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Education ain't black: the disidentification of African American students

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EDUCATION AIN'T BLACK:
THE DISIDENTIFICATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

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by
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Abstract

In this thesis, I will discuss the influence of education on the identity formation of African American students. Based on the scholarly literature in education theory, I will argue in Bourdieuan theory education, formal education, fails to accommodate the specific needs of African American students because education influences African American students to develop constructions of “whiteness” that education reinforces. As education attempts to uphold the “status quo” of American society, education simultaneously forces African American students to question the relevance of education. In questioning the relevance of education through high-achieving African American students’ use of language and pursuit of academic achievement, low-achieving African American students offer a critique of education that characterizes education as a “white-dominated” system where individuals must embody whiteness in order to achieve social acceptance. As a result, African American students choose to “disidentify” with education rather than to assimilate into White culture to avoid being identified as “white”–speaking Standard English, following rules and regulations, and maintaining a high grade point average. This critique of education– though not an anti-intellectual response to education because most African Americans still view education as a means to social mobility– signifies education does not educate African American students but instead produces “white” African American students in order to reproduce societal norms. I will also propose the incorporation of self-knowledge into critical education will facilitate an awareness of personal history and self-worth among African American students not only to disrupt an educational structure of inequality but also to foster a positive self-concept within these students.

Chapter 1. Assessing Education

Even in the years following the passing of educational reforms such as “No Child Left Behind,” African American students remain significantly behind White students in both reading and math (Strong-Leek 859). In addition to low academic achievement, African American students also experience higher occurrences of emotional and behavioral disorders and other negative outcomes— delinquency, drop-out, and teenage pregnancy— than their White counterparts (Thomas, Krampe, and Newton 530). As a result, many African American students are inevitably stigmatized by labels that characterize them as disinterested in learning and incapable of learning. In this instance, the African American educational experience exists as an experience typically misunderstood but seldom educational. Contrary to the common (mis)representations of African American students, many African American students possess the capability to learn and an interest in learning. However, educational institutions fail to provide African American students with the skills necessary to advance in education (Harris 825).

Although researchers propose the lack of academic achievement among African American students occurs as the result of the burden or fear of “acting white” (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 584), low academic achievement occurs as the result of disproportionality in the teaching of skills reserved for students who fit into the higher ranks of the educational hierarchy— White students. As a result, teachers, administrators, and policy-makers sometimes fail to offer African American students a connection between education and African American identity because education itself segues students into an ideological “whiteness” marked with social acceptance and social norms. As a result, some African American students, low-achieving African American students, disconnect from education in an effort to disconnect from the white identity— an identity associated with academic achievement, the use of Standard English, and

compliance to rules and regulations— education reproduces to uphold the status-quo or whiteness of America. For the low-achieving African American student, the language and performance of high-achieving students indicates the tendency of education to reproduce like others, each a representation of the systems of inequality and dominance that control them. Nevertheless, the incorporation of critical education and self-knowledge into the African American educational experience not only disrupts systems of inequality and dominance in education but also disrupts misrepresented identities of dependence and unwillingness in African American students.

The purpose of this thesis is to assess the scholarly literature that supports the theory that education not only functions to reproduce an American standard of identity among all students but also forces low-achieving African American students to disidentify with education because education influences high-achieving African American students to exhibit a White identity rather than an African American identity; in addition, this thesis will also explain the significance of these differences in identity among African American students. Using the findings of previous research, this thesis further explains as low-achieving African American students critique high-achieving African American students as “actin’ and soundin’ White”, low-achieving African American students also critique education as a system that fails to educate students but functions to promote inequality. Furthermore, this thesis examines how properly disrupting the construction of “white” identity in education through the use of self-knowledge promotes African American students to limit their involvement in negative behaviors (Bruce and Waelde 395).

1.1 Methodology

In accordance with the implications of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of education and Critical Race Theory (CRT), I intend to present a Bourdieuan theory of race in education using the

research of respected theorists in education. To build this new theory, I selected texts from Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Lisa Delpit, Geneva Gay, and Vershawn Young that provide evidence of the existence of reproduction in education particularly in the context of social stratification and assimilation in the American system of education. In addition to selecting texts that address social stratification and assimilation in American education, I also selected texts from Na'ilah Nasir et al., Lionel Scott, and Beverly Tatum that positioned African American students as subject to question their identity in educational settings because education fails to accommodate the specific needs of African American students in an attempt to reproduce the American standard. To demonstrate African American students' critique of reproduction in education as a form of disidentification instead of a form of anti-intellectualism, I selected texts from Geneva Smitherman, Stuart Hall, and Charles H. Long that present language as the medium through which African American students use signification to critique education as a means to reproduce an ideological whiteness among high-achieving African American students. Additional texts from bell hooks and Paulo Freire in conjunction with texts on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. will present literature on critical education that demonstrates self-knowledge as a disruptive tool used to dismantle reproduction in education.

1.2 Literature Review

I will review research that supports the function of education as a medium for social reproduction in American society. Although limited research is available on this topic, the following research will demonstrate low-achieving African American students perform poorly in schools because education fails to properly educate these students and aims to coerce African American students into an ideological "white" identity. In addition, the research will further demonstrate the incorporation of self-knowledge into the education of African American

students will disrupt the system of inequality in American education. I will conclude with implications that support the need for more research on the role of education in the identity formation of African American students.

1.2.1 Defining Education

Although individuals commonly refer to education as the knowledge received within an institution of learning, education possesses meaning both inside of the classroom and outside of the classroom. Defined as a form of learning implemented through “structured content, extrinsic motivation, and strict assessment”, formal education defines curricula taught in an institution of education (Hung, Lee, and Lim 1072). Primary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities, for example, represent institutions of formal education. In formal education, explicit forms of knowledge like science and mathematics feature de-contextualized information based on generalized theories in the form of textbooks, multimedia, and encyclopedias (Hung et al. 1074). In addition, educators typically assess the knowledge of their students through the use of assignments and both standardized and non-standardized exams in formal education. In contrast, learning implemented through “less structured activities” incorporating experimentation, exploration, intrinsic motivation, and developing interests defines informal education (Hung et al. 1072). Informal education typically arises spontaneously with no specific mediator, unlike formal education where an educator purposefully fulfills the role of a mediator (Eshach 173). For many students, their first exposure to education occurs not in the context of a classroom but in the context of a community. Before the creation of educational institutions, communities served as a medium for informal education as individuals shared common history, interdependent activities, and role performances with like others (Hung et al. 1073). Even after the creation of educational institutions, favorable messages shared among communities still

constituted an important basis for education. Tacit knowledge, or verbally shared knowledge, functions as an important aspect of informal knowledge because individuals learn through receiving feedback, role modeling, and performing, which constitutes shared meaning among a community (Hung et al. 1074). Both Hung et al. and Eshach argue the importance of combining formal and informal education both in the classroom and out of the classroom to constitute effective learning; however, neither author addresses how the inclusion of informal education in the classroom could possibly disrupt the structuralized system of racial inequality in the American education system.

1.2.2 Critical Race Theory in Education

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the 1970s in response to the inability of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) – the argument the law will never fully serve oppressed groups as a result of the power relationships in society that influence the logic and structure of conventional law – to properly address the consequences of race and racism in United States jurisprudence (Ladson-Billings 110; DeCuir and Dixson 26). According to DeCuir and Dixson, “. . . the acceptance of the idea of the permanence of racism involves adopting a ‘realist view’ of the American societal structure. . . Such structures allocate the privileging of Whites and the subsequent Othering of people of color in all arenas, including education” (DeCuir and Dixson 27). Education, like the law, reflects the social norms of American society and ultimately mirrors the prevalent race relations of American society. Through the use of CRT, researchers unveil “. . . the persistent and oppressive nature of the normativity of Whiteness, the co-option and distortion of oppositional discourses, and the ways in which policies that are offered as remedies to underachievement and educational disparity may not be in the best interests of marginalized groups, but rather serve the elite” (DeCuir and Dixson 30). Although Critical Race Theory

recognizes the underachievement of marginalized groups in education occurs as a result of education appealing to individuals of a higher social status, the emphasis of the theory on race depicts co-optation into an ideological “whiteness” as inevitable for marginalized groups yet disregards the capability of marginalized groups to disrupt racialization in education.

