute to their ability to cope. Jackson and Sears (1992) suggest that for African American women, “prayer, combined with their spiritual beliefs” is the most significant and frequently used coping strategy. Additionally, as suggested by Christian and Barbarin (2001), prayer regulates the thoughts and emotions of African American children and youth, thereby generating within them psychological buffers, and more specifically, resilience.

Prayer and Aggression – “Ok, Lord, I need you to sit on me…” ~Renee

During group conversations with the advisors, they often discussed fights that had taken place at their school. Fighting, they implied, was the cultural norm at many of their schools and took place on a daily basis. Some of the advisors admitted to being prone to fight. They spoke of “snapping” when they perceived others as disrespecting them or their friends. Advisors also spoke about the role of prayer as either delaying or preventing them from fighting. When prompted to physical or verbal altercations with students or teachers, several of the participants credited prayer and God with reducing their

aggression, the aggression of their antagonist, or taking away their opportunity to fight completely. Prayer, in these cases, usually took the form of a quick sentence that the advisors stated inwardly, as opposed to verbally.

In most cases, the advisors felt that their spirituality managed their hostility. God, they believed, reduced their aggression by keeping them focused or calming them down. For example, Erin uses prayer to cope with her often-hostile relationships with teachers who she felt did not like her "for no apparent reason". Erin shared that one teacher admitted to mistreating her because she mistook Erin's self-confidence in her academic abilities for arrogance. After asking the teacher why she was so hard on Erin, the teacher replied, "Oh, because you think you're better than everybody in the class, so I'm proving to you that you're not." When asked how her spirituality helps her deal with teachers that mistreat her, Erin stated:

> I pray and ask the Lord to keep me in my right mind because I'll just fight, and I don't want to fight my teacher. So, I just pray and, like, I just ask the Lord to help me be calm this hour that I have with this teacher. And, let me just do my work and let me get out of here quick and in a hurry. And, I'll say as less as possible to my teacher so they can't say I did anything wrong…. Praying helps me stay focused.

Erin's "right mind" is one that will not lead her to show aggression towards her teacher. Displaying aggressive acts or defiance to a teacher could lead to detrimental school consequences. Prayer, then, is a part of Erin's strategy for school achievement. Suggesting that emotions and rationality play a role in her conflict, Erin asked God to

help her stay calm and use good judgments during the hour that she was in her teachers' presence. Additionally, Erin prayed to be productive in the classroom, which will help the hour pass quickly. Productivity will also reduce the chance that she will have verbal conflict with her teacher. Praying, then, helps Erin stay focused on making academic progress, and in doing so, reduces her hostility towards unfair teachers.

Renee, an 11th grader at Hawthorne High, credits prayer with helping her avoid fights with other students. Specifically, she suggested that God controls her anger when classmates trigger her to engage in physical altercations. Conversations with Renee highlighted God's ability to restrain her. She stated:

> In some situations, like before I used to start talking to Him or even knew Him, I was easily triggered to do stuff that I know I'm not supposed to, or easily triggered to go off on people over the smallest things. But, now, I can just sit there and be like, "Ok, Lord, I need you to sit on me through this situation because if I get up, then there's going to be a problem". Like, now, I know that I can go to him to fix the situation.

This example attends to Renee's prayer to God during hostile situations. It is brief and asks God specifically to hold her down. Before she started praying, she admits to immediately initiating fights over minor things. However, she implied that now there is an additional step before she reaches that point.

In many instances, the advisors believed that prayer alleviated their aggression by allowing them to focus on productive thoughts. God, they believed, would also "send" people to intervene in the situation or hold them back. Additionally, in some instances,

they credited prayer with changing their opponents mind and encouraging their opponent to walk away. Thus, they imply that prayer did not always change their personal desire to fight or reduce their aggression. Instead, in their minds, it took away their opportunity.

Prayer, Fighting and Justified Doubt

Although a good number of advisors suggested that prayer had the potential to alleviate hostile situations, some other advisors felt that that praying in those situations did not "always work." In some cases, the advisors suggested that prayer worked to their detriment, such as in the case of Marina. Marina prayed before a fight and as she turned to walk away, her aggressor punched her in the back of her head. Some advisors also believed that once the situation reached a hostile point, there was no stopping them from fighting.

In two separate conversations, both Deshonna and Dominique cast doubt on the capability of prayer to stop them from fighting. They both stated that during hostile times, their anger superseded any potential that prayer might have to curb their aggression. When Dominique is discriminated against or marginalized because of her sexual orientation, she stated that she does not employ any spiritual practices. Instead, she feels like she is "strong enough" to "handle it" on her own. In a hostile situation, she stated:

> My first immediate thought wouldn't be to get help, it would be, I'mma kill this mofo. *laughs* Honestly, I wouldn't be that strong where, if I'm in the heat of the moment, I would just call on God.

