



# “Until Justice Rolls Down Like Water” Revisiting Emancipatory Schooling for African Americans – a Theoretical Exploration of Concepts for Liberation

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**“Until Justice Rolls Down Like Water”**

*Revisiting Emancipatory Schooling for African Americans –  
A Theoretical Exploration of Concepts for Liberation*

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A Thesis (or Analytic Paper) Presented to the Faculty  
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## Dedication

To Maureen,  
Who lives on, in my commitment to give to others, as much as she did.

To the 24 young people who I had the privilege to meet, be challenged by and love as a first year teacher. Your beauty complicated by our racist world is the reason I do this work. Your courage to strive anyway is the reason I will make sure it is heard.

## Acknowledgements

My parents taught me from an early age that African Americans have to demand to be heard in the United States. To this day, I am not sure if that was deliberate or if it just happened as a result of the way they naturally lead their lives. I just know that I became obsessed with racial justice because my parents were intent on racial justice. This dissertation and many of the convictions within it, begin with them.

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white man with a straw hat during Orientation, I was unearthing a great gift from the universe. For seven years, I went to him with incomprehensible babble and he managed to help me turn it into strategic and defensible ideas. For seven years, he read the same stories, fixed the same comma splices, re-wrote passive voice and adjusted margins. For seven years, he picked up late night panicked calls, tolerated early morning freak-outs (sort of) and afternoon whining sessions on his office couch. Overall, for seven years, he worked to ensure I was strong enough to find my voice. And I did. Thank you CL for staying the course. I know it wasn't easy.

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## Abstract

African Americans have a long history in the United States of being asked to live within, and flourish in spite of, a racist society. Throughout this history, African Americans built education institutions – often referred to as *emancipatory schools* – with the primary goals of (1) “freeing” African Americans psychologically and (2) equipping African Americans with tools to fight for their economic, political and social freedom. As racism persists, disseminating these tools to African Americans remains necessary today. Yet, there is currently no emancipatory, comprehensive school model for African Americans outside of the limited offerings of Afrocentric schooling. In fact, recent educational interventions we have chosen to focus on diligently prepare African Americans to succeed in spite of their racially unjust world. This dissertation builds on historical efforts and offers a theoretical model for African American education that re-prioritizes cultivating the skill and will for enacting social change (transformation) in addition to the capacity to thrive within existing constraints (navigation). Revisiting emancipatory schools as a viable pathway for educating might shift this landscape and prepare more African Americans to forge radical change. Drawing on cross-disciplinary scholarship, including psychology, sociology, political science and education, this dissertation suggests that five pillars must serve as the cornerstone of new emancipatory practice. These pillars are: a) a sound racial identity, b) critical consciousness, c) collective obligation, d) a liberation centered academic achievement identity and e) activism skills. Many of these pillars are staples of critical education but they are not always fully explained as a set of liberation tools and traditionally do not serve as the cornerstone of whole-school comprehensive practice. Using both theoretical and empirical literature, this work describes each of the asserted pillars, outlines their demonstrated impact on the lives of African Americans and

explains how all five pillars are interconnected and should be cultivated together in a whole-school setting to achieve the intended outcome of preparing African Americans to fight for their racial liberation.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

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*What I can see all around me is that the white people do not like the black people to stick together. Mostly it is so that they can keep the 50 dollars, 20 dollars, 100 dollar bills. So the black people cannot have 50 dollars... so the black people cannot have nothing. "I don't know what to write Ms. El-Amin. Blacks just want to be free. But obviously, we can't be." (Student journal entry, 2000)*

*"Blacks have to get somewhere in life. That is what I was thinking about when I was riding the bus on the way home this week. I want to get out of this place where there is already a decision about who I am. It's kind of funny though cause' I don't even know who I am. But she thought she knew, the women who moved a few seats back when I sat down. She eyed my Ipod like I was going to blast some music she just knew she didn't want to hear and she sucked in her teeth to let me know, it was me and not any other reason why she was moving. We need to get out of here, to a place that is not like that. Where is that place, you ask? That's the thing, I don't know. (Lashay journal entry, 2010)*

### **Background**

As a former educator in Boston and Atlanta, working with 4<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, I often asked my students to respond to journal prompts. Students in the above anecdotes were responding to the following prompts respectively, "My community & me, what do I see?" and "What is on your mind as you go into the weekend?" More often than not, in response to these race-neutral questions, students offered their words as symbols of the documented concerns and challenges of the African American community. Both rigorous research and the lived experiences of African Americans demonstrate that race is an organizing principle of our society (Leonardo, 2011) and racism oppresses African Americans academically, socially, physically, psychologically, and economically (Ballard, 2010; Chavous, Cogburn, Griffen, Maddox & Sellers, 2007; Feagin, 1991; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lamont, 2000; Massey & Denton, 1993; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The systematic and deeply entrenched nature of racism in the U.S. context has been abundantly covered and descriptively and empirically written about. As such, this work assumes that the reader knows that the United

Despite this harsh reality, we have no answer to Lashay's underlying question. There is no place in the United States where she won't be faced with the pain of racist practices, attitudes, beliefs and acts. As a country, we have yet to forge one. With no safe haven from racism's harm, what do we expect either of the students above to do in response to their observations and experiences? More specifically, what capacities or tools do we offer them as African Americans to not just survive in, but to alter, this troublesome racist reality?

Schools offer a unique opportunity to equip African Americans with tools for resisting and even overturning racism (hereafter referred to as liberation tools). First, schools are mandatory from Kindergarten to age 16 and therefore have virtually all African Americans as a captive audience for a significant portion of their lives.<sup>2</sup> This access is exclusive to schools, making schools the only institutions outside of families with the power to ensure that African Americans have access to liberation tools. Second, the socially accepted function of schools is to "teach" students' knowledge, skills or mindsets that allow them to operate as "successful and productive" members of our society. Therefore, an argument can be made that teaching African Americans the capacities they may require to live in a racist society and equipping them with tools to change that society fits within schools' broader function.

As such there is a long history of African Americans leveraging schools to this end (Payne, 2008). Historically African Americans developed K-12 schools as sites for both training African Americans to be resilient within hegemonic forces and training them to overturn these forces. This type of schooling has been referred to as *emancipatory schooling* (Payne, 2008;

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States as it currently stands both sits in and promotes racist ideology, beliefs and subsequently creates and sustains racist individuals.

<sup>2</sup> There are no fully accurate numbers of African Americans that are homeschooled, but latest data estimates that it is about 220,000 African Americans (National Home Education Research, 2015)

Pearlstein, 2009; Lewis, 2006).<sup>3</sup> Present-day scholars, activists and practitioners still call for emancipatory educational models that explicitly aim to liberate African Americans from racist ideologies and social institutions in contemporary society, as racism still persists (Aldridge, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Anderson & Kharem, 2009). However, few existing schools have a mission statement aligned with emancipatory education. In fact, there is only one widely known comprehensive education framework for African Americans that places responding to a racist society at the center of its mission: Afrocentric Schooling, a school model based on the cultural affirmation of African American identity.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, in this dissertation, I offer an alternative contemporary emancipatory school model for African Americans that is attentive and responsive to the powerful role of racism in African Americans lives, and is intended to prepare African Americans not just to thrive in this society but also – as racial liberation truly requires – to re-envision society and create a fully humanizing alternative. I argue that five pillars should serve as the backbone of a contemporary emancipatory school model: 1) developing a sound racial identity, 2) cultivating a critical consciousness, 3) engendering a liberation centered academic identity, 4) fostering collective racial obligation and 5) teaching activism skills. I further argue that these pillars need to be cultivated together, rather than independently, to best develop African Americans with the will and the skill to transform their racist world.

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<sup>3</sup> Emancipatory schooling should be understood as distinct though perhaps related to a new term in education – social justice schooling. Emancipatory schooling is in direct support of, and designed for, marginalized students with an implicit goal of freedom from oppressive ideologies, systems and people. Social Justice schooling has come to take on a variety of meanings but can often include civic education, multicultural schooling, or schooling that orients students to their role in creating a just world.

<sup>4</sup> Comprehensive refers to a whole school educational model. There are other efforts focused on racial liberation for African Americans that are not whole-school models. This will be further discussed later in this chapter.

## **Why Just African Americans?**

My use of the term African American in this work is deliberate and is meant to denote my specific focus on this subpopulation. According to our current construction of racial categories, it could make sense to use the term Black to be more intentionally inclusive of the range of ethnic backgrounds encompassed in this racial group (African diaspora population, Afro-Caribbean, etc.). However, I am most focused on the liberation outcomes of the subset of the Black population who are descendants of the African/U.S. slave trade for a few reasons. First, “the situation of African Americans has been qualitatively different from that of any other racial or ethnic minority in the United States ”(Lipset, 1997, p.113). Since African Americans were forcibly brought to this country and were not permitted to access formal education, schools were not created in service or consideration of their needs. When opportunities for formal education arose, African Americans persistently and forcefully demanded that schools be reshaped to include and accommodate them in positive and humanizing ways (Perry, 2003; Perlstein,1990). Yet, almost 200 years after slavery ended, schools have not comprehensively met these demands. Schools instead continue to marginalize, under-educate, and unequally exclude this population. Discipline statistics provide a stark example. African American students are three and a half times more likely to be suspended and expelled from school than White students (Adams, Robelen & Shah, 2012; U.S. Department of Education for Civil Rights, 2015). They receive harsher consequences for the exact same offenses as White students (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010) and although they are only 16% of the overall high school population, African Americans represent 27% of all referrals from schools to law enforcement (U.S Center of Education for

Civil Rights, 2015).<sup>5</sup> Even more appalling is that this exclusion starts in pre-school. Even though African Americans are only 18% of the preschool population, they account for 43% of the suspensions in preschoolers overall (U.S. Department of Education for Civil Rights, 2015). Thus, since American education still fails to provide a high quality, contextually grounded, liberation-forging and humanizing education for African Americans, I feel morally and personally bound, as an African American, to leverage my dissertation to respond to African Americans' long-standing call.

Second, when the Black population is and can be disaggregated in education, there is a distinct difference in outcomes across students who identify as African nationals, Afro-Caribbean, or Black Immigrants and those who identify solely as African-American. For example, a John Hopkins study (2009) showed that Black immigrants attend college at higher rates than U.S. born Blacks or African Americans. In fact, researchers found that the education experiences of Black immigrants more closely mirrored White children than native Blacks (Bennet & Luz, 2009). A more recent study in 2012, of a sample of over 100 Black individuals, found that Black immigrants graduated from college more often than African Americans and tended to have significantly higher high school GPA's (Tauriac & Liem, 2012). Related to K-12 education, the Seattle Public Schools recently released a report showing that their Black students who spoke English at home as a first language (likely African Americans) were performing substantially worse than their Black Immigrant population who spoke additional languages at home or as a first language (Rosenthal, 2011).<sup>6</sup>

These differences illuminate that even within the broader Black racial group, African

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<sup>5</sup> Note this data does not disaggregate amongst the Black population of students to specify African Americans.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that I am not excluding in this work anyone who might be ethnically defined as other than African American and yet still considers themselves African American for any number of reasons. I myself fit this category, as my mother is Trinidadian. My point is not to define how people can and should self-identify, but rather to explain why I am choosing to focus in on a distinct population in terms of literature reviewed in this dissertation.

Americans are experiencing worse educational outcomes than other members of their racial community. For me, this establishes an additional moral imperative to consider the unique education needs of this population.

Lastly, and perhaps more philosophically, I believe that by focusing on the particular educational needs of African Americans, my work can be of use to Black people and other people of color more generally. As Gloria Ladson-Billings (2015) explains, “to examine success among students who have been least successful is likely to reveal important pedagogical principles for achieving success for *all* students”(p.76). Thus, this dissertation focuses on African Americans but also may serve as a starting point for work on whole-school models for other racially/ethnically-marginalized groups.

### **Theorizing an Education Intervention – Moving from Navigation Interventions to Transformation Efforts**

Before emancipatory schools for African Americans can emerge and thrive in the United States, there needs to be a paradigm shift about how racial liberation might transpire. In the United States, we believe that if we move African Americans along a continuum from quality education to economic stability, the tides of racial inequality will turn (Perna, 2000). As a result of this belief, education ideology often upholds the notion that “the surest way to change a poor child’s life prospects is to get him into and through a high-quality high school and into and through college” (Whitman, 2008). This view is present in national rhetoric (U.S Department of Labor Statistics, 2014), individual school philosophies (Uncommon Schools, 2014; KIPP, 2015), and internalized individual beliefs (Perna, 2000). In fact, this belief is not only widely adopted, it is widely endorsed. When African Americans defy the statistics of the group using the theory of change outlined above, we celebrate and value



them excessively. Best selling self help books such as *Beating the Odds: Raising Academically Successful African American Males* and *Overcoming the Odds* instruct parents on how to ensure that their child can be one of the chosen few that succeed in spite of their race, while examples of these individuals are cherished in “successful” figures (Oprah Winfrey, Daymond John, Thurgood Marshall and Barak Obama).

Given this rhetoric and messaging, as Maldonado and Maldonado (2012), state:

[M]any of us...buy into the mythology that an education is the path to achieving success. That through an education, the black edges that outline our brown faces will somehow blend a lot smoother, lose some of its contrast, and allow us an “in” into the lifestyle that guarantees us equality. (Maldonado & Maldonado, p. 5)

An individual’s ability to move through a racist society and to achieve levels of success within that racist society is termed *navigation* in my dissertation. Navigational theories of change and corresponding education practice that promote navigation are critical and valuable because it is possible to move through our racist society and achieve various levels of success. The election and presidency of Barack Obama serves as a salient example, and my ability to write this paper as an African American doctoral candidate at Harvard is another.

However, the value of navigation is both over-emphasized and misunderstood. When a person achieves great ends despite the barriers of racism, they ultimately still live in a racist society. To use the language of Maldonado et al., the edges of African American’s brown skin do not fade, and African Americans do not cease to suffer the consequences of the racialized meaning of their skin, when either academic achievement or economic stability has been acquired. Yes, tools that help African Americans navigate our society are necessary as they give African Americans’ resources (education, economic and social capital) to manage

racist forces that affect their lives, but they are not enough to address the social practice and order in which racism exists (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003).

The election and presidency of Barack Obama once again serves as a poignant example. President Obama successfully rose above our country's racist barriers in part by using the theory of change Whitman outlines. But even armed with the highest office in the United States, he still has not been free from the thorns of our country's embedded racist ideology. As examples, the President was forced to publicize his birth certificate twice after facing intense allegations never before seen with a President that he was not "American" and Marilyn Davenport, a member of the Tea Party, widely distributed an e-mail with a picture of Obama with chimpanzee parents attached.

The fact that the United States upholds a navigational approach to racial change and in education, may reflect "the belief of many Americans that racism exists only in the form of individual prejudice" (Pew Research Center, 2014). If this were true, the consequences of racism could be resolved by African Americans avoiding racist individuals or moving around them. Yet, racism is more accurately a systemic and deeply entrenched institutional problem (Stovall, 2005), and the solution to systemic racism remains more elusive. It is simply impossible for an African American to overcome racism merely by succeeding within a society that is structured by racist principles and practices. To truly remove the burden that African Americans experience as a result of racist forces, we must propose solutions that directly reorganize the social order and disentangle systems and institutions from racist ideologies. This is called *transformation* in my dissertation. As Lashay's pained words remind us, African Americans ultimately desire a place that is free from racism not just a place where there are successful in spite of it.