1.2.3 African Americans and Education

Based on a cultural-ecological theory of school performance among voluntary and involuntary minorities, involuntary minorities—nonimmigrants forced to be a part of the United States as a direct or indirect consequence of conquest, colonization, or enslavement—like African Americans encourage their children to perform well in school to secure profitable jobs yet understand success in school does not always lead to success in adulthood (Ogbu and Simons 165; 172). Although American culture upholds a Protestant work ethic, a sociological concept emphasizing the value of hard work combined with faith as a means of prosperity, education does not prevent the social and economic barriers involuntary minorities encounter. As involuntary minority students observe the experiences of their parents as involuntary minority parents struggle to secure employment in the workforce, these students eventually adopt the notion education does not guarantee economic success nor obstruct economic barriers (Ogbu and Simons 172). Upon realizing education grants success to dominant social groups—White Americans and/or individuals assimilated into White American culture— involuntary minorities understand education works against them rather than for them because education emulates White American values. Accordingly, involuntary minorities grow to distrust “white-controlled” educational institutions because involuntary minorities fear these institutions will not educate minorities in the same manner as they educate Whites (Ogbu and Simon 174). Furthermore, some involuntary minorities believe adopting White American behaviors or language equates

losing their minority identity and therefore resist aspects of White American identity that threaten minority identity (Ogbu and Simons 175). Because the term “involuntary minority” applies to multiple races and ethnicities, Ogbu and Simon’s theory on performance in education does not address educational disparities between African Americans and Whites specifically. However, this broad theory successfully displays the dominance of the reproduction of White cultural values in America.

While some African American students manage to perform well in a racially biased system of education, other African American students fail to even reach achievements in education. Despite allowing African-American students to attend higher-performing schools, desegregation in schools only provides short-term benefits to African American students because African American students continue to receive the long-term effects of negative treatment and misrepresentation in education (Strong-Leek 858). Prior to desegregation, African American teachers and students engaged in close relationships founded on empathy with individuals and knowledge of the African American community; and, the public school functioned as “agencies of race and community identity” (Fairclough 44; 48). In addition, educators in segregated schools believed their job focused on providing students with quality education and altering the curriculum to accommodate their students (Siddle Walker 771). However, the effects of desegregation leave few, if any, remnants of the productivity of the segregated African American schools of the past. For example, misrepresentations of low-income students leave African American students most susceptible to the consequences of poverty because most low-income students attend low-performing, crowded public schools with limited funding (Morris and Monroe 24; Strong-Leek 857). In addition, students who live in rural areas in southern United States— an area historically marked with racial conflict and poverty— receive significantly lower

standardized test scores than students in other rural areas in the United States (Saddler 52). Because teachers typically leave poor performing schools after their first year of employment in response to the poor conditions of these schools— impoverished buildings, limited staff, and increased behavioral issues— some teachers may ignore the role of schools and their own roles in the poor performance of low-achieving African American students. However, students in poverty— regardless of race— generally encounter educational disparities in comparison to students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, but these disparities exist not as a consequence of poverty but as a response to the social structure of education.

Because educators ignore the influence of structure in schools, districts, and communities on academic performance, educators disregard economic capital and social capital (financial resources and human resources respectively) as contributing factors to low academic performance among African American students (Morris and Monroe 68). Without access to such capital, low-achieving African American students may learn to view education as inaccessible and to limit themselves to low-levels of academic achievement. In this instance, the public education system not only “mis-educates” students but also “de-educates” students, which systematically excludes African American students from the education system and/or systematically destroys African American students within this system (Saddler 44). The system of tracking, for example, typically defines African American students as low-achieving or underperforming students as early as primary school. As a result of this system, most African American students enroll in general and vocational courses, and only thirty-three percent of African Americans enroll in college preparatory and/or advanced classes (Saddler 44). Just as educators attribute the lack of African American students in higher-level courses to the lack of intelligence and interest among African American students, educators commonly attribute poor

performance among African American students to their own dispositions (Saddler 52). For example, educators and administration typically perceive the negative behaviors— low performance, disobedience, and deviance— of African American students as adult behavior in comparison to the appropriate behavior of White students (Griffin and Cummins 262). Because the negative perception of African American students among educators and administrators influences the uneven distribution of disciplinary sanctions among African American and White students, racial discrimination, not deviance, triggers higher rates of negative behavior among African American students (O'Connor, Lewis, and Mueller 546). In the words of Craig Saddler, “If the United States truly hopes to ‘leave no child behind’, then we need to literally dismantle and reconstruct systemic approaches commonly in place within the educational system” (53). While the above research demonstrates a need for change in the structure of the American education system, the research fails to offer a critique of the education system as a means of reproduction but instead critiques the education system as a means of destruction.

In an effort to dissociate from their negative experiences in education, many African Americans begin to “disidentify” with education to maintain a positive self-concept. Gloria Ladson-Billings, author of *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, presents evidence that defines “disidentification” as a psychological strategy for African American students to cope with self-esteem in the midst of failure (Delpit 19). In *The Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings recalls a meeting between a veteran teacher and a student teacher where the veteran teacher alerts the student teacher to the presence of two types of African American students in the school. The “white-blacks” with “white” values from “good” homes do not exhibit behavior problems like the less academically capable “black-blacks” (Ladson-Billings 22). To explain the significance of the previous anecdote, Ladson-Billings

writes: “This invalidation of African American culture is compounded by a notion of assimilationist teaching . . . the teacher’s role is to ensure that students fit into society . . . if the teacher has low expectations the place that the teacher believes the students “fit into” is on society’s lower rungs” (Ladson-Billings 24). The argument Ladson-Billings presents supports the notion education shapes the identity of students but also highlights the presence of reproduction in education, which causes students who fail to adhere to the status quo of education to disconnect from the assimilationist nature of education.

1.2.4 African Americans and Language

An important aspect of education, language functions as the medium through which individuals primarily exchange information. Language remains essential to the education of a group of people because it represents the theory of reality for a particular group of people (Smitherman 154). Being so, language plays a significant role not only in education but also in culture. In *Talkin’ That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America*, Geneva Smitherman argues individuals in power to define language force other individuals to internalize linguistic and cultural norms of a particular language and to diminish the linguistic and cultural norms of their own language (Smitherman 153). To combat the occurrence of this phenomenon in the classroom, students need to possess a complex understanding of the relationship between language and culture in conjunction with an insight into the social stratification and political nature of American dialects (Smitherman 128). In the absence of this understanding, African American students learn to view their own speech as negative because they have been taught to think of White, middle-class speech as the standard dialect of America (Smitherman 128-29). African American students in possession of this understanding, however, learn to recognize

White, middle-class speech as a dialect not common to African Americans and thus a threat to the preservation of African American culture.

Vershawn Young, author of “Your Average Nigga”, argues the educational process becomes a form of assimilation as the attempt to change the ways African American students speak and write becomes an effort to alter the identity of African American students. As Young recounts his own identity conflict in “Your Average Nigga”, he finds language differences in America lead African American students into a struggle either to try to be White or to prove to be Black. According to Young, for students to either “act white” or “act black” exists as a function of and a contribution to the continuing racialization of society— a barrier language helps to persist (Young 708). Supporting Young’s argument, Lisa Delpit recalls the Ebonics debate (a political debate over the use of “Black English” in public schools) of the 1990s in *The Skin That We Speak* and admits she feared those in power, “the white folks”, might again dismiss African American students as ignorant and unworthy if Ebonics entered the public school curriculum (Delpit and Dowdy 37). However, Delpit alters her stance on the Ebonics debate as she understands teachers, administrators, and policy-makers question the cognitive competence of children who do not “sound” intelligent, which causes students not to identify with teachers who doubt their ability nor with a curriculum that discredits their heritage (Delpit and Dowdy 41). Both Young and Delpit acknowledge the significance of language in the formation of Black identity. In addition, each author’s argument suggests the use of language in education functions as not only a racial hierarchy but also a social hierarchy where speakers of Standard English— students perceived as intelligent— receive precedence over students who fail to adhere to the status quo of education.

Linguist and public orator Ernie Smith states his mistrust and dislike for professionals, particularly bourgeois Black professionals, emerged from their use of language behavior, which led Smith to view these professionals as “superficial, insincere, and phoney” (Delpit and Dowdy 19). Because Smith did not identify with the speech patterns of Black professionals, the absence of a role model fueled Smith’s negative attitudes toward authority figures in general and influenced his belief of formal education as irrelevant and informal education, particularly “street” education, as accessible (Delpit and Dowdy 19). As Smith engaged in street education, he learned to manipulate language both within the streets and outside of the streets, an example of “code-switching”, to acquire success in functional crime (Delpit and Dowdy 21). However, Smith eventually pursues a post-secondary education but only after “Schoolboy”, Smith’s street mentor, urges him to do so (Delpit and Dowdy 21). Based on findings from Yasser Payne and Tara Brown’s study of the educational experiences of “street-life-oriented” African American males, even street-life-oriented students find value in formal education and associate formal education with social advancement (327). However, African American students in general, particularly male students, struggle to develop a sense of belonging to educational environments that fail to nurture and support students’ emotional, social, and academic needs (Caton 1074). Because language heavily influences the identity of African American students, the presence of unfamiliar speech patterns in formal education characterizes schools and other institutions of learning as both unwelcoming and inattentive to Afrocentric— embracing African heritage, tradition, and culture— African American students. The above findings support the notion African American students seek favorable messages in environments outside of formal education in order to establish shared identities with others; and, a shared language helps to solidify these identities.