Deshonna says that her ability to calm down after praying would depend on the mannerisms and hostility of her opponent. She stated:

If she's loud then, you know, you don't want to talk; you just want to punch her. But, if she's talking, but she really doesn't want to fight, then you can be like, “Lord, let this girl walk away”, and you can just walk away. It's not that I want to fight, it's just that girls be thinking I’m scary because I don't fight… If I be like God, please don't let me fight, one of my friends will come and be like, “You're not fighting”, and they'll stop it. And it won't be no fight, so He'll work that way. But, if somebody come up in my face, I will tell them how it is, and I don't think He can help me with that.

Tifani: You don't think so?

Deshonna: No, cause I’ll just blow up.

In these passages, Deshonna and Dominique suggest that their anger in hostile situations superseded prayer’s ability to assuage them. Dominique believes that “in the heat of the moment,” or when tensions are high, she would not be “strong” enough to communicate with God through prayer. Deshonna presents four scenarios around prayer: If her opponent is “loud,” Deshonna automatically wants to be violent. If her opponent doesn’t really want to fight,” Deshonna can pray and walk away. At times, Deshonna will pray and a friend will stop the fight. However, if her antagonizer opposes a direct threat, Deshonna will “blow up.”

Deshonna and Dominique’s sentiments around spirituality and fighting did not reflect those of most of the advisors. However, they reflected those of a large segment of the youth church, both male and female. During a Bible study session, we discussed the ways that the youth could represent God in their social circles. One recommendation was

for them to become peacemakers. This led to a discussion around what a peacemaker is and looks like. Part of presentation encouraged them not to fight, which led to a significant conversation, as capture in the following passage from my fieldnotes. This passage has been edited and shortened for clarity and length:

> *I discovered tonight that the kids feel obligated to fight. At Bible Study, we talked about what it meant to live as children of light - men and women who have been "brought out of darkness" to live worthy of the call. That walk, I stated, should reflect peace, unity and love… So, I asked the question, 'Who are you in your circle of friends? Do you bring peace? Do you start the fights?' Most of the kids said that they do both. They try to bring peace, if their friends are fighting. But, if someone gets in their face, they would not back down. They said that you lose respect if you do. So, in order not to look weak, they will fight every time someone is in their face. I tried to encourage them to think about non-violent ways to handle conflicts: talk it out, tell someone, walk away. But, most of the kids felt like nothing else will work. Some stated, 'If you walk away, they will put you to sleep' and claimed that I didn't understand the world that they lived in…They asked me what I would do if someone was in my face wanting to fight. I answered in a way that I felt was responsible – I told them that I would walk away, if I couldn't talk the person down. There was plenty of 'oh noooo's" and "booos" to my response, and eventually, I understood their positioning (teens who lived and attended schools in violent communities who would rather die, literally, then lose respect). Plus, I don't have to risk being called a loser and wimp every day...*

> *The incident makes me wonder what the churches' role is in instructing kids in this situation. Does, "Just pray about it and walk away", really work in a culture founded upon violence. Roneisha tried to commit suicide in large part because she was being bullied continually at school - Roneisha, who attends every Bible Study and Sunday service. She cut herself to get away from the kids who picked on her daily – not just verbally, but physically. Is this the situation where you say, 'Just have faith"? What does spirituality mean in that situation? What happens when spiritual identity intersects with school violence? Which voice determines reactions? Is there room for non violence in that situation – is it even feasible?*

The incident prompted me to reconsider the peacemaking role of spiritualty in the, often violent, context of their school communities. How does the peacemaker present herself in a culture that continually dehumanizes African American youth? Additionally, I considered the literature that suggests that religion and spirituality to reduces aggression among adolescents (Herrenkohl et al., 2003). The stories of the advisors and participants in the research setting imply the need for research studies to contextualize their analysis regarding spirituality and aggression. It also suggests the need for churches and youth groups to construct and develop a theology that is culturally responsive to all youth, and specifically those in marginalized and violent situations.

Spirituality as Community Building

Most of the advisors to this study believed that spirituality was an academic and school strength. For some advisors, their spirituality allowed them to make sound decisions that greatly impacted their academic achievement. Other advisors credited their

spiritual beliefs and practices with generating confidence or an ability to cope. Most, if not all, of the advisors credited their spirituality with helping them to assist their fellow classmates in their school setting and build and maintain community. As a matter of fact, a number of advisors stated that assisting others at school was the primary role that their spirituality played in their school experiences.

In her profile, Sheila credited her spiritual understandings with being the catalyst that prompted her to encourage the members of her school. Because she felt like the classmates in her new school could "be more" and "didn't have to live like this", she created and erected posters with encouraging quotes and scriptures. Although, Sheila seemingly upheld a culturally deficient perspective of her classmates due to her different experiences growing up, her spirituality encouraged her to do what she thought was right in uplifting her school community.