Education interventions then, that are concerned with racial freedom and liberation and are truly responsive to the role of racism in African Americans lives, need to be equally concerned and strategic about defining and building within African Americans those skills, mindsets and beliefs that will allow them to directly alter hegemonic forces, institutions and society in addition to those skills, mindsets and beliefs that will allow them to survive and thrive in our current society. In other words, an education intervention that has any hope of positioning African Americans to attain racial freedom (henceforth referred to as racial liberation) has to shift from a pure focus on helping African Americans navigate society to an equal focus on helping African Americans transform it.

### **Existing Educational Theories that Embrace Transformation**

There are several existing theoretical frames in education that emphasize a focus on transforming society. These bodies of literature provide sound theoretical guidance for shifting our current theory to include transformation as a necessary pre-cursor to racial liberation. Each further asserts that there is a unique role for schools in transformation efforts.

#### *Critical Theory:*

Critical Theory undergirds many bodies of literature and theoretical frames that focus on dismantling oppression and creating a just society. Critical Theorists try to improve the social conditions that disenfranchise or marginalize specific members of a given society by offering theoretical insights into the ideologies, structures, and practices that sustain oppression. In essence, critical theorists believe that by achieving a more accurate understanding of oppression, people will be better enabled to effect positive societal and transformational

change (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993). Particular to education, critical theorists such as Foucault, maintain education should serve as an instrument for social change but simultaneously emphasize that the marginalization of people is both perpetuated and sustained in schools (Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999).

*Critical Race Theory:*

Critical Race Theory, which originated in legal studies, foregrounds racism as a key axis of oppression. It asserts that racism is endemic in our society, and that other forms of oppression such as class and gender can be properly understood only in their interaction with racism (Parker & Lynn, 2006). Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate (1995) introduced critical race theory to education, arguing that race needed to be theorized and applied to school inequities. Critical race theorists in education, now demonstrate that racism permeates education, from school funding (Ladson-Billings; 2006), to school discipline (Simson, 2014), and teacher education (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). Critical Race Theory in education has therefore developed into “a pedagogy, curriculum, and research agenda that accounts for the role of racism in U.S. education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination in education” (Solórzano, 1997, p. 7). In line with critical theory more generally, critical race theorists also uphold that knowledge gained through examining racial inequity should be used to advance justice and forge social change (Stovall, 2006).

*Critical Pedagogy:*

Like critical theory, critical pedagogy is concerned with social injustice and “how to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations” (Burbules & Rupert Berk, 2013, p. 47).

Critical education pedagogues such as Ira Shor, Paulo Friere, Henry Giroux, and bell hooks draw on Critical Theory to articulate specific pedagogical practices (ways of teaching, educating and interacting with young people) that might lead to social transformation:

[C]ritical pedagogy is not simply concerned with offering students new ways to think critically and to act with authority as agents in the classroom; it is also concerned with providing students with the skills and knowledge necessary for them to expand their capacities both to question deep-seated assumptions and myths that legitimate the most archaic and disempowering social practices that structure every aspect of society and to take responsibility for intervening in the world they inhabit. (Giroux, 2011, p. 172).

For example, one of the most common pedagogical practices within Critical Pedagogy is Praxis, a concept most widely attributed to Paulo Freire. Praxis is the combination of reflection and action upon the world in an effort to transform that world (Freire, 2000). Freire asserts that educators should engage students in a cycle of awareness, action and reflection or praxis in order to develop what he calls “critical literacy”. The resulting skill set – the ability to “read the word and the world” (Macedo & Freire, 1987) – Freire argues, ultimately empowers people to act upon the material conditions of the world (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Overall, through engaging in praxis, members of oppressed populations come to perceive the “reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (ibid, p.31).

All three of these theoretical approaches assert that society needs to be transformed to achieve more just ends, and further that schools have a unique responsibility in this endeavor. Yet educators who are inspired by these theories lack specific guidance about how to orient a whole school toward these goals. Critical Pedagogy certainly offers some guiding principles and practices for classroom-level reforms, as well as for specific school initiatives around curriculum, instruction, and discipline. But these approaches—while admittedly

ambitious—remain piecemeal. Examples include isolated, small-scale programs, such as The Brotherhood/Sister Sol, and the Chicago Freedom School or specific in-school interventions and approaches such as culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), ethnic studies (Sleeter, 2011), empowering teaching (Shor, 1992), Youth Participatory Action Research (Fine & Cammarota, 2008), and pedagogies and practices rooted in ant-racist education (Pollock, 2008). Although powerful, these efforts are generally taken on by individual teachers rather than pursued school-wide. Even when the entire school community embraces these approaches, they are often implemented only in specific classes or isolated parts of the day rather than permeating all aspects of school programming. Missed in our current landscape is the opportunity to re-envision the entire enterprise of schooling or to use the total school environment towards the preparation of African Americans to confront and revamp our racist ideology.

### **Emancipatory Education as a Whole School Model**

A whole-school model intentionally designs and then integrates *all* aspects of the school – curriculum, pedagogy, school governance, assessment, teacher training and development etc.– into a cohesive learning environment guided by a particular philosophy (i.e. problem posing education) towards a specified goal (i.e. developing activist leaders). Educators in a whole school model actively ensure that *every* component of the school is aligned to the others and interconnected. In sum, a whole-school model is a coordinated and cohesive effort rather than disparate practices converging in one building. Despite contemporary enthusiasm for highly-aligned, whole school designs, however, comprehensive school reforms are not being pursued to prepare African Americans to live in and transform their racist world. As Charles Payne (2008) states, “It’s as if adults have decided yes, the society is

racist but no, Black youngsters don't need any particular guidance to learn how to negotiate and understand society" (p. 2). He continues, "It is ironic that charter schools – publicly supported schools freed of many centralized restrictions – are widely understood as conservative initiatives. Had the same opportunities existed 40 years ago, the Black Panther Party would have lined the ghetto with liberation schools" (p.7). There does exist a movement of small schools, typically situated in the Latino community, that have put forth a commitment to "social justice" as their school mission. Examples include El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in New York City and Pedro Albizu Campos High School in Chicago. These schools seek not only to expose their students to the embedded racist practices in this country but to teach them to resist and alter these forces.<sup>7</sup> Yet, these efforts aimed at school-wide change have not yet been adopted within the wider African American schooling community.

As Payne alludes to, and as mentioned in the opening, this was not the case historically. There is a robust history of emancipatory schooling – or schools designed to help African Americans seek racial freedom and transform society by leveraging principles found in critical pedagogy and critical theory – in African American communities (Potts, 2003). Black Panther Liberation Schools, a comprehensive elementary and middle school model developed in 1969, "employed a curriculum designed to guide African Americans in their search for revolutionary truths and principles" (Perlstein, 2005, p. 47). Sister Clara Muhammad Schools, led by the Nation of Islam, taught "Blacks to know self, love self and to do for self."<sup>8</sup> Other low-cost private schools under the Council of Independent Black

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<sup>7</sup> See Pedro Albizu Campos, <http://www.pedroalbizucamposhs.org/>, El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice <http://elpuente.us/>, and June Jordan; <http://jjse.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to recognize the role of Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU's) as another important example of an intentionally counter-hegemonic space constructed by African Americans as a whole-

Institutions similarly worked to foster the “cultural-political intelligence, psycho-emotional wellness, collectivity and commitment necessary to bring about African Americans’ return to righteous living and sovereignty” (Council of Independent Black Institutions, 2014).

Historical models demonstrate that whole school models can be developed with the goal of helping African Americans forge a transformed society and reach racial liberation. Further, they provide valuable theoretical insights for re-infusing this vision into contemporary society and creating a new framework for this type of schooling.

It isn’t that there are no modern-day efforts at emancipatory whole school practice in the African American community. There are still some Sister Clara Muhammad Schools and a few remaining Independent Black Institutions. However, whereas previously an emancipatory schooling model was at the forefront of our thinking about educational interventions for African Americans, they are no longer a topic of education discussion or visible in major and national education reform efforts.

In fact, the most widespread whole school model within contemporary practice for African Americans that is considered emancipatory is Afrocentric schooling. Although the United States has leveraged the Afrocentric schooling framework for over forty years and there is a robust theoretical framework for them, there are estimated to be only about 40 Afrocentric schools across the country.<sup>9 10</sup> Even though they are categorized as emancipatory education

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school model focused on transformation and social change. But as this work is focused on K-12 schooling, HBCU’s will not be further discussed.

<sup>9</sup> Although the formal term concept of Afrocentricity arose to prominence in the 80’s with the publication of works by Molefi Asante (1980; 1981), Afrocentric schooling or the notion of teaching African Americans through an African lens has been discussed long before then. See Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B Du Bois, etc. As such, schools using this platform existed in the form of Independent Black Institutions as early as the 1960’s.

<sup>10</sup> There is no true or accurate estimation of the number of Afrocentric schools in the country. This number is based off of the membership of the Council for Black Independent Institutions, which manages independent Afrocentric schools. However, there are multiple other Afrocentric schools (public and charter) operating in districts (Detroit, Minneapolis, Columbus) etc. that are not represented in the council’s figures.



models, however, Afrocentric schools do not live up to the historical vision of leveraging schools for social transformation.<sup>11</sup>

### **Deconstructing Afrocentric Schools as Emancipatory**

Afrocentric schools are based in Afrocentricity, or a frame of reference where phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person (Asante, 1988). Thus, an Afrocentric curriculum aims to cultivate a positive and productive culturally-based African identity for African-Americans, while African-centered schools or Afrocentric schools endeavor to apply that cultural base, placing the history, culture, and life experiences of students of African descent at the center of everything that they do in that school (Merry, 2008, p. 1).

Afrocentric curricula and Afrocentric schools embrace a wide range of strategies, from simply teaching students more about the names and contributions of prominent Africans to immersing students in everything African, including social customs, language, and history (Merry, 2008). Ultimately, Afrocentric schooling's primary outcome is to develop African Americans who can see, operate and live from an African Centered Perspective (Asante, 1988).

This mission of Afrocentric schools is incredibly important. It is a mission rooted in identity building, a concept that, I will argue throughout this dissertation, brings immense value to African Americans. Specifically, the ability to see from an African Centered Perspective grounds African Americans in a sound historical context and develops pride in historical self.

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that there is little data on the actual practices, effectiveness and practices of Afrocentric schools (Piert, 2004; Ginwright, 2004). Thus, I am speaking in this section about Afrocentricity – or the framework on which Afrocentric schools are built. I fully concede that there might be individual schools or schooling efforts drawing on Afrocentricity that do take a more explicit stance on transformation and that there are scholars who define Afrocentric curriculum with an emphasis on transformation and current identities. However since this paper is proposing an emancipatory school framework, the correlated point of comparison is the Afrocentric school framework. Thus, it is the Afrocentric schooling emancipatory framework that I am critiquing rather than the schools themselves.

Since slavery robbed African Americans of the opportunity to both know and retain their indigenous culture, building an identity based in knowing indigenous histories and narratives is critical to developing an internal belief in the value of African Americans. Yet, this identity, however necessary, is not sufficient for racial liberation. To be truly emancipatory, this identity would need to help free African Americans from *current* oppressive forces. Thus, we must ask, how does a specific identity focused on seeing through African perspectives actually help deconstruct or eliminate currently operating racist forces?

A graduate of an Afrocentric school might understand themselves as *Africans*, but if this is the only understanding they have, they are divorced from the daily reality of being an African American. If African Americans have a deep sense of their historical trajectory, can map their ancestors in Africa and articulate that there was a long and thriving history before the slave trade and the subsequent slaughter of Africans in the US context, shouldn't this historical knowledge be leveraged to forge an identity that is inclusive of current conditions? Sadly, "current Afrocentric reform efforts focus primarily on West African and Egyptian philosophies that are difficult to translate in a meaningful way to the contemporary challenges many African American youth must navigate" (Ginwright, 2004, p. 6). Further, "unlike some forms of multiculturalism that link struggles to larger issues of racial and economic justice, few Afrocentric approaches explore the relationship between racial marginalization and broader issues... problems such as poverty, violence and unemployment are rarely considered in the development and implementation of Afrocentric school reform" (*Ibid.*, p.4). How can African Americans fight against, deconstruct or battle contemporary African American issues if they don't have a strong context from which to locate themselves in those issues? Afrocentric schooling does not do enough to translate *historical* sense of self

to *present day* conditions and problems or to translate an African identity to a present day African American identity.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, there is almost no theoretical or empirical data that shows that Afrocentric schools take this next step. This lack of attention to the shifting needs of racial identity makes Afrocentric schooling less effective and less relevant and the missed translation has profound effect on the Afrocentric framework's ability to be *comprehensively* liberatory. Perhaps Afrocentric schools can be culturally liberating, but racial oppression for African Americans is not cultural alone – it is also political, economic and social.

To this end, we would expect an emancipatory school model to deeply focus on applying knowledge and skills towards social change. Yet, there is no robust evidence that Afrocentric schooling fully leverages the identity they *do* cultivate to transformative ends. For example, the Council of Independent Black Institutions, a global and national organization for schools using Afrocentric philosophies, states the following about Afrocentric schooling:

An Afrikan-centered education as the means by which Afrikan culture – including the knowledge, attitudes, values and skills needed to maintain and perpetuate it throughout the nation building process ... Its aim, therefore, is to build commitment and competency to support the **struggle for liberation and nationhood**.... (*Bold added*).

Yet, despite this claim, there is little to no systematic or explicit conversation in Afrocentric schooling literature on how to use an African racial identity for individual or collective freedom or how it is tangibly used in the struggle for liberation. What should African Americans do with their newly formed African identity? What purpose does it serve in the tangible acquisition of freedom? How should it be leveraged for actual physical societal change? As I will argue in Chapter 1 on racial identity, a sound racial identity either in the

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<sup>12</sup> I am not saying that this translation is impossible to do but rather highlighting that the framework of Afrocentric schooling does not call for this translation.

form of an African identity or an African American identity is NOT enough to achieve racial emancipation. Therefore, without an explicit focus on any other strategies for social transformation besides racial identity, Afrocentric schooling may be psychologically liberating but not yet comprehensively transformative. What little empirical data we have on Afrocentric schools' outcomes seem to corroborate this conclusion (Ginwright, 2004; Merry, 2008).

However despite these flaws, no new theoretical frame for emancipatory schooling for African Americans has been developed since the 1980's when Afrocentricity was most embraced. Thus, given African Americans continuing need for racial freedom and the enduring opportunity that schools have to ready African Americans for this battle, my dissertation outlines a much needed new theoretical guide.

### **Leveraging Existing Concepts For Re(Newed) Innovation**

Although no unified model yet exists, there is a wide body of literature with insight that can help build a contemporary emancipatory schooling framework for African Americans.

Research across fields has sought to identify the capacities, tools and skills used by African Americans who rise above racist constraints. Similar concepts have emerged through empirical research in psychology (Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003; Machman & Watts, 2002; Stevenson & Arrington, 2009) and recently in education literature (Carter, 2008; Oyserman, Harris & Bybee, 2001).

These disciplines reveal several "strategies for resilience or coping" that African Americans draw on to secure positive outcomes despite steady exposure to risk (Tiet and Huizinga, 2002). First, a *sound racial identity* can protect African Americans from the psychological harm of racism and hegemonic practices (Cross, 1971; Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Chavous, Rivas-

Drake, Smalls, Griffin & Cogburn, 2008; Oyserman, Grant & Ager, 1995). Sound African American racial identity is a complex, multi-dimensional concept with several sub-categories, including seeing oneself as part of a larger racial collective, the degree to which being an African American is positively important to the individual, and understanding how the public views African Americans (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, Smith, 1997). Having a sound racial identity is linked to academic success (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeek, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, 2003; Oyserman, 2001) and effectively negotiating experiences with racial discrimination (Neblett, Shelton & Sellers, 2004; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin & Lewis, 2006).<sup>13</sup> Historical models of emancipatory schools embraced racial identity building as a cornerstone of their practice, helping to increase student agency, reestablish historical connections, and increasing social cohesion (Potts, 2003, p. 175).