1.2.5 Bourdieu's Theory of Education

In *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues industrialized societies use education systems to reinforce and to reproduce social inequalities. According to Bourdieu, “Education . . . by the transmission of a training [formation] capable of durably patterning and ‘informing’ the receivers . . . is the equivalent, in the cultural order, of the transmission of genetic capital in the biological order” (Bourdieu 32). In other words, Bourdieu argues education functions as a medium for social mobility just as race serves as an indicator of social mobility. Furthermore, the presence of cultural capital, non-financial assets that aid social mobility (though not explicitly defined in Bourdieu's *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*) allows higher-class students more access to educational credentials than lower-class students, which maintains the dominant position of higher-class individuals (Sullivan 145-46). Although not an extension of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of education, the idea of low-achieving African American students as “school dependent” supports the argument education systems view cultural capital as the catalyst to earning educational credentials. In other words, students with access to cultural capital perform higher in school than students with limited cultural capital because students not a part of the mainstream must rely on schools to teach them how to acquire social and economic success in America (Delpit 72). Even as lower-class students advance in the educational system, they fail to challenge the status quo of the system but instead strengthen the system as they contribute to the illusion of meritocracy (Sullivan 146). Although Bourdieu posits a general argument about industrialized societies, including his native homeland France, his argument closely parallels the structure of educational systems in America specifically. For example, Bourdieu argues lower-class students separate themselves from secondary education (i.e. drop out of the education

system) despite academic achievement to avoid elimination from the education system, which functions as a mechanism of selection rather than failure (Bourdieu 153). This argument supports the high rates of African American drop-outs; however, the argument fails to provide an alternative option— disrupting the system of education for example— for students who wish to completely separate themselves from education.

Because Bourdieu primarily applies his argument to institutions of higher education, however, further work must be done to accurately apply Bourdieu's argument to primary and secondary education institutions. In addition, Bourdieu fails to clearly define several concepts in his theory of education, which leaves Bourdieu's theory subject to criticism and difficult to prove. To define Pierre Bourdieu's theory of education as an empirically supported theory, Anne Sullivan suggests the following must be proven: 1) children inherit cultural capital from their parents; 2) the cultural capital of children converts into educational credentials; and, 3) educational credentials function as a major mechanism of social reproduction in industrialized capitalist societies (Sullivan 154). Nevertheless, the structure of American education provides evidence to support Bourdieu's theory as an empirically supported theory of education.

1.2.6 Self-Knowledge

Arguably, the absence of self-knowledge, or self-directed learning, from education allows reproduction to flourish in education because reproduction fails to produce independent-thinking students. As bell hooks compares education in pre-desegregation America to education in post-desegregation America, she notes segregated schools nurtured the "minds" of African American students, and African American students learned a devotion to learning would serve as a form of resistance to "white racist colonization" (hooks 2). She further states obedience was expected of African American students in "white" schools following desegregation, and an extensive

eagerness to learn among African American students could potentially be a threat to “white authority” (hooks 3). In this instance, education functions to reinforce domination and no longer functions as the practice of freedom (hooks 4). Educators who accept the challenge of self-knowledge, however, possess the capability to create engaging pedagogical practices for students, which provides students with knowledge to enhance their ability to lead fulfilling lives (hooks 22). For example, educator Anna Julia Cooper received encouragement to be an independent thinker as she defended the African American community and advocated against sexism and limited educational opportunities in the late nineteenth century (Boukari 12). In the early twentieth century, educator and activist Mary McLeod Bethune viewed education as the catalyst for racial uplift, which reflected in the successful educational institutions she founded (Boukari14). As demonstrated above, reincorporating education as the practice of freedom through the use of self-knowledge aims to disrupt domination and reproduction in education and allows African American students to develop a connection to education. According to Beverly Tatum, “The creation of opportunities for self-generated knowledge on the part of students is a powerful tool for reducing the initial stage of denial that many students experience. While it may seem easy for some students to challenge the validity of what they read or what the instructor says, it is harder to deny what they have seen with their own eyes” (Tatum 18). In other words, self-knowledge grants students the capacity to acknowledge the things education teaches students to deny, including their capacity for learning. Lisa Delpit even argues when individuals know their real history, they can teach their own children if they do not feel brilliant, it is only a consequence of not knowing the brilliance of their history (Delpit and Dowdy 46). While the above arguments support the claim self-knowledge can serve as a disruptive tool in the

reproduction of education, the arguments primarily focus on the incorporation of self-knowledge into the classroom with little emphasis on gaining self-knowledge outside of the classroom.

Based on the ideology of Martin Luther King, Jr., gaining competence in one's own knowledge possesses the power to inspire others to pursue self-knowledge and ultimately economic justice. As King pursued economic justice, the fair distribution of wealth in America, King implemented a formula for social action to exhaust middle-class values by placing careers and wealth in secondary societal roles (Hopkins 73). Although King himself exhibited middle-class values having emerged from a family lineage of preachers and attained multiple degrees of higher education, the informal education King encountered during the Civil Rights Movement heavily influenced his approach to securing economic justice in America. In addition, "King displayed a deep appreciation for the initiatives and diversity among America's youth and students. He knew that history proved and substantiated how all revolutions succeeded when the young had entered the fray" (Hopkins 74). King even referred to young African Americans involved in social action as "constructive school dropouts" who disrupted social order to discover more direct methods of education and learning (Hopkins 73). In the midst of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s fear of abandoning conservative bourgeois supporters and the black church in his quest for economic justice, King reflected on a bible verse from the book of Romans to remind him of the need for "dissent, challenge, and change" in America: "Be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewal of your minds" (Romans 12:2). According to King, African Americans must transform their own condition of powerlessness into creative and positive power (King 37). For King, this creative and positive power embodied self-knowledge.

Although possessing contrasting views on securing social equality in America, both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. valued self-knowledge as a means to diminish social

inequality in America. Even though Malcolm X did not obtain a formal education past the eighth grade, Malcolm X utilized his life experiences as a form of education to provide a basis for personal and social growth (Smallwood 250). Furthermore, Malcolm X used self-directed study– independent learning in the absence of an educator or mediator– and analysis to discuss the conditions of African American communities in a novel manner (Smallwood 253). Similar to King, Malcolm X believed African American students benefited from knowing the significance of their own history because such knowledge fostered a deeper understanding of social stratification in America and its effects on African American communities (Smallwood 256). For Malcolm X, gaining control of one’s own education regains the control of one’s own mind. Malcolm X believed Blacks should not have to speak nor believe in the same manner as an educator to achieve success in education because the speech and beliefs of an educator “. . . represented identification with whites, wholesale assimilation into white culture, but was also a way for some middle class blacks to repudiate and distance themselves from other (ghetto) blacks” (Young 698). In other words, Malcolm X believed self-knowledge disrupted “white” education because self-knowledge allowed African Americans to adopt their own identities free from the influence of a socially and racially biased society. Both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X demonstrate the effectiveness of disruption in education through the use of self-knowledge because both men emerged as powerful social leaders in an era of turmoil and strife. However, their perspectives on education and disruption reflect an American society fifty years prior to present-day American society, which may conflict with the changes implemented in formal education since their deaths.

1.3 Implications

Because no research on black education theory offers a Bourdieuan theory of education, previous research on black education theory acknowledges the assimilationist nature of the American education system but commonly presents anti-intellectualism, not disidentification, as a common response to education. Nevertheless, African American students, even low-achieving African American students, possess a capacity for learning, and disrupting the reproduction in education through the use of self-knowledge will function as a constructive means to fulfill this capacity. In fulfilling their capacity for learning, African American students will learn to fulfill their capacity for self— a capacity which independent thinking fosters and American education obstructs.

Chapter 2. The Role of Education in Identity Formation

2.1 Identity Formation in Adolescence

Although identity formation occurs throughout individuals' lifespans, the developmental period of adolescence stands as the most prominent period of identity formation for individuals. During adolescence, the presence of new cognitive abilities, behaviors, and attitudes grants individuals the capability to mold multiple images of the self into a positive identity and to combine various roles in relation to one's environment (Sandhu, Singh, Tung, and Kundra 89). In addition, the complex process of identity development allows adolescents to acquire psychological well-being, comfort in the body, and security in the future (Sandhu et al. 98). Nevertheless, adolescence also functions as a period of identity crisis where the failure to develop a healthy identity results in identity confusion (Sandhu et al. 89). With the presence of multiple images of the self and various environments where these images arise, conflict often emerges during the process of identity formation. Once individuals learn to incorporate multiple images and various roles into one identity, however, individuals resolve the conflict of identity confusion (Sandhu et al. 89). Overall, healthy identities emerge in the presence of consistency, coherence, and harmony among the values, beliefs, commitments, and potential of adolescents (Sandhu et al. 90). Nevertheless, the lack of consistency, coherence, and harmony in one's environment hinders the emergence of healthy identities.