In another instance, Sheila spoke about using her spirituality to uplift other girls at her school. She makes it a point to interact with her female classmates who appear to be ostracized by other students. Sheila feels like her relationship with God also encouraged her to befriend girls who appear to socially reproduce controlling images around Black womanhood and perpetuate patriarchy at school. In Sheila's words, she tries to encourage girls that appear to be "doing to much" in hopes of winning the attention of a boy. She stated:

> I think when we see another female that's in a compromising position, we're really quick to talk about her, instead of realizing that this girl is in this position for a reason. She needs help. Like, we need to help her. Like, if you see a girl all over a

> boy and she's doing too much, and you just realize it. And, you just talk about her automatically. But, if you took the time out to think, 'Oh, she probably needs something to believe in. She probably has some sort of insecurity, so I should be the one over there talking to her, telling her she's beautiful and that God loves her so she don't have to feel bad. So, she doesn't have to be doing all this.

Sheila maintains a socially conservative understanding of what constitutes appropriate ladylike behavior and what constitutes "doing too much". However, this example displays Sheila's understandings around the role of her spirituality as building community among her female peers. Like Sheila, most of the other advisors spoke of the impact of their spirituality on their ability and desire to build community and support their classmates. When Jordyn's school friends passed away, she credited her spirituality with helping her comfort her classmates, as well as family members of friends who had died. Renee's spirituality encouraged her to pray for and speak positive words to classmates who were facing adversity. Erin used her spirituality to encourage a classmate dealing with issues of acceptance and rejection from boys at school. Angela stated that God told her to miss class one day to rescue a friend who was in an abusive situation and who had not been to school. Chantel perceived her spirituality as giving her the tools and resources to comfort classmates who have academic performance anxiety.

In all of these cases, the advisors felt like they benefitted from having the spiritual resources by which to help others. However, their stories also suggest that their spirituality cultivated self-initiative in building community. In other words, it appears as

though their spiritual beliefs and practices gave them the confidence to position themselves as leaders and catalysts to generate change.

Interestingly, while the advisors spoke about resources that their spirituality offered in helping others cope with and overcome adversity, only one advisor spoke about its capability to promote transformative resistance in their often oppressive contexts. Only Sheila spoke about its impact in encouraging her to actively attempt to change her community. Although Jordyn and her friends had been discriminated against regularly, along with Chantel, Erin, Marina and other advisors, when asked how their spirituality encouraged them to cope or resist, they did not articulate a theological perspective that emphasized or acknowledged social justice (Parker, 2003). This phenomenon may suggest that the majority of girls were not socialized to understand the liberating aspects of spirituality. Their families and churches may not have explicitly demonstrated its potential to promote social justice. On the other hand, their spiritual socializing agents could have possibly exposed the girls to liberatory aspects of spirituality, yet as the girls author their spiritual identities, those beliefs may not have yet become personalized and concrete.

Chapter Six: Discussion

The purpose of this study was two-fold. The first was to broaden conversations around the compatibility of African American cultural knowledge with mainstream schooling. Spirituality was positioned as a significant component of African American culture that is often overlooked in the academy, and specifically, in multicultural discourses in the field of education. Part of my eventual desire is to illuminate possibilities for educators and scholars to draw on and explore the spiritual knowledge of African American youth in an effort to increase their academic achievement. The second purpose of this study was to contribute to the literature centering the academic and school experiences of African American female adolescents. Twenty-two African American female adolescents freely shared about their school experiences, challenges, spiritual understandings and the myriad ways that they all intersect. They were experts of their lived experiences and provided data by which knowledge could be constructed.

This last chapter will summarize key findings of this study. It will also present implications for teacher education programs, research methodologies and church youth groups. First, I will address each research question and summarize major findings around each inquiry. For the first question, I highlight findings that contribute to what we know about the spiritual development of African American female adolescents. I stress the importance of family, particularly grandmothers, in initiating and cultivating spiritual understandings. I also focus on the role of adversity in personalizing socialized spiritual knowledge. For the second question, I briefly contexualize the school experiences of the participants and examine how their spiritual beliefs and practices were applied to and

interacted with their school settings. The participants' experiences were shaped by intersections of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism, which formed a unique context in which the girls experienced school. Spiritual beliefs provided a lens by which the girls came to understand their school contexts and their roles as Black female students and spiritual/religious beings within it. School ideologies and behaviors were seemingly most impacted by their theological understandings of God and God's role in their lives. To address the third question, I present findings that highlight the impact of the students' beliefs and practices in their school experiences. This group often drew upon their spirituality in efforts to cope with, and even resist, school challenges and academic failure, as well as pursue academic achievement.