A sound racial identity can be leveraged towards an individual's capacity for *critical consciousness* (also referred to as "sociopolitical development"), a second identified factor in African American resilience (Watts, Williams, & Jager, 2003; Carter, 2005). Critical consciousness, a concept that grew to prominence with the work of Paulo Friere and that clearly draws upon critical theory as discussed above, is the ability to recognize, understand and deconstruct systemic oppression in daily life (Diemer & Blustien, 2006). This "consciousness or heightened awareness of the world" includes the ability to see oppression as carried out by individual perpetrators and systemic perpetrators and to analyze the relationship between oppression and pervasive social inequities (Carter, 2008). Critical consciousness is not simply about resistance but is also about envisioning. It is the capacity to see and understand current oppressive forces, analyze their relationship to current

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<sup>13</sup> This pillar is referred to as *a sound racial identity* in my framework to specifically denote racial identity that has a positive effect.

conditions and to envision a just society absent of these conditions (Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003).<sup>14</sup> Freedom Schools are a historical example of a schooling model dedicated to critical consciousness development for African Americans. Most notably within their Citizenship Schools curriculum, Freedom School educators worked to help African Americans see the connections between their “rotting shacks and a rotting America” through deeply emphasizing a structural analysis of society (Payne, 2008, p.7).

Leveraging both a sound racial identity and critical consciousness, African Americans can develop a *liberation centered academic identity* (LCAI), a third resilience strategy. LCAI is an original theoretical concept that I developed from scholars who define specific traits African Americans draw on to resist race-based academic stereotypes and dilemmas. Developmental researchers find that youths’ academic identities – their beliefs about school’s purpose, meaning, and value, and an individuals’ belief about their capability of achieving in school – play an important role in producing actual achievement results (Oyserman, Grant & Ager, 1995, Carter, 2005). Specifically, the intentional cultivation of particular mindsets, beliefs and values can help African Americans develop a positive academic identity that can diminish or mitigate longstanding stereotypes of African Americans’ intellectual inadequacy. Positive academic identities can also help fuel motivations to attain academic achievement (Carter, 2005; Mehan, Hubbard & Villanueva, 1994; O’Connor, 1997; Sanders, 1997). LCAI refers to the combination of an internalized belief that achievement is embedded in being African American and an internalized belief that achievement has an important role in the pursuit of freedom.

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<sup>14</sup> It will be later discussed that critical consciousness by definition includes action but does not on its own contain skills for action.

The strategies above really only ensure individual success or resiliency.<sup>15</sup> While individual success is useful for the collective and is certainly critical for an individual, it is unlikely and perhaps impossible that individual success alone will tip the scales for the entire community. As such, studying and equipping African Americans with these strategies *only* has not yet yielded the societal shifts required for African Americans to live free of racial injustice. In order for African Americans (as a collective) to experience or see a world that is not undergirded by race-based oppression and consequently racial disparities, African Americans also need access to a set of tools that both motivates them and prepares them to act on behalf of their racial whole.

Activism is a term for behavior that attempts to bring about political or social change (Sherrod, 2006) and as such, many scholars assert that activist behaviors are an important part of social change and societal re-envisioning (James & Busia, 1993; Risman, 2004; Todd, 2005). Activism can entail political participation inside of traditional structures (voting in blocks) or consist of action beyond traditional political participation (protests, demonstrations, etc.). In order to engage in effective activism, individuals need access to, or training in *Activism skills and techniques*. Activism techniques can directly engage the structural and institutional forces that both perpetuate and sustain a racist society (i.e. crafting and passing new legislation, forcing changes in social policy, etc.). These techniques are used in community organizing, political organizing and social movements, and include protests, rallies, marches, civil disobedience and, when necessary, revolt (Alinsky, 1971; Watts et al., 2003; Anyon, 1988). Activism skills however are not just rooted in tactics and strategies; there are also other sets of skills that play a role in activist efforts. For example, the capacity to

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<sup>15</sup> Critical Consciousness includes critical action but does not speak to the capacity for action, the type of action or the intended outcome of this action.

imagine and the capacity to both see and seize new opportunities are essential to envisioning a society that doesn't exist. Socio-emotional skills are also an important part of an activism repertoire. What does it take emotionally to engage in a struggle over a lifetime? Literature does not offer robust insight into this question, however, I will assert that certain socio-emotional skills should be intentionally embedded in activism skills training for African Americans. These include but are not limited to, the ability to cope with and manage anger and loss, and the capacity to maintain critical hope.

Literature is clear however, that activism skills are the direct tools for racial change (Lund & Nabavi, 2008). Yet efforts aimed at social transformation still need a foundation from which to develop and thrive. For example, what incentivizes African Americans to use acquired activism skills towards racial change? Training in activism techniques may provide the skill to engage in action, but what cultivates the will to do so? *Collective obligation* (also referred to as group consciousness) is typically at the foundation of an individual's engagement in activism, particularly in civic and political participation (Gurin & Gurin, 1981; Wright-Austin, Middleton, Yon, 2011). Collective obligation refers to a sense of responsibility to a defined group that motivates actions for the benefit of that group. Thus, if we want African Americans to be interested in using any acquired transformation techniques towards the liberation of their racial group, collective obligation is likely a prerequisite.

However, collective obligation is not the only prerequisite concept to cultivating a willingness to engage in transformational action. Other concepts described above also play a critical role in this effort. For example, a sound racial identity and a critical awareness of the group's relative position in society (critical consciousness), along with a commitment to collective action aimed at realizing the group's interests (collective obligation), often lead to



activism (Gurin et al., 1980 1981). Thus, we can begin to see the overlay between these concepts.

### **Method and Argument**

Based on 1) the large number of documented strategies for African American success in a racist world, 2) the need for African Americans to access both transformational and navigational strategies, 3) the unique role schools can play in disseminating these tools and 4) the need for additional educational frameworks focused on African Americans, I offer a new theoretical framework for educating African Americans in this dissertation. This framework is designed to help African Americans both navigate (defy current academic, social and economic narratives) and transform (change the conditions affecting the group directly, not just their position relative to those conditions) society in pursuit of a country without race-embedded inequities. I construct this framework by synthesizing, and then by extrapolating new theoretical constructs on top of, research findings from multiple disciplines about the tools that assist African Americans in responding to racist forces.

The theoretical framework I propose contains five pillars that can serve as a basis for education that promotes African American liberation. The five pillars of the framework are:

- Sound Racial Identity
- Critical Consciousness
- Liberation Centered Achievement Identity
- Collective Obligation, and
- Activism Skills

Taken together, I argue, these five pillars work as *liberation tools* to offer African Americans knowledge, skills and mindsets that might ready them for fighting for their racial liberation. Each pillar individually offers a source of relief from racist forces; when joined together, however, they gain power, providing African Americans both armor and training for freedom.

Research on these five pillars is currently scattered across disciplines and fields, thus diminishing the collective power of these ideas in African Americans' lives. I therefore use a cross-disciplinary approach in this paper to bridge this disparate literature. I draw upon empirical, theoretical and biographical research. Specifically, I combine ideas about African Americans' coping strategies and resilience to racist forces with literature on activism. This literature includes psychological, sociological, and educational research on risk and resilience as well as resisting racism. This literature also includes scholarship about Participatory Action Research (PAR) and civic engagement, as well as social movement literature and community organizing literature on transformation and action. Further, I draw on political science and philosophy literature in both domains. As this work focuses on the interrelatedness of the proposed elements, I critically examine and leverage works that attempt to bring all, or some of the elements into an overarching framework (e.g., Oyserman, Grant, and Ager's (1995) Racial Identity Framework or Watts' (2003) Socio-Political Development Framework or Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) Social Justice Youth Development Model). While using cross-disciplinary literature is a benefit and innovative aspect of this paper, it also brings with it a limitation. Disciplines refer to similar concepts using varied language and often describe concepts only within their particular domain. Given this, I make selective decisions about which terminology to draw on more heavily and will explain those decisions throughout the text.

While my intention is to consider the racialized context and thus corresponding needs of African Americans in this dissertation, current research does not yet make clear delineations between African Americans and other members of the Black population. Some literature is clear and refers to African Americans, Black immigrants and other groups specifically. Most literature however, still uses Black to refer to all members of this broader racial category. This is especially true in national statistics and in historical literature prior to the popularization of the term African American to describe indigenous Blacks. I make an effort throughout this work to draw on literature that specifically uses the term African American but am in many cases limited to literature that does not articulate the makeup of the sample or literature that is clearly speaking of a Black population more broadly. I do not however draw on any literature that specifically focuses on Black Immigrants or other members of the broad racial group.

This dissertation makes three overarching arguments. First, pursuant to the theoretical frames of critical theory and critical pedagogy, I argue that transformation techniques must be incorporated within a whole school educational theoretical framework if we expect to fully address the oppression of African Americans. The persistence of racism shows that racism cannot be simply survived; it has to be altered. This understanding is not new (Watt et al., 2003), but there is no comprehensive and contemporary educational framework designed specifically for African Americans that takes this reality to heart.

Second, I argue that while each of the pillars above plays a unique role in the development of African Americans to both navigate and transform society, they are better understood collectively as a necessarily interconnected and interdependent set of liberation tools, rather than discrete strategies for resilience or action. Given their interrelatedness, I argue that they

must be cultivated in concert to help African Americans develop both the will and the skill to resist and overturn race-based oppression. Without understanding the pillars as a comprehensive set of emancipatory tools, their combined power to assist African Americans re-construct and re-envision society is significantly diminished.

Third, I argue that because these liberation tools are contextually fluid and developmentally dynamic—they take different forms and must be developed and deployed in different ways depending on individual, social, and cultural context—they must be cultivated continuously and in multiple spaces within the school simultaneously. This is why they are best positioned to serve as cornerstones of whole-school practice, rather than being confined to specific content areas, classrooms, after-school programs, or other isolated sites.

### **Dissertation Significance**

To truly change the trajectory of African Americans, “we have to first acknowledge, understand and be prepared to respond to all the forces that act against them” (Perry, 2003, p.1). To borrow from Charles Payne (2012), we can continue to scratch our heads about the variance in outcomes across racial lines, presuming that we are giving African Americans what they need to succeed and they are still failing for some mysterious reason. Or, we can acknowledge and confront the fact that racism plays a significant role in the life experiences and outcomes of African Americans and that schools have at their disposal the opportunity to prepare African Americans to develop an alternate reality. We would be remiss to think that any of the scattered efforts previously described are enough, even if they are expertly and passionately delivered.

Efforts that are not operating on a mass scale or that haven't gained national or widespread attention have little to no hope of reaching such a large constituency. However, school – as a mandatory component of African Americans' lives – provides a unique platform for a more complete intervention.

## CHAPTER 2. RACIAL IDENTITY

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*Ynecia was sitting next to me today during lunch. There was a weird moment right between my macaroni and dessert when I caught her staring at me. I turned to look at her, half expecting her to turn away in embarrassment. She didn't...instead, she put her hand on the base of my elbow and rubbed her thumb against it affectionately. It was a strange action, not at all uncomfortable for me, but something so out of character for her. The intensity of her face and her affection left me silent and I waited. "Ms. El-Amin?" she slowly asked, "You are so smart and have so much, too...don't you sometimes wish you weren't black?"*

### Introduction

Developing a coherent sense of identity is one of life's most important tasks (Erikson, 1968) and every human is faced with the challenge of making meaning of their various selves (gender, class, sexual orientation). For African Americans, a significant component of identity formation is rooted in developing a racial self or answering the question "what does it mean to me to be African American?" (Scotthom, Cooke, Sellers & Ford, 2010; Tatum; 1997). How African Americans resolve this question shapes what is called their *racial identity* (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Banks & Kohn-Wood, 2007).

At a basic level, racial identities work as a lens for interpreting, understanding, experiencing and participating in the world, as well as a way of connecting with and identifying with others. Thus, the relative "health" of one's racial identity is critical to productive living. Yet, for many African Americans, this critical sense of racial self is built on implicit and explicit messages of the racist world around them – messages that imply that what it means to be African American is to be less valuable, less intelligent and less human.

At the mere age of 9, Ynecia provides a meaningful window into this reality. Her desire to wish away my blackness stemmed from the messages of her world that no amount of

“work” could ever overcome the stain of her dark skin. Her all-African-American Atlanta community was subject to unresponsive police, inadequate facilities and blatant disregard from other members of the Atlanta community. As an example, our school building complete with no windows and no classroom doors looked nothing like the school buildings we drove past on the way to field trips. And despite intense effort on the part of the community, the district refused to ensure working bathroom facilities in any of the elementary schools halls. The world’s distaste for her race was also evident to her. She recently heard a woman in a shopping area wonder aloud how long it would take the district to rid the metro area “of those people.” Ynecia was, as Du Bois describes, seeing herself through the eyes of others.<sup>16</sup> It is of course a problem that the United States sees African Americans in this vein. But the problem for Ynecia specifically, was that the version of racial self, painted in and by a racist society, was her *only* basis for a racial identity.

I pondered the confusion and sadness evident in Ynecia’s question in silence. In that moment, it was clear to me that African Americans are harmed when the negative messages of our society about “African Americans” exist in the absence of *counter* messages that offer a more truthful and healthy racial understanding. Empirical studies confirm my thinking, racial identity provides the foundation for productive or adverse developmental outcomes throughout an African American’s life span (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin & Lewis 2006; Spencer et al., 2001) and has significant effects on African Americans across academic, social and psychological health (Smith, Levine, Smith, Dumas & Prinz, 2009; Sullivan & Esmail, 2012). African Americans with a less developed or negative racial identity (for whom race is less salient or who have anti- Black mindsets) have been found in some studies to have

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<sup>16</sup> Du Bois, 1903, p.3

higher levels of anxiety, paranoia and depressive tendencies (Carter, 1991; Pyant & Yanico, 1991).

Thus, Ynecia's misunderstanding of her racial identity, projected onto her understanding of me and the broader African American community, had the potential to manifest itself in remarkably damaging ways. More frightening, she wasn't alone. I constantly chastised numerous boys in our class for calling each other "black" as an insult and just a week prior I'd overheard two girls in the cafeteria talking about how "black" people were just not that smart for college.<sup>17</sup> Armed only with these internalizations of racial self, Ynecia and her classmates were not positioned to advocate for their own progress or the collective progress of their community. How could Ynecia advocate for her racial group if she believed that the solution to avoiding injustice was to be something other than black? How could the two young girls at lunch push for a more equal society based in a conviction that African Americans deserve and are equally ready for opportunities such as college attainment, fair housing practices and sound legal protection if they did not believe their group to be worthy?

Yet, all hope was not lost. Ynecia's comment compelled me to change my instructional practice, and I learned first-hand that imposed and negative racial identities can change when they are challenged by life experiences or shaped by direct and intentional actions. Through carefully facilitated classroom discussions, lessons and explorations, all meant to replace my class' negative understandings of what it meant to be African American with truer, well-balanced notions of their blackness, I saw definite shifts in my students' pride in themselves and in each other. They stopped using the word "Black" as an insult and a few even called

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<sup>17</sup> The class was a 100% African American and we were all Black.



out other kids in the school for doing so. They caught themselves and then apologized when they made comments that perpetuated stereotypes about African Americans (E.G. “We can’t do that. You know we are just lazy”). They even suggested we change our planned bibliography unit to a “lost” African American ancestor unit, and further, that we donate the completed works to the school library for others to learn from.