2.2 How Education Shapes Identity

Because adolescence covers a substantial period of primary and secondary education, students experience several stages and sub-stages of identity formation in the context of schools and classrooms. Accordingly, students typically receive both favorable and unfavorable

messages from their educational environments that reinforce various aspects of their identity. Both teachers and students learn to associate academic difficulties with personal worth, which falsely identifies some students as failures (Gay 8). However, the incorporation of race into the identities of students minimizes academic difficulties and increases personal worth. If students, minority students in particular, possess a complex understanding of their racial identities, these students better adjust to their environments and experience lower levels of negative behaviors (Bruce and Waelde 395). For instance, previous studies demonstrate African American students with an Eurocentric orientation— a self-concept primarily consisting of White constructions of identity— exhibit low self-esteem in comparison to African American students with an Afrocentric orientation— a self-concept primarily consisting of African American constructions of identity— who exhibit higher levels of self-esteem (Nasir et al. 95). In addition, incorporating academic achievement into racial identities results in higher levels of academic efficacy among African American students (Nasir et al. 102). Nevertheless, studies also show African American female students place more significance on academic achievement than their male counterparts who place more significance on African American tradition (Nasir et al. 103). While male and female students express culture differently, engendered socialization influences the cultural expressions of both groups of students more than their varying levels of cultural affiliation as a result of their gender (Gay 12).

Overall, many African American students create multiple constructions of how they view themselves as African American and acquire an understanding of the significance of the differences between these various constructions of identity based on their interactions with other students (Nasir, McLaughlin, and Jones 75). For this reason, institutions of learning should foster this understanding of various constructions of African American identity rather than

altering constructions of African American identity. Understanding the racial identity development theory for African Americans serves as an important means not only to encouraging academic achievement among African American students but also to dissecting the role of education in the identity formation of African American students.

2.3 Racial Identity Development Theory

Because American culture emphasizes racial-group membership, the development of racial identity occurs differently for different racial groups (Tatum 9). For some African American students, the process of identity exploration involves the focusing of self-conceptions on minimal racial and/or cultural content (Scott 522). In this instance, African American students arguably acquire identities based on the personal attributes they exhibit in the presence of other individuals regardless of shared racial and/or cultural backgrounds. While African American students who do not prioritize race in their self-conceptions still acquire psychological well-being and positive identities, African American students who prioritize race in their self-conceptions require racial and cultural driven perspectives and insights on identity to achieve psychological well-being and positive identities (Scott 522). Regardless of the level of racial and/or cultural influences on the formation of African American identity, however, one influence remains constant— the influence of White constructions of identity as a standard of comparison for African American constructions of identity.

Based on Beverly Tatum's racial identity development theory, each race experiences identity development in various stages. For African Americans, racial identity occurs in five stages— preencounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment (Tatum 9). The first stage, preencounter, involves the internalization of negative African American stereotypes and assimilation to White culture, which may allow individuals to

believe race will not function as a relevant factor in personal achievement (Tatum 10). In education, African American students in the preencounter stage view the behaviors and attitudes of White students as commonplace to the educational environment and the behaviors and attitudes of African American students as disruptive to the educational environment. When an individual experiences an event that causes the individual to acknowledge the effects of racism in his or her own life, the individual enters the second stage racial identity development— encounter (Tatum 10). For example, an African American student may acknowledge racial disparities in the classroom after witnessing a White student receive praise over the African American student for an assignment even when the African American student performed higher than the White student on the same assignment. During this stage, African Americans learn to interpret White as the preferred standard of race in American society. As an individual enters the immersion/emersion stage of racial identity development, the individual possesses a desire to engage with symbols of African American identity and to disengage with symbols of White identity (Tatum 11). In the immersion/emersion stage, African American students incorporate various aspects of African American culture like language and clothing into their educational experiences and denounce remnants of White culture that surface in their educational experiences. Internalization, the fourth stage, marks a period in which an individual develops a sense of security in his or her racial identity but also develops respect for the racial identity of others (Tatum 12). While exhibiting representations of their racial group in the classroom, African American students in the internalization stage learn to exhibit these representations without projecting negative attitudes toward other students from different racial groups. Although few differences separate internalization from internalization-commitment, individuals in the internalization-commitment stage develop a commitment to the concerns of their racial

group, which allows individuals “to proactively perceive and transcend race” (Tatum 12). In this stage, African Americans encourage and inspire other African Americans to embrace and nurture their own identity development to ensure psychological well-being and to acquire a healthy identity.

The expanded nigrescence theory, the racial identity development theory of theorist William E. Cross, Jr. proposes personal identity does not significantly influence African American identity because “Blackness” refers to a social identity (Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, and Fhagen-Smith 72). In addition, reference group orientation reflects the importance of race to an individual and to the valence an individual gives to race (Vandiver et al. 72). Unlike Beverly Tatum’s racial identity development theory, Cross’s revised nigrescence theory consists of four stages of identity development. The names of the stages in the expanded nigrescence theory represent the themes of each stage; however, the stages of both theories share similar names (Vandiver et al. 72). The Pre-Encounter stage represents three identities: Assimilation, Miseducation, and Self-Hatred (Vandiver et al. 72). Individuals who exhibit the Assimilation identity do not view race as an important aspect of their identities (Vandiver et al. 72). However, individuals in the Miseducation identity possess negative, stereotypical attitudes about the Black community; and individuals in the Self-Hated identity think of themselves negatively because of their race (Vandiver 72-3). In the next stage, the Encounter stage, individuals encounter an experience (or experiences) that influences individuals to question their reference group orientation (Vandiver et al. 72). Upon experiencing immense cognitive and emotional discomfort in the Encounter stage, individuals enter the Immersion-Emersion stage (Vandiver et al. 72). The Immersion-Emersion stage consists of the identities Intense Black Involvement and Anti-White in which individuals either experience a deep immersion into Black culture or reject

all aspects of White culture (Vandiver et al. 72). The three identities— Black Nationalist, Biculturalist, and Multiculturalist— in the Internalization stage share goals of Black acceptance and activism (Vandiver et al. 72). Individuals with the Black Nationalist identity aim to empower the Black community while individuals with either the Biculturalist or Multiculturalist identity aim to build coalitions outside of the Black community (Vandiver et al. 72). With each stage representing overarching themes and multiple identities, the expanded nigrescence theory presents identity development as a non-fluid process. In other words, individuals do not necessarily progress from one stage to the next. Individuals instead enter and return to particular stages as needed. The presence of assimilation in education, however, interferes with the identity formation of some African American students and prevents them from sufficiently progressing through the stages of their racial identity development.

Chapter 3. Teaching Assimilation

3.1 Education as a Social Norm

Before children even enter the education system, their parents often instill in them the notion success in education leads to success in adulthood. This notion stems from the Protestant work ethic, a sociological concept positing hard work in conjunction with faith secures economic mobility, which stands as an important staple of American society. As children enter the classroom, children continue to receive messages that reinforce success as a common goal in American society. Prior to the removal of religion from the public classroom, teachers sometimes led students in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and in singing “My Country Tis of Thee” at the start of the school day. The prevalence of this practice in the classroom arguably reinforced among students the belief of America as a land of promise and a country of opportunity. Nevertheless, this practice also disregarded the importance of economic capital and social capital in the achievement of such promise and opportunity (Morris and Monroe 68). As a result, educators taught and still teach students not only to accept the presence of social stratification in America but also to adhere to the social norms prevalent in social stratification.

Pierre Bourdieu states:

... by suggesting with the amorphous notion of ‘social control’ that the educational system performs an indivisible, undifferentiated function for ‘society as a whole’, all-purpose functionalism tends to conceal the fact that a system which helps to reproduce the structure of class relations indeed serves ‘Society’, in the sense of the social order, and through it the educational interests of the classes which benefit from that order (192).

Although education appears to benefit all students, education instead benefits the students most likely to sustain norms of social control.

Even in the absence of civic rituals, educators often verbalize and demonstrate means of sustaining social order as they share with students information outside of the planned curriculum. This unwritten curriculum, or “hidden curriculum”, although informal, presents students with the social norms necessary to function as productive members of the school and ultimately of American society (qtd. in Wren 594). In this essence, education functions as an act of depositing in which the educator deposits information for students to passively “receive, memorize, and repeat” (Freire 53). According to Paulo Freire:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. . . It is not surprising that the banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them (53-4).

In addition, mastery of this system of banking in education parallels the mastery of the social hierarchy in education. Once students acquire the knowledge necessary to advance within the social structure in education, they acquire the knowledge necessary to advance within the social structure of the dominant structure. Schools assess this knowledge in the form of an examination. Pierre Bourdieu states:

. . . the examination is not only the clearest expression of academic values and of the educational system’s implicit choices: in imposing as worthy of university sanction a social definition of knowledge and the way to show it, it provides one of the most efficacious tools for the enterprise of inculcating the dominant culture and the value of that culture (142).