Finally, in this chapter, I will present recommendations for future research to incorporate spirituality in understandings around the academic impacts of future-time perspectives (Adelabu, 2008) and stereotype threat (Steele, 1997). I urge researchers and teachers to adopt a spiritual lens in order to promote theories that potentially facilitate academic success and challenge those that put at odds African American cultural knowledge and school success.

The Spiritual Development of African American Female Adolescents

The first question of this study inquired about the participants' sources of spiritual development. Mattis and Jagers (2000) imply that the interactions and behaviors of African Americans often correlate with their spiritual socialization, training and development. By asking this question, I joined with other researchers who have suggested that the spirituality of children and youth impact their daily experiences. (Davis, 2001;

Haight, 2002; Norton, 2008; Parker, 2003). I contribute to this conversation by focusing on the direct impact of spiritual development on Black female adolescents school experiences.

The Impact of Women, Sisters and Fathers

Several scholars have suggested that spiritual development is primarily initiated and cultivated in social interactions with family and fictive kin (Boyatzis, Dollahite, & Marks, 2006). By observing and participating in family-led spiritual practices, the spiritual identities of children and youth begin to form. Parker (2006b) specifies the importance of female family members in the spiritual development of African American female adolescents. She specifically points to the impact of grandmothers, mothers, and aunts in facilitating spiritual values that assists African American girls in negotiating challenges in racist and sexists contexts while maintaining their relationship with God.

The data in this study demonstrated similar findings. The girls spoke about their grandmothers, mothers and aunts as initiating and cultivating their spirituality. The large majority of the participants credited their grandmothers with initiating their spiritual awareness and being the primary contributor to early spiritual understandings. Their grandmothers made their participation in spiritual and religious practices mandatory – many of the girls recalled not having a choice in participating in them. In interviews, family members often spoke of the necessity of the advisors' development of a spiritual foundation in order for them to survive in the harsh reality of life.

Unexpected findings were the roles of sisters and fathers in the advisors' spiritual development. Those with sisters close to their age or older pointed to their sisterhood as

cultivating their spirituality, primarily through creating an opportunity for dialogue, accountability and mutual support. This finding extends literature that suggests the influence of peers, mentors and "girlfriends" (Baker, 2000) in providing safe spaces to practice spiritual understandings (Desrosiers, Kelley, & Miller, 2011).

An additional unexpected theme that emerged was the role of fathers in the spiritual development of the girls, whether directly or indirectly. Only two of the advisors reported to having functional relationships with their fathers. The other girls either had no direct contact with their father or reported that their relationship was, what they felt to be, emotionally destructive. However, their relationships, or lack of relationships, with their fathers impacted their spiritual understandings in meaningful ways. Either the girls observed and mimicked their father's spirituality, or they used their negative experiences to develop a resiliency that positively transferred to other areas of their lives. These findings challenge literature that constantly points to the negative impacts of absentee fathers on the personal development of African American female adolescents (Ellis et al., 2003; Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993). Spirituality, in this case, may present itself as a protective factor that buffers potentially negative consequences.

The Impact of "Going Through"

The second major finding related to the first question signifies the importance of lived experiences in the spiritual development of African American girls. Specifically, as the girls interacted with intersecting contexts of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism, their spiritual development and practices entered into a dialogic relationship with these factors (Parker, 2006). This process, which contributed to the

authoring of their distinct spiritual identities (Holland et al., 2003), was often referred to as "going through".

The advisors often spoke of "going through" adversity as a way of developing deeper, more personalized and pragmatic concepts of God (Wilmore, 2004). It was by the development of, what they referred to as, a "personal relationship with God", that their understandings of God and self in relation to a spiritual realm were individualized and cultivated. The majority of the girls spoke of personal relationships with God forming while they were enduring hardship. For example, Dominique first admitted to "talking to God for [herself]" when she was in the homeless shelter with her mother and sister. Keisha's feelings of alienation at school, she stated, took her relationship with God to a "whole other level". Erin's feelings of rejection from her father encouraged her to begin praying to God on her own in order to heal.

Many of the advisors described this personal relationship with God in two ways. First, they understood it by their tendency and personal desire to perform spiritual practices informally and sporadically throughout the day without being requested to by socializing agents. Second, they understood it as reflecting a connection with God that was custom-fit to their idiosyncratic nature, human attributes and conditions.