Janet Helms, a founding scholar in racial identity literature, explains that “the development of a healthy racial identity, involves the intentional abandonment of societal impositions of racial-self in favor of one’s own personally relevant self- definition” (Helms, 1990, p.155). Thus, for Ynecia and the many other African Americans like her in the United States, there is a profound opportunity to reshape racial understanding and to develop what is henceforth called, **a sound racial identity**.<sup>18</sup> Cultivating a sound racial identity in African Americans is the first step to ensuring that African Americans can not only successfully navigate our society, but transform it.

The following section will 1) explain and define racial identity according to the literature 2) explain how a racial identity is understood to achieve outcomes that might be useful in navigating a racist society 3) assert a clear definition of a sound racial identity for practitioners to draw on and 4) explain the role of racial identity in an educational framework that is designed to promote navigation and transformation. Essentially, I will argue that a sound racial identity is the foundational pillar - the one all other proposed elements in this framework require to be properly cultivated. Yet, I will also argue that despite this critical

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<sup>18</sup> In this paper, a sound racial identity will refer to a racial identity that is linked to positive outcomes. Further explanation of what a sound racial identity entails will be given later in this section. A new emancipatory framework should work to clearly cultivate the components of a sound racial identity as they are described in later parts of this section.

role, and in contrast to some common and popular school practices that emphasize racial identity, a sound racial identity alone is inadequate to achieve true societal change.

### **Understanding Racial Identity**

In general, “racial identity” is referred to using a variety of terms across disciplines. Often, the terms “race” and “ethnicity” are used interchangeably and are sometimes combined (racial-ethnic identity, ethno-racial identity). I will use the term Racial Identity to encompass the literature on racial identity alone, ethnic identity alone, and racial-ethnic identity combined. Psychologists, sociologists and other researchers tend to agree that Racial Identity refers to the meaning one makes of one’s racial group membership or the extent to which one psychologically identifies with or chooses not to identify with one’s racial group (Crocker & Luhtanen, Blaine & Broadnax, 1990; Phinney, 1992; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997; Phinney & Ong, 2007).

African American racial identity has been consistently studied and modeled over time (e.g. Cross, 1971, 1991; Parham & Helms, 1985; Sellers, Chavous, Shelton, Smith, 1997). Many African American racial identity models assert a developmental process or outline particular stages of racial identity, usually in a linear progression with a clearly identifiable “best” stage. As an example, Cross’ Nigrescence model - probably the most recognized model of racial identity- posits five stages of African American racial identity development. According to Cross, individuals move over the course of their lives from a pre-encounter stage, where they are unaware of their racial selves, to internalization or the final stage, where they are

accepting of their own race and the race of others.<sup>19</sup> In that process, individuals first seek refuge in their own racial identity (immersion) before being able to have a more nuanced view of their race (emersion). While Cross' Nigrescence model and other developmental models (such as Phinney's 1992 ethnic identity model) are useful and popular for theorizing about racial identity, they don't give us specifics about the structure of racial identity. There are other models (often referred to as content models) however, that serve this purpose. Instead of focusing on the development of racial identity over time, content models focus on trying to describe the components of racial identity, breaking it into multiple dimensions (ex: Demo & Hughes, 1990; Thompson-Sanders, 1995).<sup>20</sup> Because content models deconstruct racial identity, they are most useful for understanding this element in the context of an education framework for two central reasons. First, educators are more likely to embrace and value the role of racial identity if they have a clear understanding of how to break apart racial identity to produce navigational success. Examining each dimension and its impact on African Americans helps with this understanding. Second, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the dimensions of racial identity increases the utility of this framework. Practice and pedagogy can be better targeted to those dimensions of racial identity that have shown the greatest results (Chavous e al., 2003).<sup>21</sup>

The most commonly used and accepted content model across all domains, and thus the one this work will draw on, is the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) developed

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<sup>19</sup> In an updated version of his RI model, Cross re-evaluates the notion that the stages are linear or static. He later asserts (2003) that these stages are fluid and contextual. In other words a person may move back and forth in between them in different parts of their life or move back and forth in between them across their life.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson-Sanders (1995) assert that racial identity has four dimensions (physical, cultural, socio-political and psychological) while Demo & Hughes(1990) assert that racial identity has three dimensions (closeness, black group separation and Black Group Evaluation). See Marks, Settles, Cooke, Morgan & Sellers (2004) for more information.

<sup>21</sup> Developmental considerations have an important place in application of this element and will be discussed in future work that speaks to structures and pedagogical practices.

by Sellers et al (1998). The MMRI proposes four dimensions of racial identity: a) racial salience b) racial centrality c) regard (private and public) and d) racial ideology. **Racial salience** is the extent to which race is relevant to a person's self-concept at a particular point in time or in a particular situation. This salience is fluid and may change depending on the context (school, work, etc). **Racial centrality** refers to the extent to which a person considers his or her race to be an important part of his or her identity. This concept is more stable and includes the hierarchy with which one considers being African American as core to themselves (i.e. a Black woman vs. a woman who is black). **Regard** has two components: **private regard** is the degree to which individuals feel positively or negatively about being African American and **public regard** is an understanding of how "others", specifically other racial groups, view African Americans (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley & Chavous, 1998). Finally, **racial ideology** consists of an individual's opinions, beliefs or attitudes about how a member of one's race should act.<sup>22</sup> In sum, the first two dimensions (racial salience and racial centrality) address the significance of race in the individual's self-definition, while the second two dimensions (regard and racial ideology) address the qualitative meaning that the individual ascribes to being Black (Sellers et al., p.190).

Each dimension of the MMRI can be harnessed by an individual at varying levels representing differing perspectives. For example an individual with **high private regard** internally holds African Americans in high esteem whereas an individual with **low private regard** does not. Further and conversely, an individual with **low public regard** believes that society has clear biases and negative beliefs about African Americans while an individual

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<sup>22</sup> The MMRI operates from three core assumptions. 1) that identities are influenced by situations as well as being stable properties of a person identity, 2) that people have a series of identities that are hierarchically ordered ( e.g., Race/gender); thus the MMRI takes into account how important an individual deems "race" to themselves, 3) that the best gauge of an individual's racial identity is their own perception of it.

with **high public regard** believes that society sees African Americans in a positive light. Racial Ideology does not take the same form as the other four (high and low) and is less explored in the literature. It will therefore not be further discussed.

Understanding the variance in these dimensions and the possible combinations of them (ex. high private regard and high racial salience) helps clarify what mindsets or beliefs within racial identity are most associated to positive results. Furthermore, looking at racial identity with this level of nuance helps clarify that all racial identities are not made equal. Ynecia had a racial identity. However, her sense of racial identity was built on negative images of African Americans and consequently herself. As a result, Ynecia had low private regard, meaning she did not internally believe African Americans to be inherently valuable. As previously mentioned, lower levels of racial identity (or negative racial identity) put African Americans at risk of negative outcomes and also makes it hard for African Americans to contribute to their personal emancipation and the emancipation of others. But, research shows that a sound racial identity has the complete opposite effect. In the next section, I therefore explore the following questions: What is a sound racial identity? What dimensions of racial identity lead to it? Further, how does it support African Americans?

### **How does Racial Identity Impact African Americans?**

There are mixed reviews about the impact of racial identity on African American lives, yet most empirical research demonstrates that racial identity (properly nurtured and cultivated) has positive influences on important levers for success in American society. In particular, research suggests that three racial identity components (**centrality, public regard and private regard**) have distinct relationships with two critical outcomes for navigation: social and educational resiliency. Each of these three components (separately or in combination

with each other) are associated with academic adjustment (O’Conner 1999; Sanders 1997; Chavous et al., 2003), resilience against racial discrimination and ideologies (Wakefield & Hudley, 2005), higher levels of self-esteem (Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney & Chavira, 1992), more active coping strategies with racial discrimination (Watts & McMahon, 2002), as well as lower susceptibility to depression (Yasui, Dorham, & Dishion, 2004).

Resilience from racial discrimination or psychological health is the most common outcome associated with racial identity. This role cannot be overstated. Racial discrimination is a normative and pervasive experience for African Americans, making discriminatory acts and racially oppressive institutions an inevitable part of life (Anderson & Boyd, 2000; Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2010). “Discrimination is a unique stressor associated with diminished psychological well-being” (Fisher et al., 2000 in Seaton 2009) and feelings of anger, anxiety, helplessness and frustration (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). Relatedly, racial discrimination is linked to numerous stress related diseases, including high blood pressure, hypertension, stroke, and cardiovascular disease (Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000). Both the constancy with which discriminatory experiences occur and their destructive consequences fuels the urgency to equip African Americans with any capacities that might serve as a source of relief.

In short, a sound racial identity influences how individuals experience racial discrimination, mitigating the risk associated with these aggressions and serving as a protective factor (Sellers, Morgan, & Brown, 2001; Neblett, Shelton, & Sellers, 2004). Public regard is particularly linked to psychological resilience and is an illustrative example of how the variance (high vs. low) of a dimension of racial identity is associated with different results.

Cross disciplinary empirical literature reveals that **low public regard**, or the belief that others view African Americans negatively, moderates perceptions of racial discrimination among African American adolescents, decreasing depressive symptoms (Sellers et al., 2006, Seaton, Upton, Neblett Powell-Hammond & Sellers, 2011). Initially this might seem counterintuitive as one might assume knowing that society sees you negatively would lead to depression, but it is possible that with low public regard, individuals hold realistic expectations about society and how they will be regarded or treated. Thus, they are not surprised when they encounter racist practices or behaviors, though they may be hurt, frustrated, angry or diminished. This preparedness gives individuals with low public regard the room to act or react to discrimination more positively<sup>23</sup> and it allows them to build up an arsenal of coping mechanisms (Sellers et al., 2006). Another explanation is that low public regard allows African Americans to dissociate negative experiences from their personal selves locating fault instead in racist individuals or a racist society (Oysermann et al., 1995). On the other hand, African Americans who have **high public regard** – or believe that society views African Americans through a color-blind or positive lens - are more at risk of greater psychological trauma when discrimination occurs. This is likely because their perception of society doesn't match reality (Chavous et al., 2003) and thus they are less prepared to respond (Sellers et al., 2006) in instances of racial discrimination.<sup>24</sup> According to Lazarus & Folkhorm (1984) negative encounters that occur unexpectedly are experienced as

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<sup>23</sup> Positively does not mean pleasantly, it simply means in a manner that does not lead to personally harmful psychological effects.

<sup>24</sup> Seaton (2009) found that having high public regard AND high private regard did have mild moderating effects on perceptions of racial discrimination. It is important to note that this finding is not about high public regard on its own and therefore does not negate research that high public regard operates as a risk factor. It rather might indicate that alongside internally strong beliefs about African Americans believing that society also views African Americans this way might not be harmful. Further research about this intersectionality is needed.

<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that literature also indicates that those with low public regard or who view society as negative towards African Americans are more likely to report experiencing racial discrimination. Yet this does not decrease the moderating effect that low public regard has on the consequences of these instances.

much more stressful than those for which the individual has some expectation (cited in Sellers 2006).<sup>25</sup>

Other dimensions of racial identity also protect African Americans from the psychological effects of racism and race-related discrimination. In a study conducted by Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, and Cogburn (2008), African American students who did not consider race to be an important aspect of their self-concept (**low racial centrality**) were likely to allow peer discrimination on the basis of race to affect how they thought about themselves and the importance of school. For these individuals, waning academic motivation led to lower grade point averages. Yet, the relationship between perceptions of classroom discrimination and grade point average was attenuated for students who had **high racial centrality** or considered race important to their self-concept (Chavous et al., 2008). In other words, students who felt that being African Americans was important to their identity were more able to disassociate their discriminating experiences at school from how they felt about themselves and how they felt about school.

As shown, distinguishing among different components of racial identity can inform conceptual frameworks and explain how different dimensions relate to outcomes. However, the dimensions of racial identity often do not function independently when influencing attitudes and behaviors (Chavous et al., 2003, Cross, Strauss & Fhagen-Smith 1999; Helms, 1990). Thus practitioners and schools focused on cultivating a racial identity that will impact African Americans positively have to be attentive to more than one dimension at a time. As

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an example, Wong, (2003) found that racial centrality *alone* had no buffering effect on perceptions of racial discrimination. Wong instead found that racial centrality had a moderating effect on the impact of discrimination when it was coupled with another already discussed dimension of racial identity: public regard.<sup>26</sup> Sellers & Shelton (2003) corroborate this relationship. Sellers et al., found that the association between racial discrimination and perceived stress was weaker for individuals for whom race was a more central identity (high centrality) and Sellers et al also found that individuals who felt that other groups had more negative attitudes towards African Americans (low public regard) were less bothered by experiences of discrimination they encountered.

The intersectionality of the dimensions of racial identity is most prevalent in discussions about racial identity's relationship to academic attainment. As we know, to thrive and to eventually transform our current society, African Americans have to have access to and to achieve high levels of academic proficiency. Any tools that might assist African Americans in this endeavor therefore are extremely valuable. There are two frames of thought for how racial identity might influence motivations and attitudes related to academic achievement. Some researchers see two specific components of racial identity as levers for developing maladaptive behaviors that ultimately hinder academic success :(a) group association (racial centrality) and (b) knowledge of existing racial discrimination based on that identity (public regard) (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In this view, African American youth who strongly identify as being African American (high racial centrality) and recognize disparities in economic and social mobility for their racial group (low public regard) may come to feel that education or other efforts have little value or utility in future life and professional pursuits

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<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that Wong (2003) only focused on racial discrimination experienced in schools.

(Ford, 1992; Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1995; Taylor, Castern, Flickenger, Roberts, & Fulmore, 1994). Scholars in this camp believe that as a result of African Americans' understanding that society has barriers in place to prevent their success, youth back away from the work and effort it would take to overcome those barriers – seeing the efforts as futile and oppression as inevitable (Hughes & Demo, 1989). Advocates of this “identity as risk” perspective believe that African Americans must become “raceless” in order to succeed academically (Fordham, 1988).

Sygnithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) are the most commonly cited authors who uphold this perspective. Using data from a mixed-method study to investigate a large racially diverse high school, Fordham and Ogbu argue that African Americans lower the value they attach to school as they become increasingly aware of their likely future racial discrimination in education and other arenas (low public regard). As a result, Fordham et al. posit that young African Americans develop an oppositional culture to what they perceive as “acting white” which include behaviors such as academic achievement. Other researchers, such as Claude Steele (1995) similarly posit that an awareness of racial discrimination (low public regard) negatively impacts African Americans psychologically and consequently academically via a process he calls “stereotype threat.” Steele asserts that African Americans with high levels of racial salience (who identified as being black right before a high stakes test) and were also aware of the negative stereotypes about black achievement ability (low public regard) performed worse than those who did not have high racial salience.