Because the examination allows students to eject and to exercise deposited information, the examination offers more than an opportunity of advancement into a higher level of education—the examination assesses students’ ability to conform to the social standards of society.

3.2 Education as a Means of Social Advantage

Although an achievement gap exists between White and African American students, this achievement gap exists as an extension of society’s construction of class in the education system. Lisa Delpit, author of *“Multiplication Is for White People”: Raising Expectations for Other People’s Children*, states there is no “achievement gap” between African American children and European American children at birth (5). In addition, “. . . the achievement gap should not be considered the gap between black children’s performance and white children’s performance . . . but rather between black children’s performance and these same children’s exponentially greater potential” (Delpit 5). Nevertheless, differences in social backgrounds results in some students, those who are a part of the mainstream, performing better in school than other students, those who are not a part of the mainstream and reliant upon schools to teach them success, even in the presence of poor teachers (Delpit 72). Gloria Ladson-Billings states:

The curriculum remains a contested property across and within schools. Even in those schools that offer enriched curriculum/intellectual property, students of color have trouble gaining access to it. They are discouraged by teachers and counselors who suggest that such work will be ‘too hard’ or students themselves reason that because few students of color take such courses they will be isolated and uncomfortable in the classroom. . . High-status courses such as Advanced Placement, honors, and other college preparatory courses are treated as scarce commodities and more influential parents (typically White, upper middle class) lobby to ensure that their children always have access to these courses. African American students find themselves taking courses to graduate while their White counterparts take the courses that prepare them to be successful at gaining admittance to the colleges and universities of their choice (117).

In this instance, students who excel in the classroom perform well partly as a result of academic ability but primarily as a result of social advantage. This social advantage aims to conserve class relations in society while utilizing education as a means of selection. In the words of Bourdieu:

. . . every educational system is characterized by a functional duplicity which is actualized in full in the case of traditional systems, where the tendency towards conservation of the system and of the culture it conserves, encounters an external demand for social conservation. It is precisely its relative autonomy that enables the traditional educational system to make a specific contribution towards reproducing the structure of class relations, since it need only obey its own rules in order to obey, additionally, the external imperatives defining its function of legitimating the established order, that is, to fulfill simultaneously its social function of reproducing the class relations, by ensuring the hereditary transmission of cultural capital, and its ideological function of concealing that social function by accrediting the illusion of its absolute autonomy (199).

Because many African American students lack the cultural capital to navigate the social culture of education, only a select few fit into the established order of education. However, the autonomy of the culture of education defines these select few and their social experiences.

3.3 Education and Cultural Identity

According to Freire Paulo, the question of cultural identity “. . . is connected directly to the challenge of assuming who we are, which is what a purely technical, objective, and grammatical vision of education cannot do or be” (Freire 46). In other words, education would not possess the capability to inform cultural identities in the absence of subjective definitions of culture. These subjective definitions of culture— derived from dominant cultures— falsely inform the norms of sub-cultures, which “mis-educates” individuals in sub-cultures. Based on the implications of Carter G. Woodson’s *Mis-education of the Negro*, Geneva Smitherman argues mis-educated individuals— regardless of race— mis-educate other individuals, which allows mis-education to flourish for decades (Smitherman 306). For Bourdieu, the structure of education

itself exists as a product of mis-education and yet ignores its influence in the mis-education of the mis-educated. He states:

If it is true that the relation an individual maintains with the School and with the culture it transmits is more or less ‘effortless’, ‘brilliant’, ‘natural’, ‘laboured’, ‘tense’ or ‘dramatic’, according to the probability of his survival in the system, and if it is also the case that in their verdicts the School and ‘society’ take as much account of the relation to culture as of culture, then it is clear how much remains unintelligible until one goes to the principle underlying the production of the most durable academic and social differences . . . the generative, unifying principle of conducts and opinions which is also their explanatory principle, since at every moment of an educational or intellectual biography it tends to reproduce the system of objective conditions of which it is the product (161).

Although the culture of education reproduces the culture of American society, educators appear to ignore this underlying cause of social and academic differences in education. Because mis-educated educators seek to reproduce like others, the success of African American students heavily relies on the expectations of the educator (Ladson-Billings 24). As a result, low-achieving African American students dwell in the “lower rungs” of society (Ladson-Billings 24). Bourdieu further states:

Although the adherence individuals give to school hierarchies and to the scholastic cult of hierarchy is always related to the rank the School gives them in its hierarchies, it depends primarily, on the one hand, on the value system they owe to their social class of origin (the value accorded to the School within this system being, itself, a function of the degree to which that class’s interests are linked to the School) and, on the other hand, on the degree to which their market value and social position depend on educational guarantees. This is why the school system is most successful in imposing recognition of the value of itself and its classifications when its action is applied to social classes or class fractions who are unable to counterpose to it any rival principal of hierarchy (147).

Because assimilationists—educators who either consciously or subconsciously implement aspects of dominant culture into their instruction—do not perceive low-achieving African American students as capable of advancing within the social hierarchy of education, assimilationists

reinforce this misconception through the biases of assimilationist teaching. For example, bell hooks states:

Many educators are concerned with the fact that, across class, black children often behave as though book-learning and being smart in school makes them ‘less black identified.’ Rarely do these educators acknowledge that equating education with whiteness is a way of thinking that most black folks acquired in predominantly white school systems. Black students who mock their studious black peers have themselves been socialized via schools and mass media to believe that education has no positive meaning in their lives and that too much education will lead them away from ‘blackness’ . . . White supremacist thinking, and the internalized self-hatred it promotes, may lead unenlightened teachers, even individual black teachers, to teach as though black students are academically less capable of excellence (70).

With White-supremacist thinking informing the teaching styles of educators, educators themselves teach students to accept stratification in society not only as commonplace but also as inevitable. This White-supremacist thinking appears accepted in American society, even in education, because racism remains entangled in the structure of social order in the United States (Ladson-Billings 113). According to Pierre Bourdieu:

In reducing the role of self-elimination at the end of primary schooling . . . the educational system fulfills its conservative function yet more successfully . . . it must disguise chances of entry as chances of success. Those who invoke ‘the interest of society’ to deplore the economic cost of ‘educational wastage’ contradict themselves in failing to take into account the profit accruing from it, namely the advantage the social order derives from spacing out and so concealing the elimination of the working classes (159).

This ideology of elimination, or exclusion, heavily embedded in the construction of American values, influences and informs the assimilationist nature of education. A subtle form of racism, White supremacy continues to define social stratification in America because White supremacy possesses the ability to emerge in a non-threatening context. bell hooks states, “In our culture almost everyone, irrespective of skin color, associates white supremacy with extreme conservative fanaticism. . . It is the less extreme white supremacists’ beliefs and assumptions,

easier to cover up and mask, that maintain and perpetuate everyday racism as a form of group oppression” (29-30). hooks further states:

Black supporters of the civil rights struggle for desegregation of schools did not take into account the way our self-esteem would be affected when we were taught by racist teachers. In my family we were encouraged to ignore the racism (not let it upset us) and to focus on our studies. Yet it was obvious to every black student in these predominantly white schools that our teachers did not really believe we were as capable of learning as white children did. Smart black students were deemed exceptional. We were often viewed as ‘freaks of nature’ by racist teachers and by those rare, caring white teachers who were nonetheless influenced by the white-supremacist idea that black folks were never as smart as white folks (69).

In fear of the racist biases, and racist professionals, that influence the academic curriculum in public schools, some African Americans appear more inclined to support segregation in schools (hooks 68). Nevertheless, even segregated schools receive reinforcement from the educational standards of predominantly White schools. According to bell hooks, “The dominance of conservative forces in black schools often means that standards of excellence are overdetermined by mainstream thinking about obedience to authority and keeping to the rules. In such settings, educational excellence cannot emerge without struggle” (hooks 79). With mainstream influences constructing a culture of struggle for low-achieving African American students, the effects of assimilation must be diminished in order to foster academic achievement among these students. bell hooks further states:

The segregated schools of my past were the locations where many black folks first were affirmed in our longing to be educated. That affirmation was crucial to our academic development. Yet segregated schools today, particularly in our public school system, function merely as reservations where students are housed, disciplined, and punished, or taught that they cannot achieve academically. In fact students in segregated public schools often feel that they have been ‘set apart’ because no one believes in their capacity to learn. Public schools as well as institutions of higher education must be transformed so that learning is an experience that builds, enhances, and affirms self-esteem. Education can affirm that self-esteem in black students/students of color when educators are anti-racist in word and deed (79).