Spirituality as a Distinct Component of Identity Development

Two implications emerge from the findings related to the first question. First, it begs churches, youth groups and others who are instrumental in cultivating the spiritual identities of this group to do so in ways that takes into account human differences and particularities. While spirituality between two people may have a similar foundation, the

ways that it is interpreted seemingly varies in different degrees according to lived experiences and human attributes. We find this when examining intersections of spirituality and school experiences of Chantel and Angela, for instance. Both girls credit their spirituality as influencing their academic ideologies and behaviors. As sisters, they were socialized similarly – their grandmother initiated their spiritual awareness and cultivated understandings. Growing up, both girls were taught the same tenets of Christian doctrine, made to perform spiritual rituals together and attend the same church regularly. Additionally, both girls credit their sisterhood as providing a space for their spirituality to flourish. Yet, academically, Chantel likes school, and Angela hates it. Furthermore, Chantel interprets God's divine purpose for her life as obligating her to pursue academic excellence, while Angela understands God's purpose for her life as not relating to school success. As Angela stated, "I just know that I have a higher calling than going to school... My purpose does not involve school."

Similarly, the research of Medina (1998) who explored Chicana spiritualities and Mattis (2000), who studied the spiritual understandings of Black women, highlight the effects of intersectionality (Collins, 2000) between and within groups of people. Without specific attention being given to sociocultural and human differences, as well as differences in standpoints by which theology is constructed (Williams, 2006), it is possible to neglect the impact of individual uniqueness on spiritual development and by doing so promote inequitable expectations around the practices that constitute appropriate spiritual behavior. As a result, spiritual dogma may negatively impact individuals' spiritual and religious epistemologies and identities (Fullilove & Fullilove, 1999).

The second implication of these findings encourages researchers interested in the identity development of African American female adolescents to incorporate spirituality into their methodology as a factor that impacts its production. Scholars and theorists of color maintain that spirituality continues to significantly impact the lives of African Americans (Dillard et al., 2000; Newlin et al., 2002; Wilmore, 2004). It is not understood as existing separate and apart from the secular or material realm, but rather it permeates life and is connected to their everyday existence (Phillips, 2006; Paris, 1995). Myers and her colleagues (1991) contend that it is difficult to develop a positive cultural identity that dichotomizes the physical from the spiritual. “Self knowledge,” they state, “is the process of coming to know who and what we are as the unique expression of infinite spirit. With this knowledge, individuals can integrate all apparent aspects of being (e.g., age, color, ethnicity, and size) into a holistic sense of self” (p. 58). The identity of many African Americans is inextricably tied to their spirituality, and neglecting their spiritual understandings necessarily yields an incomplete understanding of their identity formation.

Conversations with the advisors often reflected this sentiment. For example, Keisha, in describing her response to the challenges she endured at school stated, “I think it caused the growth spurt for my relationship with God. Like it took me to a whole other level… the more I went to youth church, the more I learned about God and the more I learned about myself.” Similarly, Dominique described prayer as allowing her “strong side” (i.e. God) to encourage her “weak side” (i.e. personal sensibilities). In doing so, she hears her “powerful side” encouraging her to persevere and “push through.” Describing

the process, she stated, “That’s just prayer. That’s just me praying. That’s just me believing in me, believing in what I can do, believing in what God can do.” Dominique and Keisha suggest that what they are able to do in their everyday lives is automatically tied to their understandings of God.

Milner (2006) offers a reflective model of racial, cultural and spiritual engagement for researchers and their participants in an attempt to facilitate more “empowering research” about African Americans. He describes empowering research as allowing the researchers and research participants to change and improve situations that can hinder African American progress and mobility. I extend his proposal and suggest that spirituality be included in explorations of sociocultural factors that influence identity development. Additionally, I suggest that a framework is needed that directly explores the role of lived experiences and adversity in the identity development of African American female adolescents.

Spiritual Beliefs, Practices and Performances at School

The second question of this study inquired about the spiritual beliefs and practices that the advisors employed at school and the ways in which they were employed. The data confirmed what some scholars have implied -- that spiritual beliefs and practices are understood and performed according to a specific historical that has assigned culturally constructed meaning to spiritual ideas and activities (Tisdell, 2006). In the advisors’ often hostile school contexts, their beliefs about God and practices that allowed them to feel connected to God offered them an alternate lens and counter narrative by which to understand themselves and their academic abilities in the school setting.

The advisors' school experiences largely reflected those described in the literature review (Grant, 1984; Morris, 2007). These scholars have noted intersectionalities of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism that Black female students must negotiate and the tendency of teachers and classmates to focus more on their social demeanor and mannerisms then their intellect and potential to achieve (Fordham, 1993). Such was the case for many advisors. Both teachers and classmates tended to believe them to be anti-intellectual and sexually deviant. Their interactions with others were often guided by long-standings controlling images of Black womanhood, based on perceptions of them as, what Collins (2000) would label, Jezebels and ghetto women. Updated versions of these images (i.e. ratchet, golddigger) presented by Stephens and Phillips (2003) were often the ones assigned to the participants to sustain their marginalization.