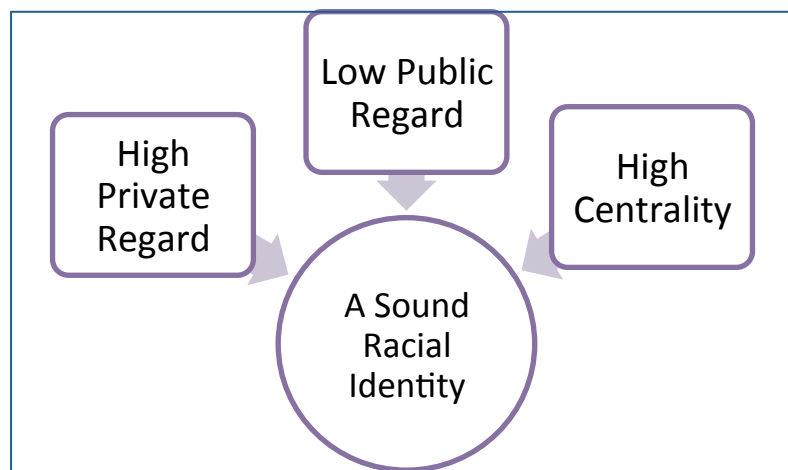
Despite the popularity of Ogbu's view in public discourse, racial identity as a *sole* risk factor for African Americans is less supported in current academic research and Ogbu's theory specifically has been rigorously contested by scholars across fields (Ainsworth- Darnell &

Downey, 1998; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, and Harpalani, 2001; Carter, 2008; Horvat, McNamar & O'Connor, 2006). In fact, Ogbu himself provides a more nuanced understanding of his original findings in a book written in 2003. In this more recent work he explains that an understanding of limited social mobility (low public regard) and identifying strongly as being black (high racial centrality) does not perpetuate oppositional attitudes in Black Americans towards achieving good grades but rather in his revised opinion towards the behaviors commonly associated with getting good grades – language, dress, etc. (Carter, 2008; Ogbu, 2003).

Thus, contrary to Ogbu's original contention there is a more empirically supported framework of thinking that embraces racial identity as a positive influence on academic performance. While only a few studies show a direct positive relationship between racial identity and achievement, considerable empirical research suggests that certain dimensions of racial identity have positive implications for academic achievement motivations. For instance, Cokley and Chapman (2008) found **high private regard** (believing in the inherent value of African Americans) to be related to academic achievement positively through academic self-concept. Wong et al., (2003) also came to the same conclusion. Emphasizing the inter-relatedness of multiple dimensions on academic motivation, Chavous et al. found that groups of students who both had group association or high racial centrality and high private regard were more likely to achieve academically. More specifically, Chavous (2003) found that this profile (**high racial centrality and high private regard**) was strongly associated with high school attendance, high school completion and college entrance. This study suggests that strongly identifying as African American and believing internally in the value of African Americans, work together to keep African Americans on academic pathways. It is important to note that Chavous found these associations alongside an

individual's knowledge of existing racial oppression or racial stereotypes (low public regard). This finding provides compelling counter evidence for Ogbu's position that knowing the truth about our racist societies' views towards African Americans combined with high racial centrality leads *only* to maladaptive behaviors. Chavous' findings instead suggest that cultivating a robust racial identity, one where salience and positive internal beliefs about African Americans work alongside the knowledge that the world is racially biased, may be especially promotive of academic outcomes (DiLorenzo, 2009). Other work corroborates this. Five years after Seaton (2009) found the same racial identity profile, named the "buffering defensive" profile (high centrality, high private regard and low public regard) was most associated to positive academic concepts and resilience.

Although there is still debate within racial identity literature, a preponderance of work suggests that *specific* dimensions of racial identity have a useful role in assisting African Americans to survive and navigate our country. More explicitly, as demonstrated above, literature reveals that the most positive racial identity – which I will henceforth call a sound racial identity (SRI)-- is one where African Americans have a *positive* understanding of their collective racial group, and through that understanding feel compelled to identify with it (high racial centrality). Additionally, a sound racial identity includes an internal belief in the value and capabilities of African Americans (high private regard) and an awareness of racism's existence and its arbitrary associations to certain groups in the United States (low public regard). See Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Components of a Sound Racial Identity**

This model of a sound racial identity is similar to one developed by Oyserman, Grant & Ager (1995). The authors posit that a positive African American Identity Schema consists of seeing oneself as a member of the racial group (i.e. connectedness), (b) being aware of stereotypes and limitations to one's present and future social and economic outcomes (i.e. awareness of racism), and (c) developing a perspective of self as succeeding as a racial group member (i.e., achievement as an African American). Although the authors do not align these dimensions to the MMRI, I posit that the authors are similarly talking about high centrality (connectedness), high private regard (sense of self) and low public regard (awareness of racism). Using the components of the MMRI helps align this framework to newer research on racial identity and provides additional evidence that a sound racial identity consists of; high private regard, low public regard and high race centrality.

### **Racial Identity as One Strategy– Necessary but Not Sufficient**

Given the impact of African Americans developing a sound racial identity (SRI), schools should purposefully cultivate such an identity in students. This baseline notion has admittedly been the aim of Afrocentric schools, which consider racial identity building to be

a critical part of their mission. Afrocentric schools define their outcome as developing African Americans who can see, operate and live from an African Centered Perspective (Asante, 1981). To this end they primarily, and sometimes exclusively, focus on building racial identity from an African perspective –principles of Kwanzaa, African History, African rituals and rites are encouraged, used and taught. For example, the Betty Shabazz Charter School network in Chicago “aims to achieve students who have self-confidence, a strong sense of cultural identity, and a commitment to make positive contributions to their community and the world”.<sup>27</sup>

While this approach may be foundational to defying race based inequities, a sound racial identity is *not enough* to actually ensure the elimination of racism or for transformation. A sound racial identity only serves as a mechanism for resilience allowing African Americans to survive in our racist world and helps cultivate the “*will*” needed to produce transformative change. In and of itself, SRI does not predict or guarantee transformative change. Hence, there is a critical difference between what I am proposing and the Afrocentric approach. A sound racial identity in my educational framework is asserted as *a means to an end* (or a foundation) rather than the goal itself.

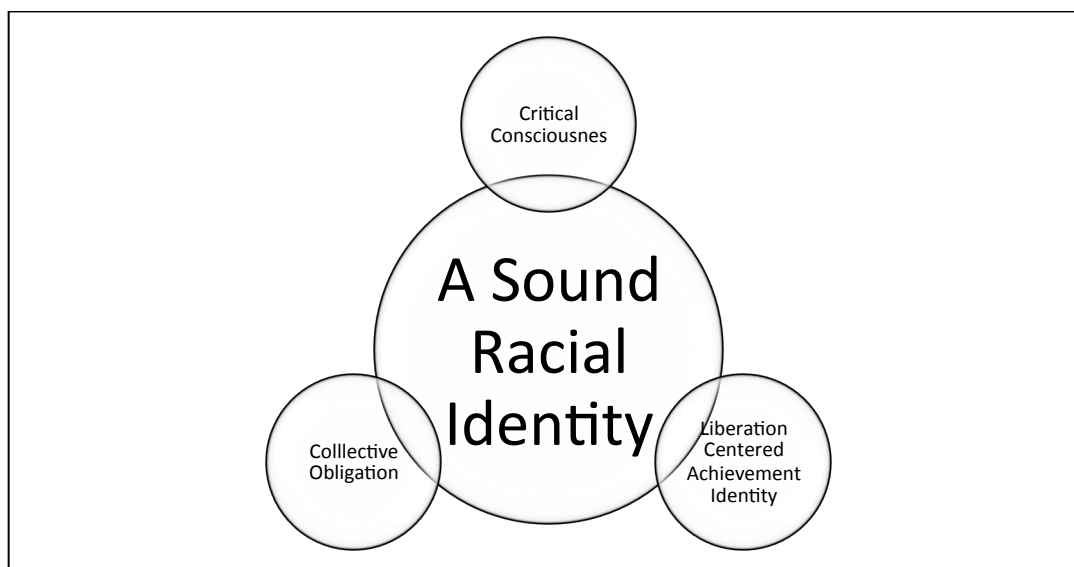
Considering a sound racial identity as the end goal, or considering it as enough, would be similar to sending troops out to fight in a war with just armor and no weapons. Imagine a student who graduates from one of the Betty Shabazz schools and then finds herself in the workplace facing a set of racially biased practices. As a result of her fully cultivated racial identity, this woman is aware that the practices demean and devalue both herself and her racial group and wants to do something about it. Yet, with just a sound racial identity alone,

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<sup>27</sup> Retrieved February 1 2014 ; [http://www.bsics.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=179005&type=d](http://www.bsics.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=179005&type=d)

what is she actually equipped to do? SRI does not assume any skills in resistance, any tools for fighting against large embedded systems or big bureaucracies. While a sound racial identity has generated the pride or the sense of self necessary *to want to* advocate for self and call out injustice, it does not guarantee or imply the skills needed to do this. A sound racial identity thus is a tool for navigation and the *fuel* for transformation, but is not in and of itself preparation for transformative change.

The above is not meant to undermine the critical role of SRI in this education framework. In the United States, where “blackness” is constantly under attack, scrutiny, or inspection whether or not embraced by an individual, a sound racial identity serves as the first level of resilience and resistance to oppression. Furthermore, a sound racial identity is the first step in producing the will in African Americans to change society in the first place. If African Americans do not believe themselves to have a critical, unique value, and further do not see their collective in a positive light (high private regard), they have little basis for upending society on behalf of themselves or other African Americans. Third, a sound racial identity is the platform upon which all of the other tools for navigation and transformation are formed. Just as houses cannot (or conventional wisdom holds that they should not) be built without a solid foundation, none of the other pillars in the proposed education framework can be built without a solid racial identity. Further, without a foundation, frames and sheetrock, ceilings and doors cannot stand or work properly. The same holds for the relationship of a sound racial identity to other pillars in this educational model.



**Figure 2: Relationship of Elements to A Sound Racial Identity**

As Figure 2 demonstrates, three of the four other pillars asserted in this framework (Critical consciousness, collective obligation and a liberation centered achievement identity) use components of a sound racial identity as their base. The easiest way to truly see racial identity as connected to the other pillars is to consider collective responsibility, another pillar in this proposed framework that refers to a sense of obligation for a broader group to which one identifies. While a sound racial identity does not work alone to produce collective interest, it stands as a pre-cursor for that interest. It is much more difficult to decide that you will invest your power, your resources and your time in the efforts of a group to which you do not a) perceive yourself to belong (high racial centrality) or b) have a strong positive belief in (high private regard). In this example, a sound racial identity serves as the fuel or the will to act on behalf of others. Thus, one can't have a collective racial obligation without first having a sound racial identity.



Let's consider another example. As we have seen, while a sound racial identity is associated with positive academic motivations, the direct association between motivation and actual achievement is still being debated in the literature. Thus, in light of the critical role that academic attainment plays in navigating a racist society, African Americans need other strategies that will more directly guarantee academic performance. A Liberation Centered Achievement Identity<sup>28</sup> or the belief that achieving academically *must* happen as a method of resistance has embedded in it concepts that are directly linked to academic results (grades, GPA, high school completion) (Carter, 2008; Oyserman et al., 2005). But, in order to have a Liberation Centered Achievement Identity, African Americans have to believe that there is something to resist (low public regard), that African Americans have the inherent qualities to achieve despite stereotypes (high private regard) and that they themselves are African American (high race centrality). This is the precise definition of a sound racial identity. Thus, you have to build a sound racial identity before you can cultivate a Liberation Centered Academic Achievement Identity or at the very least they must be cultivated at the same time. Yet, it must be clear that while a sound racial identity contributes and is required for each of the listed pillars to be erected, it does not necessarily follow that a sound racial identity naturally leads to any of these other pillars. It is possible to have a sound racial identity and not to leverage it towards anything. A sound racial identity *only* serves as a foundation for navigation when other tools for navigation and resilience are built on top of it. When other components are layered on top of SRI, such as collective identity and critical consciousness, we begin to give African Americans the true arsenal and range of tools they need to upend racial inequalities.

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<sup>28</sup> Revisit p. 5-7 for an overview of each pillar if needed or see Appendix C.

In sum, sound racial identity is both the foundational pillar (forms the basis of the others) and the primary pillar (must be cultivated before others or initially as you cultivate others) of this emancipatory school framework. But we cannot lose sight of the fact that a sound racial identity in an education intervention is simply the first step to liberation and not liberation itself.

### Chapter 3. Critical Consciousness

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*I was halfway through my planning period, when Mr. Geraldo burst into my classroom Anthony was underneath his arm, wriggling in exasperation. "What happened?," I asked. The Spanish teacher responded with palpable anger "I will not tolerate his disrespect. He was unruly, rude and very dismissive of me!" I glanced towards Anthony, hoping for some clarity. He was silent. Mr. Geraldo removed his hand from Anthony's collar and explained to him that he would be failed if he didn't straighten himself out, before walking away in a cloud of frustration. Anthony and I stood side by side in the empty classroom and I waited. "I didn't do anything Ms. El-Amin," he muttered finally. "Yeab?" I inquired. "That doesn't seem to be what Mr. Geraldo thinks."*

*With confidence, Anthony turned to face me. "He tried to make me believe that Christopher Columbus discovered America" he exclaimed, reaching his hand out to touch my sleeve. "But, Ms. El-Amin, how can you discover something when someone else is already there?" Dropping his hands hurriedly to his side, Anthony continued in agony, "White people always want to think they started things, invented things, found things...when really all they do is steal!"*

The anecdote above is different from the previous one opening the chapter on Racial Identity. Whereas with a sound racial identity I started with examples from my experience that highlighted what African Americans believe or do without the pillar, in this section I want to begin with an example that highlights the impact of the pillar from the start. Anthony's story helps paint a picture of the reality African Americans face when trying to resist and overturn racist forces while simultaneously capturing the depth of knowledge that leads them to resist. **Critical Consciousness** is the second pillar in this framework and fuels this knowledge and motivation.

Critical Consciousness is an essential ingredient in an emancipatory educational framework and has two fundamental purposes in helping African Americans navigate and transform a racially unequal society. First, basic logic holds that you cannot *proactively* defend against something you can't see or don't know exists. As Paulo Friere (1972) explains, a first step towards liberation is being able to identify and name your oppression. Critical Consciousness

provides a name, face, and an understanding of the forces that African Americans have to be able to overcome in order to achieve liberation. Second, to actually eradicate racism, African Americans have to actively transition from just surviving in society (navigation) even if they are thriving to being willing to pursue social change (transformation). African Americans “will not gain liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it and through the recognition of the necessity to fight for it.” (Friere, 2000, p.45). Critical Consciousness serves as the key mechanism for that transition pushing people beyond naming their oppression to acting against that oppression.

The following section defines critical consciousness, explains how it achieves the above two outcomes using the opening anecdote as an example, and situates critical consciousness amongst the other pillars in this schooling framework.

### **Critical Consciousness Defined**

Critical Consciousness as a socio-political construct in education is most associated with Brazilian author and activist Paulo Friere, who conceived of critical consciousness as a direct tool for liberation and social transformation. At a basic level, critical consciousness entails developing a deep and nuanced understanding of the world and using that understanding to initiate action against oppressive forces. Different than racial identity, critical consciousness is inherently positive. It is a *definitively* liberatory concept used solely in the pursuit of either tangible or psychological emancipation. As such, there is little to no literature that seeks to refute it as a tool for relieving oppression. Therefore, this section will seek less to argue that critical consciousness is a tool for liberation – because it is by definition – and will rather seek to demonstrate *how* it is.

Furthermore, this chapter will draw solely on Friere's definition of critical consciousness.

There are two specific reasons for this. First, Friere's conceptual frame of critical consciousness is the most widely used and analyzed in social science and theoretical works across disciplines. As a result, most, if not all other definitions of critical consciousness pay heed to his original ideas. To this end, there are not widely variant understandings of critical consciousness or its component parts. Second, and perhaps most importantly, Friere's definition of critical consciousness is *directly* aligned to the goals of this framework – the pursuit of a new society. Since this framework is intended to position African Americans to alter their existing reality, using, discussing or analyzing definitions of critical consciousness that do not as explicitly embrace transformation would be futile.