In the absence of this transformation, however, African American students search for cultural identity outside of education. Eventually, the pressures of assimilation typically lead students to establish a cultural identity of their own— an identity free of mainstream influence yet critical of this influence.

Chapter 4. Learning Disidentification

4.1 Disidentification

For low achieving students, assimilation in education influences the presence of cognitive dissonance— conflicting cognitions and attitudes— among students. As Vershawn Young recounts his experiences as an educated African American male navigating (or struggling to navigate) his way through the racially and socially stratified profession of education in “Your Average Nigga”, Young recalls his interaction with a young African American student, Cam. Although Cam lives in the “ghetto”, Cam believes the pursuit of higher education provides an outlet from the harsh realities of “street life” yet complicates the authenticity of “black identity” (Young 709). Young concludes, “. . . the problem for black students in our schools is the problem of black identity . . . the problem of escaping poverty . . . is only made worse— in fact, insoluble— when we redescribe the tools for escaping poverty as tools for escaping identity or as ways to protect it” (Young 709). According to Geneva Gay,

‘Double Dealing,’ or being at once highly ethnically affiliated and academically achieving, can take a terrible toll on students when the two agendas are not complementary, as is frequently the case in conventional schools. Negotiating both ways of being can be stress-provoking and emotionally exhausting; it can even cause some students to drop out of the academic loop entirely. Others may sacrifice their friendship networks and ethnic connections for school success. Neither of these choices is desirable for the students involved, nor does either offer the best conditions for maximum achievement of any kind. Students should be able to achieve academically, ethnically, culturally, and socially simultaneously without any of these abilities interfering with the others (21).

To combat the cognitive dissonance that arises as students attempt to differentiate between their cultural and educational identities, students learn to “disidentify” with education. As students dissociate themselves from the educational practices that threaten their racial identities, students also attempt to dissociate themselves from the cultural definitions of society.

In *“Multiplication Is for White People”*: *Raising Expectations for Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit suggests the chronic experience of stereotype threat— the experience of anxiety in a situation where an individual possesses the potential to confirm negative stereotypes about his or her social group— influences African American students to disidentify with situations that trigger this threat (Delpit 17; 19). Perceptions about the intellectual inability of an individual’s ethnic group influence “self-threat” in addition to stereotype threat and obstructs academic achievement “by reducing the range of intellectual cues students are able to use, diverting attention onto task-irrelevant worries, creating self-consciousness and undue caution, and causing them to disengage from academic efforts” (Gay 19). As a result, African American students may utilize disidentification as a psychological strategy to cope with self-esteem in the midst of failure (Delpit 19). Because African American students believe themselves to be unaccepted by and unacceptable to the schools they attend, disidentification among African American students could arguably indicate their own unacceptance of the education system (Delpit 165). However, disidentification grants African American students the ability to exclude from their sub-culture the dominant culture that excludes them from the education system. In all, as African American students refuse assimilation they also reject education (Young 704).

4.2 Influences of Disidentification

As educators and policy-makers propose conventional interventions for underperforming students, they primarily focus on the deficits of culturally diverse students and on maintaining cultural neutrality (Gay 13). However, these culturally neutral interventions arguably force culturally diverse students to sacrifice aspects of their own ethnic and cultural identity in exchange for academic achievement because these interventions address academic performance in the absence of cultural, racial, and personal influences (Gay 13). Geneva Gay states in

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice, “Just as the evocation of their European American, middle-class heritage contributes to the achievement of White students, using the cultures and experiences of Native Americans, Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, Latino Americans, and African Americans facilitates their school success (Gay 15). Because African American and other minority students require representations of their cultures in their educational experiences to foster academic achievement, the lack of these cultural representations in education arguably constitutes a significant proportion of underperformance among African American students. Gay states:

. . . scores on standardized tests and grades students receive on classroom learning tasks do not explain why they [culturally diverse students] are not performing at acceptable levels. These are symptoms of, not the causes of or remedies for, the problems . . . Simply blaming students, their socioeconomic background, a lack of interest in and of motivation for learning and poor parental participation in the educational process is not very helpful (Gay 17).

While internal dispositions influence the attitudes and performance of some students, situational disparities within the classroom affect educational attitudes and performance more significantly than internal dispositions. To understand the underperformance of minority students, the educational context in which they underperform must be evaluated. For example:

White students are punished for smoking, vandalism, leaving classroom (or school) without permission, and using obscene language. Black students are punished for disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering. What is interesting about these offenses are the differences in degrees of specificity associated with offenses. There is no dispute whether a student is smoking, committing vandalism, leaving without permission, or using obscene language. However, one could ask, what constitutes disrespect or excessive noise, a threat (other than a student directly stating that he intends to harm you), or loitering (Ladson-Billings 120).

When African American students receive criticism in educational contexts, they receive criticism not for their own dispositions but for their unwillingness to assimilate. Paulo Freire states, “The oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must therefore adjust these

‘incompetent and lazy’ folk to its own patterns by changing their mentality. These marginals need to be ‘integrated,’ ‘incorporated’ into the healthy society that they have ‘forsaken’ (55). In addition, as African American students receive unfavorable messages from their educational environments for their unwillingness to assimilate, these environments threaten the students’ self-esteem. Delpit states:

When students doubt their own competence, they typically respond with two behaviors: they either hide . . . and try to become invisible, or they act out to prevent a scenario unfolding in which they will not be able to perform and will once again be proved ‘less than’. Teachers frequently misinterpret these behaviors, usually inferring that the student is unmotivated, uninterested, or behavior disordered (Delpit 14).

Nevertheless, students themselves come to interpret their own behavior as an attempt not to conceal incompetence but to expose inequality. According to Ladson-Billings, “If from your earliest memories you perceive that the rules and the system are stacked against you, you come to accept that inequity as normal. You also fail to develop any real allegiance to the institutions or the state. You see racism as normal, not aberrant. You become a racial realist” (120). In other words, as students learn of the misrepresentations presented against them, they acquire ways to establish representations of their own.

4.3 Disidentification and Language

Gender, education, social class, and degrees of affiliation influence expressive behaviors such as thinking, talking, and writing, which indicate signature characteristics for particular cultures of ethnic groups (Gay 11). In addition, communication, culture, teaching, and learning coexist in a semiotic relationship where one entity cannot exist in the absence of another entity (Gay 76). Culture also functions as a catalyst for discovering meaning and for sharing understanding with others, which influences distinctive communication styles among different

ethnic groups (Gay 76). Therefore, the language of a particular culture solidifies the significance of culture to its respective people. According to Paulo Freire, “If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity” (69). However, the presence of standard speaking patterns in mainstream society threatens the significance of cultural expression. For example, culturally diverse students who exhibit traditional communication styles in addition to other expressions of cultural heritage experience more academic obstacles than culturally diverse students who exhibit behaviors that embody “mainstream” or standard cultural norms (Gay 77). Gay states:

If students are not very proficient in school communication, and teachers do not understand or accept their cultural communication styles, then their academic performance may be misdiagnosed or trapped in communicative mismatches. Students may know much more than they are able to communicate, or they may be communicating much more than their teachers are able to discern (77).

Because education reduces language to the primary indicator of intelligence for culturally diverse students, language also exists as a means of reproduction in education. With the language of mainstream society— Standard English— reserved for those who comprise the higher ranks of the educational hierarchy, low-achieving students perceive Standard English as a language of inequality and dominance. In the words of bell hooks:

An unbroken connection exists between the broken English of the displaced, enslaved African and the diverse black vernacular speech black folks use today. In both cases, the rupture of standard English enabled and enables rebellion and resistance. By transforming the oppressor’s language, making a culture of resistance, black people created an intimate speech that could say far more than was permissible within the boundaries of standard English. The power of this speech is not simply that it enables resistance to white supremacy, but that it also forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies— different ways of thinking and knowing that were crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic worldview (171).

Although the English language reinforces dominance and oppression, variations of the English language embody aspects of culture for the dominated and the oppressed. In *The Skin That We Speak*, Lisa Delpit states language shapes the identity of individuals before any other aspect of identity (Delpit and Dowdy xvii). Similar to Ogbu and Simon's argument involuntary minority parents influence the educational attitudes of their children, Delpit further states young children develop attitudes toward African American language and form assumptions about the speakers of African American language that mirror the views of adults (Delpit and Dowdy xvi). Delpit even alludes to reproduction in education as she states African American language conflicts with the power structure of the American education system (Delpit and Dowdy xviii). Accordingly, linguist Michael Stubbs concludes when an individual interprets another individual's use of English as wrong, the interpreter proposes not a linguistic judgment but a sociolinguistic judgment of language (Delpit and Dowdy 77). For instance, Vershawn Young profiled his student Cam as a "ghetto black man" based on the appearance and speech of the student upon meeting Cam for the first time (Young 699). In addition, Young believed the student jeopardized his "blackness" because Young was both incapable of speaking and personifying Black English Vernacular (BEV) and incapable of speaking and embodying Standard English (Young 699). Unlike his student who chose to speak BEV over Standard English as an extension of his Black identity, Young struggled to choose either language as his own language and therefore struggled to acquire a fixed identity. According to Bourdieu:

In reality, not only is the relation to language and culture continuously taken into account throughout secondary education . . . a function of the type of practical mastery of language and the type of language acquired in the home— but the organization and functioning of the school system continuously and through multiple codes retranslate inequalities in social level into inequalities in academic level (157-8).