In presenting the context in which the girls' spirituality was utilized, the complex relationships that the girls often had with each other became apparent. The advisors suggested the impossibility to form relationships with other girls because of the tendency of the female classmates to be "messy," disloyal and selfish. Merten (1997) proposed that the exploration of girls' meanness may serve as a starting point by which to understand connections between competition, conflict and popularity. This proved to be relevant in the case of several of the advisors who claimed that the disunity of girls at their school resulted from fierce desires to be popular and/or claimed by male classmates.

The advisors' spirituality was performed in a school context shaped by racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and patriarchy. In this space of social reproduction, stereotyping and marginalization, the advisors made practical the beliefs and practices

that were initiated by socializing agents, yet renegotiated to interface with their unique conditions and attributes. In doing so, the young ladies were encouraged to cope with and resist oppressive and unpleasant situations. The data suggests that the factor that most affected the school experiences of the girls were their perceptions of God and God's role in their lives. Their theological perceptions greatly reflected Black Liberation and Womanist Theology (Cone, 1990; Douglas, 1994).

Conceptions of God Contribute to Academic Engagement

The data revealed that the advisors drew upon conceptions of God to become more engaged in the academic process. These theological understandings of God positioned God as: (1) the source of all things, and thus empowering the advisors to academically succeed, (2) supernatural, yet involved in the concrete experiences of students, and (3) foreseeing and guiding the students and universe towards a predetermined path.

As the source of all things, God was believed to have ultimate power and control of the advisors' school situations. Perceiving God as sovereign and empowering led them to develop greater self-confidence in their academic abilities and potential for success. It was according to this belief that all other beliefs held by the girls were reinforced. Because God had limitless power, they believed that He could insert Himself into their concrete school experiences. Because God controlled all things, they believed that He knew their ultimate plan and could guide them, as well as the universe, to ensure its fulfillment.

Most interesting are the assumptions embedded in these conceptions of God and the girls' applications of them. First, the girls assumed that God wanted them to be academically successful. Not one of the advisors suggested at any time that God did not desire for them to achieve academically. Even Angela, who did not feel like God's divine purpose obligated her to do well in school, felt like God would be pleased if she were academically successful. The second assumption that the girls apparently held about God is that God is willing to break the rules to ensure their success. For instance, Deshonna stated that God helped her with a standardized test that she was not prepared to take. Chantel accounted a similar experience, where God "helped" her with tests. The third assumption that the girls made regarding God's participation in their school experiences is that God expected the girls to take the lead in bringing about their academic success. While the girls recognized God's influence in their experiences, they also realized that it did not make void their agency and responsibility, as some scholars have suggested. In fact, believing that God was involved in their school experiences increased their desires to be academically engaged because they believed that if they failed, God "had [their] back".

This study contributes to literature positing African American cultural knowledge as a protective factor that allows students to cope with and/or resist unpleasant situations (Evans-Winters, 2005). Because the advisors understood God as a partner in their academic success and themselves as having a favorable divine purpose for their lives, they seemingly developed greater self-confidence in their academic abilities and were less swayed by academic failure. Chantel and Angela framed failure as a sign that God

wants them to become better students and study more diligently. Jordyn, Sheila and Erin assumed that their divine purpose required them to do well in school in order to be prepared for the future opportunities that God would send. Sheila and Deshonna suggest that God orchestrates people and situations to guarantee that the students achieve. As a result of these beliefs, the girls tended to prioritize their schooling and grades and not attend as much to negativity.

Valenzula (1999) suggests that schools subtract from ethnic minority students by discouraging their use of indigenous cultural and home practices in the classroom and school setting. Norton (2008) argues, however, that students do not leave their spiritual beliefs and practices at home and learn to negotiate them in ways that the schools may deem appropriate. For instance, in this study, Chantel claimed to praying verbally before each test, while Deshonna says that she prays silently. Some girls read their Bibles in class, and others attended a school Bible study group.

Implications for Teachers Education Programs and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

These findings have great implications for teacher education programs. Over the past few decades, scholars have recommended that culturally responsive pedagogy include spirituality in its repertoire (hooks, 1995; Norton, 2008; Tisdell, 2007). I agree and suggest that the absence of an embrace of spirituality in the classroom setting contributes to school discrimination and subtractive schooling, as some students are directly or indirectly forced to leave a significant aspect of their cultural understandings at home.