Critical consciousness is both a state of mind and a pedagogical tool. Through Friere's work with Brazilian marginalized adults, Friere realized that oppression was perpetuated by both a lack of "functional" literacy (the ability to read text) and a lack of what he called "critical" literacy (Friere, 1970). Freire (*Ibid*) defined critical literacy as an ability to "decode" social conditions that served to sustain and exert social inequality and oppression. "To know the world," Friere stated, you have to be able to "read" it. Thus the first component of critical consciousness is reflection about and analysis of the sociopolitical environment (critical reflection).

*Critical reflection* is defined as the ability to analyze the root causes of racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and gendered disparities in society, particularly through a socio-historic lens

(Diemer et al., 2009).<sup>29</sup> Through critical reflection, individuals “engage in an analysis of context and power” on two levels (Tunstall, 2011). First, reflection on oppression in one’s *daily life* (micro), and second, reflection on how oppression becomes systemic and *institutionalized* (macro) (Koustic, 2009). Analysis on both of these levels and developing a nuanced understanding of the interactions across and within them begins with “problematization” (sometimes called problem posing education) or “challenging accepted explanations for phenomena that have been assumed as normal and logical, but which make people’s lives difficult; painful, unfair, and hard” (Montero, 2010, p. 78).

Critical reflection is a precursor to the desired outcome of *critical action*, the second component of critical consciousness. Critical action is defined as acting on the sociopolitical environment to combat oppression and transcend the corresponding social and economic consequences (1970; 1973). As Watts, Williams & Jaeger (2003) state, analysis without action does not bring about tangible change. Since Freire conceived of critical consciousness as a liberatory tool that could facilitate individual and systemic change; action is automatically assumed in his definition. For Freire critical consciousness is:

... characterized by the ability to separate one’s self from, and to de-reify and problematize aspects of, the socio-historical reality in which one is initially submerged, to critically perceive how that reality was constructed, and **to take responsibility to transform** aspects of that reality that are oppressive.

Freire, 2000, pp. 43 & 55 (bolding mine)

In other words,

“When you are critically conscious that means you are looking at yourself and the whole. If you don’t go back and do something or do some kind of change, then you are not really conscious (Tunstall, 2011, p.70).

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<sup>29</sup> As this framework is concerned with racial liberation, practitioners drawing on this framework should emphasize critical consciousness relevant to racial disparities and inequity.

These words, spoken by a young African American in a study on critical consciousness highlight both the transformational intention of critical consciousness and the relationship between both presented components of critical consciousness. The relationship between critical reflection and critical action is what Friere (1970) terms praxis. Praxis is defined as the reflexive movement between reflection and action. As a result of Praxis or the shift between reflection and action, critical consciousness is the bridge between navigation and transformation in this dissertation – it moves African Americans from surviving in society to acting to transform it.

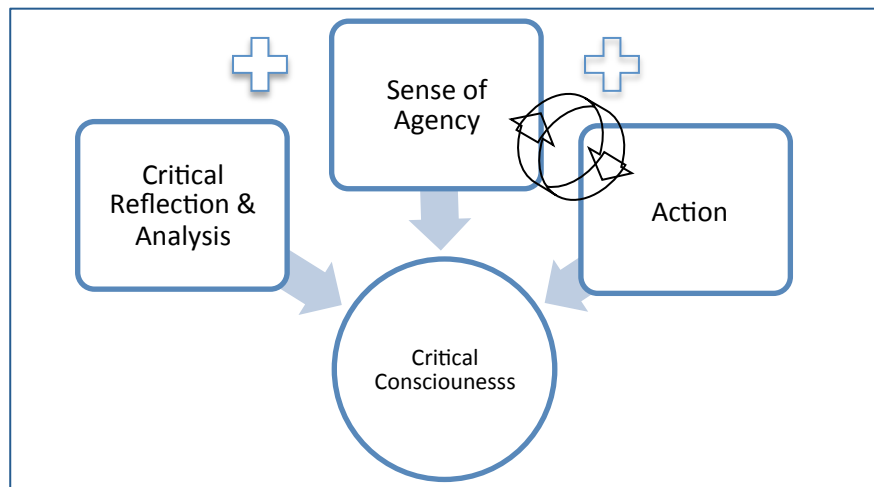
There is one additional component of critical consciousness that is necessary for this bridge to be fully operational. Critical reflection or understanding socio-political forces, might motivate African Americans to act against those forces, but motivation to act and actually engaging in action are not the same (Watts et al., 2003; Diemer et al., 2006; Kerpelman & Mosher, 2004). To keep people from becoming “armchair activists” who are equipped with the capacity for social analysis but decline to challenge systems and institutional frameworks (Watts et al., 2003) or to ensure praxis truly occurs, many scholars assert an additional component of critical consciousness (Watts, Diemer & Voigt, 2011).

*A sense of agency* (sometimes referred to as sociopolitical control/self-efficacy), or the belief that one is capable of changing societal inequities, helps move individuals from understanding their socio-political context to acting against that context (Diemer & Hsien, 2011). Those with higher levels of self-efficacy or agency set higher goals for themselves and are more persistent in achieving those goals (Bandura 1991). Thus, a sense of agency helps individuals use the information about socio-political conditions gathered from critical

reflection and their desire to change those conditions to actually plan to or set a goal to do so (Tunstall, 2011).

In sum, critical consciousness contains three distinct yet related dimensions in this work:

a) critical reflection, b) sense of agency (self-efficacy), and c) critical action.



**Figure 3: Subcomponents of Critical Consciousness**

## **The Impact of Critical Consciousness in the Struggle for Racial Liberation**

### **- Clarifying how Critical Consciousness “Works”**

Critical consciousness has not yet matured into a coherent body of empirical research (Diemer, Hsieh & Pan, 2009) even though it is situated in various disciplines as a tool for liberation. Most of the existing empirical research focuses on the factors, context and experiences that best nurture and facilitate critical consciousness (Lynn, Hassan & Johnson, 1999; Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan & Hsie, 2006; Diemer, Hsieh & Pan, 2009;



O’Conner, 1997), rather than the outcomes of critical consciousness. This is in part because there is not a psychometrically sound and broadly accepted standard of measurement of critical consciousness. For example, there are very few measures of critical reflection (Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011) and although there are some early stage attempts at models of measurement for critical action, these are still very nascent and not widely used. There is a greater body of empirical literature on sociopolitical development (Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011), which is often used interchangeably with critical consciousness in civic development literature (Diemer, 2003; Diemer et al., 2009), youth engagement literature (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) and psychological literature (Watts, Williams & Jager, 2003).<sup>30</sup> I will draw on that literature in the following section, however for the most part, psychological and theoretical research currently provides the best avenue for understanding critical consciousness’ value.

There are two ways that critical consciousness impacts African Americans. Anthony’s story offers an example of each and I will use his story as a lens to describe the impact of critical consciousness. First, critical consciousness (specifically critical reflection) helps African Americans recognize individual and systemic injustice *and* deconstruct both individual and systemic injustice into their underlying motivations and processes. For example, as a critically conscious African American, Anthony could see that his teacher, despite being the adult and the defined authority in the room, presented a historically inaccurate view of Christopher Columbus. Anthony knew the factual history of our country’s evolution – a canon of knowledge inherent in critical reflection—and therefore he knew Mr. Geraldo’s view was disrespectful and dismissive of the native indigenous people that developed a thriving society

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<sup>30</sup> See Watts & Flannagan, 2007 (particularly section on youth sociopolitical development). See Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003 for an overview of SPD and Watts et al., 2007 for an example of a model of SPD.

well before Christopher Columbus' arrival. Further, as a critically consciousness African American, Anthony also understood what purpose the lies stood to serve. When asked, he didn't hesitate to name the root cause of the lie as the desire to sustain white power.

The depth of understanding embedded in critical consciousness can lead to important navigational and transformational outcomes. For example, Anthony had the psychological power to resist the framing of whites as "all knowing and all powerful." This resistance is an important aspect of pursuing racial liberation, because it protects the oppressed from internalized notions of deficit. Critical Consciousness allowed Anthony to refute the dismissal of a marginalized group of people. Watts (1999) calls this the "affirmation" power of critical consciousness. That is that critical reflection allows African Americans to "define themselves, think from their own perspective and it is these definitions that give them power" (p. 257). Critical consciousness can also weaken the oppressor. Oppression is easiest to sustain when the disenfranchised ignore it, miss it or support it rather than resist it (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1999). However, critical consciousness makes visible intricate methods of racial injustice. Thus, we can think of critical consciousness as a source of resilience providing African Americans with an additional buffer from racist ideology and practice. Further, we can think of critical consciousness as empowering, providing African Americans with knowledge to contest racist ideology and practice.

Secondly, critical consciousness both expects and motivates action. When people understand the sociopolitical context that facilitate a negative consequences for their environment, they are more likely to be motivated to and to actually engage in activities that would alter that context (Hart & Atkins, 2002; Ginwright, 2010; Syverseten, Gill, Gally & Cumsille, 2009).

In Tunstall's (2011) study of African American students who participated in a summer program designed to build critical consciousness. Tunstall found that students' critical reflection about unfair and unjust practices in schools had a "significant impact on students' level of activism and involvement in schools" (p. 120). Freire's own words illuminate this relationship "...to every understanding, sooner or later an action corresponds. Once man perceives a challenge, understands it, and recognizes the possibilities of response, he acts. The nature of that action, corresponds to the nature of his understanding" (1973, p. 44).

Let's review Anthony's choices as an example. Anthony's critical reflection and resulting knowledge motivated him to engage in action towards racial justice. Specifically, Anthony's knowledge and analysis motivated him to overtly correct Mr. Geraldo and to persist in that correction. Even though Anthony was asked by our school principal to apologize to the Spanish teacher later on that day, he refused to do so, stating that he would not participate in the teaching of "racist" lies to students, particularly in the name of white supremacy. The third component of critical consciousness (self-efficacy) played the role of giving Anthony the "strength of self" needed to maintain his position and the courage to "disobey" first the Spanish teacher and then the principal, while his knowledge and analysis provided him with the motivation to do so. As a result of his statement and refusal to apologize, Anthony was banned from Spanish for the rest of the semester. The principal also gave him detention for a week. But Anthony refused to fold and, though he expressed sadness about missing a class he typically enjoyed, he stood firm that he did the "right" thing by speaking out. In sum, Anthony was able to critically reflect on a racist issue and that reflection and analysis spurred outrage, which in turn spurred action.

Because of critical consciousness' ability to motivate marginalized groups to engage in transformative action, it has become a central concept in bodies of literature focused on social change. Work on community organizing, youth political engagement, civic action and empowerment, and social movements all pay respect to critical consciousness. Certain fields rename the concept to give it a deeper focus on the actionable results it produces or the agency it generates (e.g., sociopolitical development, youth justice development theory). But all of these constructs are based in the elements of critical consciousness and contain to some extent each of its three components: critical reflection, agency and critical action.<sup>31</sup>

### **Addressing Concerns about “Harmful Impacts” of Critical Consciousness**

Despite both levels of impact – resilience and action, there are existing concerns about building critical consciousness in African Americans. Couldn't the depth of knowledge embedded in critical consciousness be harmful to African Americans? Wouldn't intricate contextual knowledge that systems and practices are intentionally developed to hold groups and individuals back or to retain the power of one group be overwhelming and cause depression or immobility? Theory provides insight and suggests otherwise.

We know that oppression is a part of a larger system that is not based in any legitimate knowledge or force. The decision of who is “privileged” and who isn't is based in large part on arbitrary categories and skills that ultimately protect those who are already “privileged.” Pierre Bourdieu (1986) stated that in every society there is a form of “dominant power.”

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<sup>31</sup> See Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003 for an overview of SPD and Watts & Flannagan, 2007 for an example of a model of SPD that explicitly contains and names the elements of critical consciousness. See Ginwright, 2002 for another theory of social analysis and action that uses critical consciousness as its root. See also Anyon, 2005 for a discussion of critical consciousness in relationship to social movements.

According to Bourdieu, the idea of dominance is predicated on conflict and the contest is not final at any given moment. Thus “dominant power”, Bourdieu asserts, is “fluid and arbitrary” and “acknowledgement of it as such is the only way to begin to deteriorate it.”(p.22). Further as a result of power’s fluid and arbitrary nature, people and institutions who wield power *always* have the *opportunity* to be challenged.

Using Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of dominance, we can begin to see how critical consciousness theoretically fuels a great sense of power in African Americans. First, critical consciousness demands that people reflect on and analyze the individual and systemic barriers that lead to oppression. In this reflection, individuals can realize that a) systems that hold them back are created and sustained by humans and have no legitimate basis or merit and b) individual experiences with racism are not isolated instances but are built on systemic and endemic processes that are in essence “allowed” to occur (Ginwright, 2006). This is typically comforting and affirming for marginalized groups (Watts et al., 1999). This does not mean that emotional responses – such as being overwhelmed or bewildered –do not occur in either the process of developing critical consciousness or in the critically conscious.

Suffering broadly defined, may be a part of learning about the nature of society’s unjust conditions. However, that suffering does not have to be debilitating despite or common understanding of the word. Avi Mintz (2013) calls this tension “the paradox of suffering.” He asserts that not all suffering is the same and that we could call “the painful awareness of the structural and cultural biases that limit oneself ‘empowering suffering’ – a pain inflicted to empower groups who face discrimination to realize the obstacles they face and to work to eliminate and overcome them.” (p.226).

Empirical evidence corroborates this claim. African Americans who have a clearer sense of how the course of their life may have been in part structurally determined are more empowered and consequently more healthy (Diemer, 2003). This works in a similar manner to low public regard. Critical consciousness or a nuanced understanding of oppression can help African Americans move from internal self-blame for racial hurdles to an appreciation of the role that external forces play. It becomes even clearer that the “problem” is not their race but rather the interpretation of their race that others have constructed. The decrease in self-blame increases an individual’s ability to develop external coping mechanisms and promotes psychological resilience (Kitano & Lewis, 2005). Shingles (1981) puts it best:

The realization that the reason for black deprivation does not lie squarely on them has allowed many poor blacks to transfer the responsibility ... from themselves to society and to the most visible symbol of society; government. The result is a mentally healthier and politically more active black citizenry. (p., 89)

Thus, critical consciousness is theorized to work as an “*antidote*” to oppression (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul- Adil, 1999; Ginwright, 2011) and empirical evidence once again corroborates. Zimmerman, Ramirez-Vallez & Maton (1999) conducted a study to determine whether or not critical consciousness insulated youth from helplessness and negative mental health. They found that critical consciousness moderated the effects of both helplessness and negative mental health in youth of color. Further and directly related to other navigational outcomes, critical consciousness has been associated with African American youth’s academic achievement and motivation (O’Connor, 1997; Carter, 2008), career development (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer, Wang & Smith, 2010), and job attainment (Diemer et al., 2009). It is however, important to make explicit that a key feature of critical consciousness at work in the outcomes above is an *accurate* understanding of the underlying causes of oppression and the reasons for its perpetuation. Simply providing African Americans with the fact that there is oppression is not the same thing as being

critically conscious. Practitioners cultivating this concept have to be sure to move African Americans from knowledge to analysis and from surface level understandings to a deeply nuanced and contextualized frame.