An extension of assimilation, language functions as an indication of acceptance into educational and ultimately societal hierarchies. As low-achieving students experience academic inequalities resulting from differences in speech and dialect, they begin to associate the term “acting White” with Standard English speaking, high-achieving African American students who obtain access to schooling and, ultimately, well-paying jobs—historically perceived prerogatives of White Americans (Fordham 243). In addition, African American females specifically receive reinforcement to embody “universalized” images of White women which “silences” images of African American culture and allows African American females to engage in “gender passing” (Fordham 8). According to Lisa Delpit:

In part, the problems we see exhibited in school by African-American children and children of other oppressed minorities can be traced to this lack of a curriculum in which they can find represented the intellectual achievements of people who look like themselves. Were that not the case, these children would not talk about doing well in school as ‘acting white.’ Our children of color need to see the brilliance of their legacy, too (177).

Although perceived as a “diss”—a form of disrespect—to high-achieving African American students, the term acting White instead “disses” the American education system. As high-achieving African American students, female students specifically, engage in socialization, they become silenced and invisible and ultimately isolated and alienated from their underachieving counterparts as a result of socialization in education (Fordham 24). Geneva Smitherman defines this type of diss directed at a person or a thing as a criticism of that person or thing as “signifyin” (Smitherman 223-24). According to Charles H. Long:

Signifying is worse than lying because it obscures and obfuscates a discourse without taking responsibility for so doing. This verbal misdirection parallels the real argument but gains its power of meaning from the structure of the discourse itself without the signification being subjected to the rules of the discourse . . . Signifying is a very clever language game, and one has to be adept in the verbal arts either to signify or to keep from being signified upon (1).

With signifying constructed as a clever language game, African American students must possess intelligence to prevent being signified upon. As low-achieving African American students utilize this intelligence to signify upon the language of high-achieving African American students who mimic attributes of White culture, low-achieving students demonstrate their awareness of the ability of education to reproduce whiteness, which aims to dominate the cultural attributes of sub-cultures. Knowledgeable of the oppressive nature of Standard English, low-achieving students also critique the presence of Standard English in education as a means for whiteness to further dominate the social structure in education. Based on this signification, low-achieving students identify academic achievement as White and resist academic achievement in order to resist whiteness. Signifying practices, a “well-established part of the black vernacular literary tradition”, construct meaning in language in which the practice of representation produces (Hall 28; 244). Furthermore, objects in addition to language can function as signifiers—producers of meaning—in the semiotic approach (Hall 37). Outside of language, African American students who wish to distance themselves from mainstream society manipulate aspects of the body to function as signifiers of reproduction. With mainstream clothing styles emitting a sense of “elegance,” “formality,” “casual-ness,” and “romance,” exploiting a “difference” in fashion codes (e.g. wearing larger clothing that does not “fit” the natural frame of the body) also signifies the presence of domination in society (Hall 38).

In all, signifying grants low-achieving African American students power over the education system because these students now control meanings in education. Consequently, the forms of resistance against power must be explored to understand the significance of power relationships (Foucault 780). According to Stuart Hall, “Power. . . has to be understood here, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or

symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way— within a certain ‘regime of representation’” (Hall 259). This regime of representation attacks techniques and forms of power instead of groups, institutions, and classes of power (Foucault 781). In attacking techniques and forms of power, catalysts for power no longer possess the momentum to emit power over others. In addition, “This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attached him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (Foucault 781). As subjects, individuals learn to exhibit power over their own identities in the absence of the control of others. Through signifying, African American students acquire the power to create representations of the system of oppression that misrepresents them and to acquire the independent identities this system denies them.

Chapter 5. Disrupting the Reproduction in Education

5.1 Reproduction of the Norm and the Exception

Even as African American students attempt to create their own representations of the educational practices that obstruct their personal and academic growth, society reminds these students of their assumed place in society. bell hooks states:

Looking at the impact of mass media on the self-esteem of black children/children of color is important because they encounter a pedagogy of race and racism long before they enter any classroom settings. Usually schools, unenlightened teachers, and textbooks full of white-supremacist thinking merely reinforce the notion that black children are inferior, unworthy (95).

Upon encountering such negative images, no solution appears to exist for African American students in response to these images. Without challenging negative images, African American students continue to contribute to the illusion of meritocracy in education, which reinforces the notion of a social hierarchy in education (Sullivan 146). According to Paulo Freire, “. . . a black person in general could hardly be expected to be decent or competent. Whenever a black person is found to be decent and competent our innate racism draws on the adversative conjunction *but* to acknowledge what is clearly an exception to the rule” (50). Furthermore, the myth of the exception works against African American students and reduces these students to mere products of the system that created the exception (Freire 5). Unable to penetrate the social hierarchy in education, African American students risk the possibility of elimination from the education system. Although African American students appear to drop out of the education system in fear of failure within the system, the process of selection within education forces lower-class students to separate themselves from the education system (Bourdieu 153). In her discussion of the fate of students education deems as the exception, bell hooks states:

More often than not, these students [African American students], especially gifted students of color from diverse class backgrounds, give up hope. They do poorly in their studies. They take on the mantle of victimhood. They fail. They drop out. Most of them have had no guides to teach them how to find their way in educational systems that, though structured to maintain domination, are not closed systems and therefore have within them subcultures of resistance where education as the practice of freedom still happens (48).

To provide students with an outlet for education in the midst of reproduction, students must utilize education as a form of resistance. As students utilize resistance, students demonstrate their allegiance to particular aspects of their identity while simultaneously dismissing dominant definitions of success (Butin 115). In resisting the norm and the exception in education, students not only resist reproduction in education but also disrupt reproduction in education.

5.2 Critical Education

As education continues to reproduce the norms of society, the outcome of reproduction remains the same. Freire states: “By giving the students formulas to receive and store, we have not offered him the means for authentic thought; assimilation results from search, from the effort to re-create and re-invent” (33-4). In the absence of authentic thought, social order remains intact as assimilationist practices control the extent of information given in the context of education. As a result, progressive education increases in importance because progressive education functions as a medium for critical consciousness and ceasing domination in the absence of continuous social justice movements in the United States (hooks 45). Instead of relying on others to inform their definitions of education and society, students who engage in critical education learn to establish their own definitions without dominating the definitions they create. According to Freire:

One of the most important tasks of critical educational practice is to make possible the conditions in which the learners, in their interaction with one another and with their teachers, engage in the experience of assuming themselves as social,

historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons; dreamers of possible utopias, capable of being angry because of a capacity to love. Capable of assuming themselves as 'subject' because of the capacity to recognize themselves as 'object'. All this, while bearing in mind that the assumption of oneself does not signify the exclusion of others (45-6).

Unlike traditional education, critical education functions as a system of inclusion in the absence of a social hierarchy. With no hierarchy to facilitate a process of selection or exclusion, critical education facilitates a sense of community where individuals collectively aim to resist White-supremacist influences within education. In the words of bell hooks:

To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination. A body of critical theory is now available that explains all the workings of white-supremacist thought and racism. But explanations alone do not bring us to the practice of beloved community. When we take the theory, the explanations, and apply them concretely to our daily lives, to our experiences, we further and deepen the practice of anti-racist transformation (36).

To successfully achieve a sense of community within education, learning must be understood to occur both inside and outside of the classroom. In combining formal and informal education as a collective representation of life experiences, students acquire the knowledge to challenge the hierarchy from which they have been excluded. bell hooks states:

Teachers who have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalized classroom. Rather than embodying the conventional false assumption that the university setting is not the 'real world' and teaching accordingly, the democratic educator breaks through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life. Embracing the concept of a democratic education we see teaching and learning as taking place constantly. We share the knowledge gleaned in classrooms beyond those settings thereby working to challenge the construction of certain forms of knowledge as always and only available to the elite (41).

Although critical education seeks a collective effort in obtaining educational freedom, critical education does not aim to integrate students into the same system of oppression that

excludes them. Instead, critical education functions to influence students to stand apart from such a system while maintaining a positive sense of self. According to Freire:

The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not ‘marginals,’ are not people living ‘outside’ society. They have always been ‘inside’— inside the structure which made them ‘beings for others.’ The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’ (55).