Palmer (1999) argues that by ignoring the spiritual dimension in teaching, schools neglect the "deepest needs of the human soul," which includes a quest for connectedness with something larger. He suggests taking a non-religious approach to including spirituality in pedagogy – one that allows students to consider questions about the meaning and purpose of life, identify their divine gifts and explore the maintenance of hope in difficult situations. Tisdell (2003) recommends that culturally relevant education programs focus on the cultural dimension of spirituality that has allowed historically marginalized groups to challenge hegemony imposed by the dominant culture, much like in the case of Nat Turner (Gray and Turner, 1831). Spirituality, then, can be incorporated into multicultural and history classes as a dimension that has encouraged minority groups to claim a positive cultural identity. In a similar vein, Peele-Eady (2011) suggests that traditional school settings may foster positive membership identity among African American learners by developing communicative practices that reflect those used in spaces of learning within the Black church setting. This holistic instructional method would constitute blended and balanced usage of implicit and explicit approaches to teaching. Furthermore, it would provide varied opportunities for African American youth to demonstrate competence as members and learners in an intellectual space. Dillard (2000) implies that incorporation of the spiritual knowledge held by the African American community will not only be beneficial to students, but also to spiritually-minded educators who often feel obligated to fragment their spiritual and academic identities in an effort to submit to school structures. Finally, Dantley (2005) suggests that

schools located in urban centers with predominately Black populations may flourish with leadership that is grounded in the African American spiritual tradition.

Drawing from the findings of this study, I suggest that culturally responsive pedagogy include conversations around spirituality and collective struggle for Black people in the United States (O'Connor, 1997). Discussions and exercises can illuminate the dynamics of power and resistance of African Americans and the variables that contributed to their survival in the United States. I suggest that multicultural education and teacher training programs include spirituality as a sociocultural factor that influences the learning process of African American students.

The Role of Spirituality in the School Setting

The final question of this study addresses the specific roles and functions of spirituality in this school space for African American female adolescents. Did it make a difference for the girls to employ their spiritual beliefs and practices in the setting? Did drawing upon their spirituality potentially contribute to academic success?

The findings of this study suggest that their spirituality served their academic agendas in three ways: (1) it provided a lens by which the girls processed their experiences and made meaning of them, (2) it contributed to their educational resilience, as they were able to push through unpleasant situations, and (3) it encouraged them to build community among their classmates, which contributed to their peers' educational resilience as well.

Improvisation and Educational Resilience

In her exploration of the function of spirituality in the coping experiences of African American women, Mattis (2002) pointed out its ability to encourage new ways of thinking about and understanding common phenomena and less than pleasant psychological disruptions. Stewart (1996) describes this as the “improvisational” dimension of Black spirituality. The data of this study suggests that the spiritual understandings of the advisors allowed them to make meaning out of less than ideal situations. For instance, Angela and Chantel claimed to understand academic failure as necessary because it encourages them to become better students. Angela compared her outlook to those of other students, stating that while they may blame their failure on the teacher or on their inability to be academically success, she has a “more positive outlook” and attempts to benefit educationally from it. Similarly, Jordyn made sense of her inability to commit suicide by interpreting the situation to mean that God has a divine purpose for her life and that she had “more work to do”. This interpretation led to greater motivation to pursue academic success.

This new lens and ability to improvise contributed to the participants’ educational resilience. Educational resilience represents a space where students have positive educational adaptions and outcomes within contexts of significant adversity (Cunningham and Phillips, 2010). Evans-Winters (2005) highlights the role of social networks (i.e. family, churches, peer communities) in contributing to the educational resilience of African American female adolescents. Similarly, O’Connor (1997) suggests that families and significant others may cultivate educational resilience in African

American students by informing them about the history of collective struggle in which Black people in the U.S. have participated in.

The contributions made by this study suggest that conceptions of God contribute to the educational resilience of African American female adolescents, and specifically, their abilities to cope with and psychologically resist school adversity. Because Janea and Erin understood God as having a purpose for their lives, they were able to psychologically resist degradation from teachers who felt they were anti-intellectual. Additionally, Chantel, Marina and Jordyn coped with being stereotyped by students at their predominately White schools and continued to pursue success. This resilience may come from understandings of their membership to an imagined community of other believers or may be produced from ideas that God is a part of their academic struggle.

Building Community in Schools

Finally, the advisors to this study credit their spirituality with encouraging them to build community among their peers and classmates. The majority of the girls felt that their spirituality gave them the tools needed to assist others with their academic and personal challenges. For instance, Sheila used her spiritual understandings to attempt to motivate the students at her high school to resist anti-academic behaviors, such as smoking weed and missing class, and pursue academic success. Erin encouraged and prayed with a classmate who was battling feelings of rejection. Chantel and Angela counseled classmates suffering from family violence, and Jordyn's spiritual beliefs gave her a frame by which to console classmates grieving the death of a fellow student. In each

situation, the girls used their spirituality to unite their school community. The data suggests that in doing so, the advisors also cultivated educational resilience in their peers.