Another concern is that critical consciousness could promote inaction as African Americans learn about the complexities and depths of the obstacles facing them. However, extant empirical research suggests that knowing about the lack of merit that informs hierarchal structures doesn't promote immobility but instead, as highlighted in the anecdote above, may give people the courage and the strength to dismantle (or try to dismantle) those structures. Consistent studies in psychology, education, civics and youth empowerment show that African Americans "who are knowledgeable about dominant forms of power and how this power affects them move from self-blame to informed efforts at change" (Anyon, 2005, p.180). Janie Ward (2000) found in her study of African American women that "the development of a critical perspective on the world resulted in the refusal to allow oneself to become stifled by victimization or to accept an ideology of blaming the victim and enabled black youth to resist racial oppression" (p. 54). Lewis, Sullivan and Bybee (2006) corroborate these findings. The authors studied the outcomes of an emancipatory curriculum implemented in a predominately African American school. Students were randomly assigned to an emancipatory class, which focused heavily on critical consciousness building and deepening an awareness of racism. Experimental and control group data showed that African Americans in the experimental curriculum scored higher than the control group on overall social change involvement (Sullivan, Bybee, Lewis, 2006). Friere (2000) articulates this process as individuals "...develop[ing] their power ... they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation... sooner or later they may

perceive the contradiction that education seeks to maintain... and then engage themselves in the struggle for their liberation. (p. 75)

Interestingly, even scholars who worry that critical consciousness or recognition of oppression might be harmful to African Americans recognize that critical consciousness is nonetheless a pre-requisite for change. For example, Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith & Huo (1997) state that although knowing about racist forces can lead to negative psychological and physical health outcomes, members of stigmatized groups *must* recognize events as unfair before attempting to engage in strategies that may help change the status quo. (p.34). Further Cronin, Lecin, Branscombme, Van Laar and Tropp, (2012) state, “although perceiving discrimination may have a direct negative effect on psychological well-being, perceptions of discrimination may also be a *necessary* condition for efforts to improve the group’s status through activism.” Therefore even with some small disagreement about the psychological effects of critical consciousness on African Americans there is resounding agreement that critical consciousness is necessary for African Americans to pursue transformation. Thus, its inclusion in this framework is essential. My intent in this chapter is not to suggest that all African Americans will have the exact same response to critical consciousness. I am rather offering an explanation of how critical consciousness properly nurtured and internalized is empirically demonstrated to operate as a liberation tool and describing how it is theorized to operate.



### **Critical Consciousness as a part of the whole**

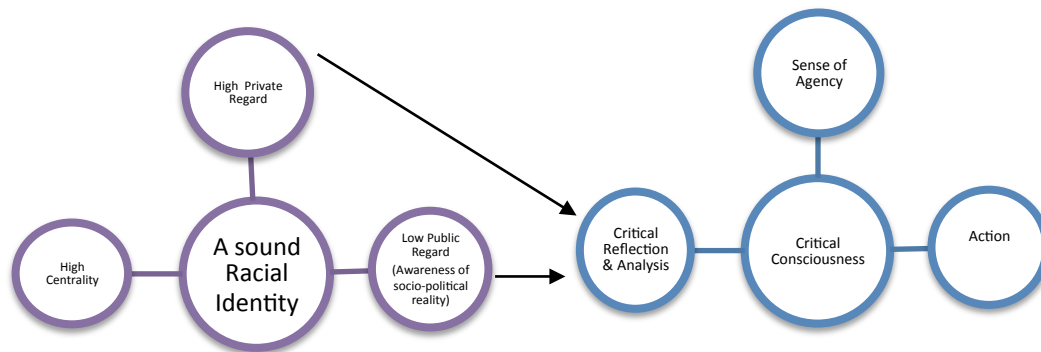
I have just outlined what critical consciousness is and explained the role it has in navigation and transformation efforts and thus justified its place in this educational framework.

However, as stated previously, all of the pillars in this educational framework are intricately interwoven and none of them can work alone to ensure the desired result.

True to its role as the foundational pillar, a sound racial identity is required to effectively build critical consciousness.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, critical consciousness builds off two dimensions of a sound racial identity: high private regard and low public regard. First, a strong internal belief in African Americans' value (high private regard) helps people accept (counter to popular discourse) that there are reasons outside of their personal and collective deficiency to the burdens evident in their racial group experiences. Secondly, as we already know, low public regard is the knowledge of negative perceptions of African Americans. And as we just learned, critical consciousness is comprised of both knowledge and analysis. Thus, critical consciousness is an extension of low public regard; the latter serves as a basic knowledge base and the former serves as the analytic lens.

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<sup>32</sup> One could argue that critical consciousness in regards to other axis of oppression (gender/class) does not require a sound racial identity. However as this framework is focused on the racial emancipation of a particular group, a sound racial identity is absolutely necessary to cultivate or build critical consciousness that works towards this end.



**Figure 4: The Relationship between A Sound Racial Identity and Critical Consciousness**

While the two concepts are interrelated, they have different roles in pursuing a society without race-based inequity. Critical consciousness includes a canon of knowledge (built from a sound racial identity), but it also embodies a set of skills (that a sound racial identity doesn't): the ability to deconstruct, take apart and analyze embedded racist frames and power. When African Americans have a sound racial identity, they know there are deeply problematic racist roots in institutions, policies and people. However, with *only* a sound racial identity, African Americans may or may not understand fully the reasons for systemic racist forces. A sound racial identity, as previously shown, assists African Americans in seeing that the stereotypes about their group are likely false, but it doesn't *on its own* explain the long historical and contemporary reasons that racist practices, structures and beliefs exist in the first place, let alone continue. To adequately transform racist conditions, African Americans have to understand both how those conditions are developed and how they are sustained. This analysis is embedded in a critical consciousness. Thus, critical consciousness has a unique role in actually getting to a new and free society for African Americans.

Critical Consciousness also plays a role in other pillars in this framework: namely a Liberation Centered Academic Identity and Collective Obligation. Collective Obligation includes the desire to act on behalf of the group as a result of knowing that the group is deprived of certain conditions. This knowledge is built from a critical consciousness. Thus it is unlikely that an African American would have a sense of collective obligation as it is defined in this framework, without first being critically consciousness. Further connections between critical consciousness and other pillars will be discussed in the following chapters.

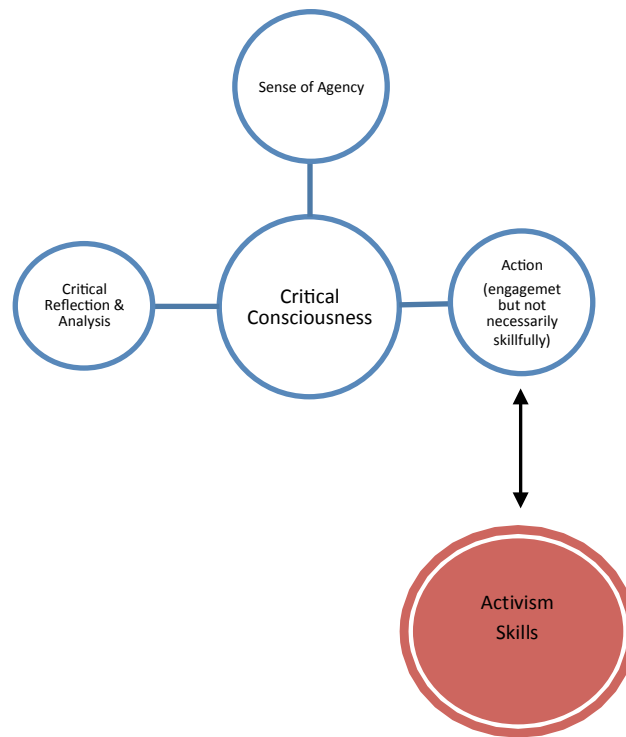
### **Is Critical Consciousness Enough for Transformation?**

Yet despite critical consciousness' transformative powers and the role it plays with other pillars overall, there is still something missing for critical consciousness to be *the* lever for social change for African Americans. In much of the literature on critical consciousness there is an assumed ability to act and minimal discussion on where the tools to effectively engage in action come from. How exactly are African Americans equipped to take action beyond their knowledge and their will? Let's consider an example assuming fully operational critical consciousness. As a young African American, I might see how the methods my school uses for class assignment practices ultimately serve to hold African American students back. Further, I might feel a sense of agency, in so much that I believe that I know I can do something about it because these decisions are rooted in fallacies and arbitrary associations of blackness to low levels of achievement. But where do I go to gather the strategies and ideas for what to do? Who or what helps me recognize that in this situation, I am likely to garner the outcome I want with allies (other students, parents, community members) vs. launching a single campaign on my own as a disenfranchised student? From where does that information come? And once it comes, how am I prepared to recruit, train

and lead this movement against the unjust practices in my school? Perhaps I act, as critical consciousness compels me too, but without this knowledge, do I act in the most strategic and effective way?

Anthony's narrative provides an additional opportunity to analyze the question of "effective" action. One could argue that although Anthony took a clear stand against a racist narrative, his course of action was not the most effective. His decision to speak out in Spanish class came at a cost to him – he lost his opportunity to learn Spanish. Perhaps there may have been a different course of action that still advocated his point of view and yet did not harm him academically (e.g. speaking to Mr. Geraldo after class, writing a letter to the curriculum board). That said, for Anthony, the loss of Spanish instruction did not overshadow the need for his classmates to hear the "truth," or the real time urgency to recognize those who came before Christopher Columbus. Although in Anthony's case, the benefits outweighed the cost, how do critically conscious individuals always know how to make the best decisions not only about *how* to engage in action but also *when*? Several skills such as power analysis and risk analysis would ultimately enhance this decision making process.

Therefore, critical consciousness, even with critical action embedded within it, must be coupled with true strategies and skills to ensure that action yields the desired result. In this vein, being explicit about skill building was a critical component of The Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panther Movement, and the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa. Each involved and explicitly required grassroots training on and in the tactics of social action (Biko, 1971). Thus critical consciousness becomes a more *effective* transformation tool when **activism skills** are added to it.



**Figure 5: The Role of Activisms Skills**

Given this, the final pillar in this work is Activism Skills and the last chapter will assert a categorical understanding of activism skills that may best position African Americans to utilize their critical consciousness in the most meaningful way. For now, readers should feel clear that critical consciousness is the start of transformative practices but is not enough to leverage the cataclysmic societal shifts that will eradicate racism.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen the direct effect that critical consciousness can have in positioning African Americans to both navigate and begin to transform society. Anthony represents a positive example of an African American who demonstrates critical consciousness and its

corresponding impact. Yet, becoming critically conscious in a society that exerts a herculean effort towards hiding “truths” is difficult.<sup>33</sup> This is particularly true in the absence of clear and intentional teaching that provides facts and tools for analysis. For as many moments of pride that I had with young people like Anthony, who chose to speak their truth despite resistant and sometimes hostile crowds, I had another million moments of despair where kids sat in silence, oblivious that there was even another truth to consider. Once on a field trip to D.C, I overheard two students discuss the recent arrest of over a dozen men in their community. Their discussion approached this problem devoid of context about the mass incarceration of African Americans in society at large. They had no idea that the problems they saw translated to a larger America and that those problems were not simply borne of “cultural deficits” and poor decision making, but were also rooted in a historical precedent to over-institutionalize black men, a system of poverty, a system of over-policing and a system claiming to be color-blind yet enforcing racially biased consequences for infractions. With this lack of understanding and an inability to interrogate their community or the broader society, the students came to a disheartening conclusion: “African American men are just stupid.”

There is no ability to proceed with an emancipatory education framework without the direct, intentional and effective cultivation of critical consciousness. Without it, transformation simply isn't possible. As mentioned, it is difficult to fight something you can't see. And it is difficult to fight something *effectively* that you do not understand. An effort to overturn an enemy whose motives you don't know, whose tactics you don't recognize, and whose fears you can't name is undoubtedly less targeted and therefore less powerful. Malcolm X, one of

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<sup>33</sup> See James Loewen (1995) *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Text Book Got Wrong* for a basic overview of this effort.

the greatest social change agents of our time and a man who was undeniably proficient in leading African Americans to fight for racial justice, makes the role of critical consciousness clear: “The greatest mistake of our movement,” he claimed, “... is trying to organize a sleeping people around specific goals. You have to *wake the people up first*... then you'll get action” (1989).

## CHAPTER 4. COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION

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*I was sitting in my office, getting ready to close out for the day, when she walked in. She was tall and all smiles. “Ms. El-Amin!” she exclaimed, running over to give me a hug. It had been 5 years since I saw her last as a 5<sup>th</sup> grade student in my class. “Keyonna!” I shouted excitedly. For the next hour, we sat side by side and caught up. She told me about her experience in tenth grade and shared that she felt she was a strong competitor for academic college scholarships. I proudly shared that I finally hung my hammock in my backyard—the same hammock, she knew I started putting up when she was my student. As we reminisced about her all African American classmates, she told me about a few that had been having some trouble. “I am so glad it is going to be over soon,” she said earnestly. “What is?” I asked. “Being here,” she responded, spreading her arms to indicate the Atlanta neighborhood surrounding us. “I can understand that,” I replied, conjuring images of the various hurdles her community faced and the challenges those hurdles posed for her and many of the other kids I loved. “You will be able to do some helpful things though, when you come back.” “Come back?” she laughed as she tipped back her chair swinging her brown arms expressively, “Why would I do that?”*

### Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, a sound racial identity positions African Americans to feel positively about themselves as African Americans, despite the fact that the United States harbors negative feelings about African Americans overall. Chapter 2 described how critical consciousness is theoretically and empirically documented to motivate African Americans to action. In this chapter, I discuss how collective obligation further cultivates African Americans’ motivation to engage in a fight for racial liberation and clarify how the *specific* motivation generated by collective obligation is a necessary addition to this framework.

I chose not to fully describe the nature of racist forces in Chapter 1. This is because the role of racism in African Americans lives is substantially documented and need not be proven here. However, as the goal of this framework is to position African Americans to thrive in our society and transform it, it is important to now consider what African Americans are up against.



Given the entrenched nature of racism in the United States, it will take a monumental effort to actually change our society's racial hierarchies. Racism is embedded in complex ways in virtually every system and institution throughout the country (Bobo, 2001). As Bonilla- Silva (2001) explains, "the foundation of racism is not the ideas that individuals may have about others but the social edifice erected over racial inequality" (p. 23). As such, any chance at "liberation for African Americans must ultimately involve transformation of oppressive social structures" (Moane, 2003, p.92). This transformation would include, for example, eliminating housing policies and practices that result in African Americans' getting turned down for loans at higher rates than White Americans (Aleo & Svirsky, 2008), being more likely to be targeted for subprime loans (Calem, Gillen, & Wachter, 2004, p. 395) and being consistently blocked from owning property in higher wealth neighborhoods (Massey, 1993). Transforming our society's racist social edifice would also include tearing down a justice system that allows for African American men in some states to be sent to prison on drug charges at twenty to fifty times the rates of White men (Alexander, 2012) and for African Americans to be admitted to prisons at 6 times the rates of White Americans overall (Alexander, 2012). This transformation would still yet include dismantling an economic system that makes it possible for unemployment for African Americans to be nearly 50% higher than that of White Americans and to make 66 cents on every dollar that White Americans make even when they are employed (Pew Research Center, 2012; U.S Department of Labor, 2014). Add to this already complex task the fact that these institutions are embedded in a power structure that serves the interest of the dominant group, and the challenge is altogether terrifying. Yet the sole purpose of this framework is to mine literature to combine those concepts that have the best chance of preparing African Americans for the job. There is no roadmap for this type of radical change. However, there are research-based

strategies that offer a promising pathway: specifically the use of group solidarity and collective action.

Scholars across numerous fields, from community organizing (Alinsky, 1971) and political science (Chong & Rogers, 2004) to social movement theory (Tarrow, 1994) and youth activism (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007), have found that groups of people who identify and work with one another collectively are far more effective than are individuals in bringing about serious and lasting political and social change (Miller, Gurin, Gurin & Malanchuk, 1981).