Because African American students have always existed within oppressive systems of education, forcing them to integrate into oppressive systems only suppresses the need for transformation within these systems. Furthermore, “If the education of a society does not exist in a concrete context, showing the influence of human beings and at the same time influencing them, it cannot advance the transformation of the reality of that society” (Freire 138). To advance the transformation of the reality of American society, critical education must emerge in the form of self-knowledge— a form of disruptive education that re-educates the mis-educated and disrupts the uninterrupted.

5.3 Self-Knowledge

With industrialized societies relying on mass production as a dominant source of reproduction for goods and services in America, the concept of industrialization also arises in education. Like goods reproduced on an assembly line, education in the absence of critical education reproduces similar individuals with a generic process of thinking that lacks critical influence. Freire states:

In our highly technical world, mass production as an organization of human labor is possibly one of the most potent instruments of man’s massification. By requiring a man to behave mechanically, mass production domesticates him. By separating his activity from the total project, requiring no total critical attitude toward production, it dehumanizes him. By excessively narrowing a man’s specialization, it constricts his horizons, making of him a passive, fearful, naïve being. And therein lies the chief contradiction of mass production: while amplifying man’s sphere of

participation it simultaneously distorts this amplification by reducing man's critical capacity through exaggerated specialization (31).

Without possessing a critical attitude toward mass reproduction in education, individuals do not possess the critical capacity to act against reproduction in education. To regain critical capacity, however, one must be willing to resist adaptation to reproduction. In resisting adaptation, one ultimately resists oppression and attains humanity. Freire further states:

If man is capable of changing reality, he adjusts himself instead. Adaptation is behavior characteristic of the animal sphere; exhibited by man, it is symptomatic of his dehumanization. Throughout history men have attempted to overcome the factors which make them accommodate or adjust, in a struggle— constantly threatened by oppression— to attain their full humanity (4).

As African American students adjust their thinking about education and society, they begin to create a reality for themselves. This reality emerges through self-knowledge. In other words, "As men relate to the world by responding to the challenges of the environment, they begin to dynamize, to master, and to humanize reality. They add to it something of their own making, by giving temporal meaning to geographic space, by creating culture" (Freire 4). In using self-knowledge to create culture, students no longer rely on systematic definitions of education to inform their experiences, which separates students from the oppressive mindset of education. In the absence of self-knowledge, however, African American students themselves reproduce a representation of Black as the exception and incapable of penetrating the education system. bell hooks states, "If we are not able to find and enter the open spaces in closed systems (no matter the catalyst for the openness), we doom ourselves by reinforcing the belief that these educational systems cannot be changed" (74). However, self-knowledge fosters a desire to disrupt and ultimately to change systems of oppression. According to Freire:

During the phase of the closed society, the people are *submerged* in reality. As that society breaks open, they *emerge*. No longer *mere spectators*, they uncross their arms, renounce expectancy, and demand intervention. No longer satisfied to watch,

they want to participate. This participation disturbs the privileged elite, who band together in self-defense (Freire 11).

Participation in the disruption in education allows the underprivileged to disturb definitions that the privileged established. Although used as a disruptive tool in education, self-knowledge doubles as a constructive tool in identity formation. bell hooks states, “Education as the practice of freedom affirms healthy self-esteem in students as it promotes their capacity to be aware and live consciously. It teaches them to reflect and act in ways that further self-actualization, rather than conformity to the status quo” (72). Furthermore, “When one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others, when one characterizes these actions by the government of men by other men . . . one includes an important element: freedom” (Foucault 790). In all, self-knowledge evokes a culture of freedom from which intellectual activists emerge and permanent change arises.

5.4 Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Like the educational activists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who aimed to build the African American community through leadership and uplift, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. utilized subversive practices to facilitate reinscription in education. Although Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged as pioneers during the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century, the intellectual ideologies of both leaders remain relevant even in the assumed post-racial society of the twenty-first century. These ideologies remain relevant partly because America still exhibits a need for freedom in education. For instance, education served freedom for the younger generation of the 1960s— a group of youths King believed to have used education for its intended purpose— who questioned the nature of citizenship and human interaction and engaged in social action to facilitate human integration and citizen democracy (Hopkins 73). Through subversive measures such as sit-ins, boycotts, and

marches, the youth of the 1960s reinscribed definitions of citizenship as belonging to individuals of all races. King even learned during his studies at Morehouse College he could facilitate “proficient and relevant preaching, effective praxis, and intellectual reflection” through his ministry to combat segregation in America (Dickerson 233). In addition, Malcolm X, an “intellectual aesthetic”, attracted people to his message with his unique use of self-directed study and analysis in his discussion of the conditions of “Black life” (Smallwood 253). The ability of King and Malcolm X to engage others in self-knowledge demonstrated their commitment to restoring the African American community. Both King and Malcolm X engaged in a quest for democracy through faith in critical education. According to Paulo Freire,

Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in men, on the belief that they not only can but should discuss the problems of their country, of their continent, their world, their work, the problems of democracy itself. Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion (33).

Although each a product of the formal education system, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X depicted informal education as a significant aspect of their quests for democracy. As King encountered issues of drugs, alcohol, prostitution, and brutality within the African American community, King initiated creative discussion in his advocacy for social and economic change, which challenged the youth of King’s time to employ change for themselves (Cone 226). This creative discussion relied greatly on self-knowledge sought through one’s own history. For Malcolm X, “. . . [the] use of history as a community activist was for Black people to develop a better understanding of social stratification and its impact in their communities. . . Malcolm X used history to educate and organize African Americans in their communities . . . to discuss the negative effects on them” (Smallwood 256). A lack of history, according to Malcolm X, influenced African Americans to lose control of their own minds because they possessed no

control over their own education (X 35). With no control over education, individuals rely on society to construct reality, which stifles opportunities for rebellion and resistance to oppression. Accordingly, individuals receive the purest definitions of their history in the absence of filtered definitions found in formal education. Dwight Hopkins states, “King displayed a deep appreciation for the initiatives and diversity among America’s youth and students. He knew that history proved and substantiated how all revolutions succeeded when the young had entered the fray. . . young Americans figured prominently in King’s last campaign of nonviolence and social change” (Hopkins 74). For King, the youth and students of his time embodied genuine leadership because genuine leaders create consensus; they do not seek consensus (King 63). In other words, genuine leaders must utilize subversive measures to overpower the consensus that creates opportunities for dominance and oppression in society. The notion of reinscription, however, allows a new consensus to emerge.

To permanently disrupt reproduction in education, the notion of genuine leadership must be re-introduced to the youth of today. Unlike Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the youth of their generation whose leadership spanned a limited era in American history, the youth of today should be inspired to engage in leadership designed to continue throughout generations and capable of withstanding the permanence of education. According to Freire:

Education shows ‘duration’ in the contradiction of permanence and change. This is why it is possible to say that education is permanent only in the sense of duration. In this case ‘permanent’ does not mean the permanence of values, but the permanence of the *educational process*, which is the interplay between cultural permanence and change (137).

Parallel to the permanence of the educational process, identity formation exists as a continuous process as well. Once individuals acquire an understanding of themselves or of their misunderstandings in the context of culture, performative identities combine with individuals’

true selves, which essentializes and reifies the ongoing process of identity reconstruction (Butin 119). Without the need for change in society, however, there would exist no need for change in education. With no need for change in education, there would exist no need for change in the individual.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

As argued in the previously discussed literature, educators, researchers, and policy-makers do not need to question why some African American students do not identify with education but instead need to question why education does not identify with all African American students. Constructed in the ideology of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of education in conjunction with the implications of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education, the answer to this disregarded question lies in the underlying purpose of education— the tendency to reproduce social and racial stratification in American society. Unlike researchers who present the underachievement of African American students as an extension of students' lack of interest or lack of intelligence, researchers like Lisa Delpit, Geneva Gay, and bell hooks, to name a few, interpret the underachievement of African American students as an extension of the absence of cultural representations in the American classroom. In the absence of representations of African American culture in the public classroom, formal education forces African American students either to assimilate to White cultural identities or to disidentify with White cultural identities. With the racial identity development of African Americans mirroring the educational experience of African American students, reproduction makes evident its dominating role in influencing the formation of identity in African American students— to reproduce the White supremacist influenced American standard.

Through language, however, African American students acquire power over meanings in education as their critique of high-achieving students' speech patterns and behaviors as “acting white” signifies upon the tendency of education not to educate but to reproduce. In understanding the manipulative nature of education, African American students themselves can manipulate education through the use of critical education and self-knowledge to disrupt the

system that identifies African American students as inferior and to acquire a healthy identity free from the influence of reproduction in education. Just as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, like the educational activists before them, utilized the principle of self-knowledge in their advocacy for social change in 1960s America, African American students of today must utilize this same principle in their quest for equality in education. In the emergence of independent-thinking students, there emerges a culture of social consciousness and social change in the midst of educational freedom. For when students know and understand who they are, no system of oppression can shape what they are.

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Vita

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