Walker (1983) describes a Womanist as one who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." The advisors to this study positioned themselves as Womanists who frequently used their spiritual knowledge to uplift their school communities. While the girls' spiritual knowledge encouraged their educational resilience, as well as inspired them to cultivate that of their peers, absent from their experiences were acts of transformational resistance to deal directly with the structural causes of their school challenges. Transformational resistance refers to school behavior that demonstrates a critique of oppressive structures, as well as a social justice orientation (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Acts of transformational resistance (i.e. walkouts, protests) generate a greater possibility for social change.

A large majority of the advisors admitted to enduring discrimination impacted by racism, classism, sexism or heterosexism. Yet only one of the girls, Sheila, used her spiritual knowledge to attempt to change the root cause of the discrimination. Parker (2003) refers to this neglect as a "fracture" in Black adolescent spirituality. She suggests that African American adolescents speak about "God's salvific and protective power in their lives separately from the evils of racism experienced individually or collectively" (p. 47). Jordyn was called a on her way to class and told that she did not belong to the school. In response to my inquiries about her subsequent actions, she stated that confidence in herself allowed her to cope with it. Dominique had been discriminated against due to her sexuality multiple times. Yet, she did not feel the need to speak to her

school officials about it. Instead, she positioned herself as being strong enough to “handle it”.

Working Towards a Culturally Responsive Theology

These findings have great implications for churches, youth groups and other organizations that are instrumental in cultivating the spirituality of African American adolescents. This study encourages these entities to be intentional in their pedagogy and theological interpretations. Douglas (1995) contends that Black Womanist theologians and religious scholars who are committed to the survival and wholeness of the Black community must cultivate theologies that confront interlocking systems of oppression which prevents our community from thriving. These systems of oppression must be confronted not only in society, but also in our churches, which sets the community against itself because of differentiated views around gender, economic status, or sexual preference.

I encourage churches and youth groups to cultivate a theology that is culturally responsive to the circumstances and situations of African American youth. Theology is the systematic study of God’s role in the lives of individuals and communities (Floyd-Thomas et al., 2007). Liberation theologians emphasize the role of lived experiences in the construction of theological understandings. According to Mitchem (2002), theology “begins not in a classroom, but in living life” (p. 39). For instance, Black Liberation theologians use the Black experience in the United States as the springboard by which to understand God’s role in the lives of African Americans (Cone, 1990). Similarly, Womanist theologians built upon many of the tenets of Black Liberation theology but

stress the importance of differentiating between the "Black" experience and "Black female" experience in the America. Womanist theology, then, becomes an opportunity to reflect on the meanings of God in the historical, cultural and present context and realities of Black women's lives (Mitchem, 2002).

I challenge youth groups to develop ways of thinking about God that are relevant to the everyday experiences of African American youth – theologies that celebrate racial and cultural identity, inform youth of our historical collective struggles (O'Connor, 1997) and teach youth to challenge the status quo through acts of transformational resistance (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). The pedagogy utilized in these spaces must be willing to promote dialogue among the youth and their leaders about their theological understandings which may not reflect traditional Black Christian ideas. For instance, what is God's role in the life of Dominique who faces social discrimination because of her sexual preferences? And, what is God's role in the lives of female adolescent students, who are often mishandled in society, school, and church due to long-standings, misguided socially constructed images around Black womanhood? Questions like these need to be addressed in order for the Black church and youth groups to remain relevant in the lives of African American adolescents.

Recommendations for Further Study and Final Thoughts

By centering the spirituality of African American students, and specifically of African American female adolescents, researchers have an opportunity to understand their school experiences in new ways. Recognizing spirituality as a component of their cultural identity adds a fresh dimension to traditional inquiries that have explored

intersections of culture and education for this group. For instance, Steele (1997) suggests that the academic achievement of ethnic minority students risks being stifled because of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat refers to the danger that the judgments of others will reflect negative stereotypes and result in depressed academic performances. The findings in this study, however, suggest that spiritual beliefs which position God as partnering in the academic struggle of African American students may serve as a protective barrier that results in psychological resistance to those threats.

Further research can also be conducted to understand the role of divine purpose in impacting future time perspectives and conceptions of hope in African American adolescents (Adelabu, 2008). Future time perspective refers to an individual's thoughts and attitudes toward the future. Scholars suggest that students who envision positive representations of their future self are motivated to achieve academically while they plan for their future (Nurmi, 1991). The hope agency of African American students – or, their sense of determination towards reaching their goals - have been found to positively correlate with their academic achievement (Adelabu, 2008). Future research may explore connections between spiritual beliefs and practices and the cultivation of future time perspectives and hope agency.

This dissertation was conducted for personal and political reasons. By choosing to focus on the role of spirituality in the school experiences of African American students, I attempted to demonstrate its significance in Black lives. Maintaining pedagogy that is culturally relevant for African American students requires attention to a realm that is

unseen. It is in this sphere that academic ideologies are constructed and educational equality for all can be achieved.

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