With respect to African Americans in particular, for example, Lucius Outlaw (2005) explains:

The struggle of African Americans continues to be that of seeking progressive liberation at levels capable of being shared. Toward this end, however, the concrete realities of the politics of the past, present, and foreseeable future demand that African people in the United States approach the struggle from the level of a group (i.e. racial and ethnic, or as some would say, “nationalist”) position, the only viable position in terms of which to achieve limited goals within the present order of things. (p. 4)

This group identification and collaboration were missing in Keyonnia’s strategy for change. Her sole aspiration was to leave her community and to forge a new and better life for herself. It did not occur to Keyonnia that the shifts she desired in her neighborhood, rooted in institutional and structural disregard, were most likely to occur with group solidarity and action, nor that she might be able to contribute to that group action if she returned. I pushed Keyonnia on this point as our conversation continued. Yet she maintained that her responsibility was to herself. She declared that she could not take care of her community and take of herself. Even, when I explained that Keyonnia could take care of herself through achieving socially and economically and then come back and offer these benefits to the

community, she was dismissive, asserting that she did not consider this contribution necessary.<sup>34</sup> There are a myriad of reasons that Keyonna may have developed this position. Yet regardless of how she got there, her stance is troublesome for the racial liberation of African Americans. African Americans can not garner the collective power Outlaw asserts is the only possible route to radical change, if they are not attentive and responsible to each other. This responsibility does not have to come at the expense of individual success as Keyonna thought, but rather needs to be complimentary to individual success. To fight an enemy so pervasive and powerful as structural and institutional racism, African Americans need to forge a group connection and interest, and then need to act in concert with one another against their common enemy.

The greatest African American leaders of our time similarly believed in this theory of change. Thus, “in an effort to liberate blacks from the burden of racial oppression, black leaders consistently called on African Americans to become a more unified collective body.”(Shelby, 2002, p. 231). Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X are clear examples of such calls. Both leaders emphatically asserted that group unity and group action were essential approaches for achieving African American racial liberation, despite other notable disagreements (i.e. nonviolence vs. by any means necessary). Malcolm X, for example, formed an organization built around the principles of group cohesion and collective action called the Organization of African Unity. The organization was intended to “unite everyone in the Western Hemisphere of African descent into one united force” and to “ support the aspirations of African American people for brotherhood and solidarity in a larger unity.” Speaking of the organization’s focus, Malcolm X stated, “African Americans must unite and work together...

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<sup>34</sup> While Keyonna and I were talking about returning to her community in the literal sense, she was also not fully open to the idea conceptually. That is that she should and was responsible to use some of her accumulated benefits for the benefit of her community.

we must seek allies in ourselves.”<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther King extends on these notions of group unity to advocate for group action, declaring, “there must be more than a statement to the larger society, there must be a force that interrupts its functioning at some key point. That interruption must not, however be clandestine or surreptitious. It must be open and above all, conducted by large masses.” (King, 2010).

As both of the above leaders knew, racial liberation is a group goal (i.e., one cannot be truly racially liberated if the race is not racially liberated). **Collective Obligation** therefore is the third pillar in this framework. Collective Obligation shifts African Americans beyond a sense of an individually racialized self (sound racial identity) to a sense of group, and promotes a desire to act on behalf of their racial whole. The following chapter defines collective obligation, outlines the impact of collective obligation for African Americans and situates collective obligation amongst the other pillars in this schooling framework.

### **Defining Collective Obligation**

Neither group cohesiveness nor action on behalf of a group “springs from thin air” (Levinson, 2012, p.93). In fact, both group unity and group action require that individuals are *motivated to* act towards the needs of a shared collective and *know how to* engage in action together. Where and how people acquire the skills for effective collective action will be discussed in the final chapter. This chapter instead focuses on the necessary pre-cursor – individuals’ commitment to engage *for* a group. What creates or generates an individual’s interest in the collective? Further -- and perhaps more importantly for the goals of this

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<sup>35</sup> Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcolm X* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), pp. 35-67. - See more at: <http://www.blackpast.org/1964-malcolm-x-s-speech-founding-rally-organization-afro-american-unity#sthash.JbMdSeyP.dpuf>

framework -- what motivates an individual to act for that collective using the strategy termed collective action?

Extant literature answers these questions and helps draw a map around what might generate that motivation. Both theoretical and empirical literature assert that individuals can have an identity rooted in a sense of responsibility to their racial group and that this concept plays a powerful role in African Americans' desire to participate specifically in group action (heretofore termed collective action). Substantial literatures are found in political science and its related fields of civics and political theory, and in psychology and particularly social psychology. Political science and Social psychology literature is most relevant to this work because these groups studying group consciousness, solidarity and collective obligation want to better understand why people become involved in collective action (Duncan, 1999), similar to my interests and goals in this chapter. Therefore, the remainder of the chapter draws primarily from these bodies.

Because this concept is found in multiple disciplines and fields, there is a lot of terminological variation, including group consciousness (Duncan, 1999), racial solidarity (Chong & Rogers, 2005), and collective responsibility (Levinson, 2012). Moving forward, I use the term "collective obligation" to refer to literature speaking of group consciousness, group solidarity and collective responsibility,<sup>36</sup> and more broadly the idea of being motivated to act *with* and *on behalf of* a group or a collective.

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<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that collective obligation is specific to marginalized groups and is not as theorized or studied as it relates to dominant social groups.

*Unpacking Collective Obligation as a Concept in Political Science*

Most political science literature asserts that collective obligation must begin first with group identification. Group identification is the extent to which an individual sees her/himself as a part of a given group, which may or may not be tied to others' ascriptive judgment about the individual's group membership (Mclain, Carew, & Walton, Jr., 2009, p. 473). Instead of ascription, group identity is a psychological state and includes only a person's beliefs about the groups to which they belong. Group identification is expressed by a thought such as, "I am African American and that is important to me." This is separate from an awareness of group membership such as "Others view me or see me as African American." Despite different meanings, group identity and group membership can be mutually reinforcing because being ascribed to a group can affect a person's group identity. For example, "I am seen as African American" (group membership), "and therefore I identify as African American" (group identity). That said, regardless of how group identity is formed, group identity means an individual's psychological attachment to a group and their subsequent view of her/himself as a member of that group. The relationship between group identity and a sound racial identity will be unpacked in a later section of the chapter, however at this point, the reader should know that a sound racial identity necessarily includes a group identity. That is in order to have a sound racial identity, African Americans have to believe and feel connected to a group called African American – this is the precise definition of group identity.

Group identity is necessary for group consciousness, which is formed when individuals combine their group identity with consciousness about the groups' status in society (Miller, Gurin & Gurin, Malanchuk, 1981; Chong & Rogers, 2005, Duncan, 1999, 2010; Levinson,

2012). In addition to group identity, group consciousness rests on three further components: an understanding of the group's position in a power hierarchy, and a belief that the group is deprived of power relative to the dominant group;<sup>37</sup> a rejection of the reasons society offers for why the group is positioned relative to the dominant group; and most critical for this work, a belief that people should pool their resources to eliminate the obstacles that face the group (Duncan, 1999; Gurin, Miller & Gurin, 1980; Austin, Middleton & Yon, 2011).<sup>38</sup>

Group consciousness can be formed about any group to which an individual identifies, as long as that group experiences deprivation relative to other similar groups (Miller et al, 1981).<sup>39</sup> For example, the construct can be applied to class, gender or race groups.

Just as critical consciousness is specifically a consciousness about the structural components in society that work to marginalize groups, group consciousness also contains this same structural understanding and requirement. This may be hard to achieve, as Miller, Gurin, Gurin and Malanchuk (1981) explain:

Those group members who do view their group as relatively deprived may not attribute the group's position to systemic causes. They may instead regard personal failings as the primary cause of their situation in society. As a result, attempts at changing the conditions might thus become directed at themselves rather than toward the political system. (p,495)

Group members who direct their change efforts towards themselves rather than structural components cannot then be said to possess genuine group consciousness. Group consciousness by definition means that an individual understands the systemic causes that

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<sup>37</sup> This component of group consciousness helps explain why collective obligation is not discussed for majority groups. It by definition involves a group perceiving an inequality between their group and the dominant group. In the case of race, Collective obligation is discussed as a concept held by people of color and not White People.

<sup>38</sup> See Gurin, Miller & Gurin (1980) for a more robust explanation of group consciousness – termed stratum consciousness by the authors and the foundational work in political science for this concept.

<sup>39</sup> This experience of deprivation must be actual deprivation. This means that groups that believe they are deprived and in fact not deprived (i.e. White Americans who believe they are disproportionately affected by affirmative action), are not displaying group consciousness as it is outlined in the literature.

are perpetuating the group's position relative to the dominant group and that their action is directed towards those systems and structures. It should be noted that although both group consciousness and critical consciousness by definition contain an understanding of structural components of inequality and marginalization, they can lead to different ends/types of action. This will be further explained in a later section of the chapter.

Group consciousness is often operationalized or measured in political science using a concept called *linked fate*. Linked fate is a belief system that helps to explain how and why an individual shifts from simply group identity to group consciousness. Linked fate is defined as a person believing that one's fate as an individual is linked to the fate of the group. It is embedded in the famous words of Martin Luther King, "we may have all come here on different ships, but we are in the same boat now" (Lewis, 2014). In making this claim, Martin Luther King was trying to push African Americans to stop seeing themselves as independent and unilateral and instead see themselves as deeply connected and embroiled in a collective battle.

Linked fate for African American expands from this belief and is the complete "recognition that individual life chances are inextricably tied to the race as a whole" (Siemen, 2005, p.529).

Scholars suggest that linked fate in African Americans is built from "lived experiences, specifically day-to-day encounters with race oppression and class exploitation" that ultimately drive African Americans to participate in collective action as a necessary form of resistance (Siemen, 2005, p.530; Dawson; 1994; Gurin et al., 1980;1981; Tate, 1994).

Malcolm X describes this process: "Oppression makes people brothers, degradation makes people brothers, discrimination makes people brothers, segregation makes people brothers and humiliation makes people brothers." (Malcolm X, 1965, p. 66). In essence, as Malcolm

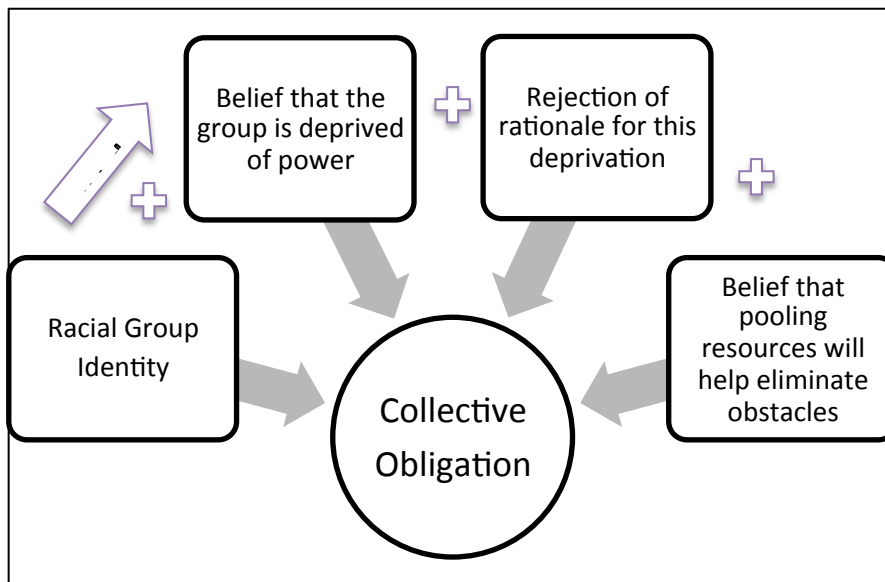


X describes, linked fate “is the excessive exploitation of a group that creates this sense of unity for action” (Malcolm X, 1964).<sup>40</sup> Linked fate as a measure of group consciousness has been found to have a role in commitments to coalitions of people of color (Reese & Brown 1995; Brown & Shaw, 2002), certain political activities such as signing petitions and contacting government officials (Chong & Rogers, 2005) and racial attitudes and perceptions of racism (Masuoka & Junn, 2013). In sum, for African Americans, linked fate is a critical cognitive component of racial group consciousness (Hochschild, 2005). It should therefore be understood by educators as an underlying and necessary component for group identity to shift into group consciousness and for group consciousness to ultimately lead to collective action.

As stated in this chapter’s opening, I have renamed group consciousness Collective Obligation in this framework. Thus, as described in the literature, Collective Obligation starts first with group identity and then -- often through the concept of linked fate -- transitions into a set of beliefs about the group that lead to collective action. Within the context of this framework, I am specifically talking about educators being intentional about cultivating a racial group identity that can be leveraged for collective racial obligation.

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<sup>40</sup> Although it will not be further discussed given its roots in social psychology, social psychologists assert that the emotions (anger, frustration and resentment) generated from the knowledge of excessive exploitation are what causes people to engage in collective action (Van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears, 2008). This is sometimes termed relative deprivation theory (Walker & Smith, 2002). This is an interesting pedagogical note for educators that may use this framework. The emotions no doubt present in realizing one is deprived of rights, freedom can be intentionally used towards social action. This is also draws on theoretical insights discussed in chapter two about the impact of critical consciousness.



**Figure 6: Subcomponents of Collective Obligation**

### Clarifying how Collective Obligation “Works”

To ensure that Collective Obligation can be pedagogically understood and therefore properly nurtured in schools, allow me to present an example using my gender identity. I identify as a woman (group identification), but mere identification does not mean that I am conscious of the ways in which women are subject to marginalization and disenfranchisement as a result of our patriarchal society. “Group identification doesn’t by itself entail a perception of inequality. Having a sense of shared interest or identify with a particular stratum or group does not mean that one must also believe that the group is somehow lacking in relevant resources compared with other strata groups” (Gurin et, al., 1981, p. 495).

Let us imagine that no one ever equips me with the knowledge that women are subject to marginalization and disenfranchisement based on the fact that we live in a patriarchal society. With no knowledge of the group’s position in society, why would I be motivated to

act on the group's behalf specific to liberation? Just as I discussed in Chapter 2 with critical consciousness, I can't be interested in disrupting an enemy that I do not know exists and further, I cannot wish for freedom from a cage I cannot see. Therefore, group identity alone is not enough to motivate people towards collective action on behalf of the group with which they identify.

But, *since* I identify as a woman, when I learn (or I am taught) about the way in which society marginalizes woman and realize (or am taught) that I am subject to those same conditions as a woman, I might begin to see that the conditions of women *as a group* are directly related to my conditions as an individual. From that belief, I can develop a sense of motivation that encourages me to act on behalf of myself and other woman. Linked fate leads to collective obligation. Thus, it is collective obligation that ultimately influences people to engage in activities beneficial to the group (Dawson, 1994). What practitioners and educators must take away then, is that in order for African Americans to be motivated to work on behalf of African Americans as a whole, group identity has to be intentionally leveraged towards collective obligation.

### **The Impact of Collective Obligation on African Americans**

The primary impact of collective obligation on African Americans related to the pursuit of racial liberation is the relationship between collective obligation and collective action. Collective action is the term often used to describe groups coming together to take action towards a specific goal and this type of action is believed to be a powerful lever for social change (Tarrow, 1994; Della Porta & Rucht, 2009). Collective action can take many forms, including but not limited to, protests, demonstrations, civil disobedience, voting strategically in blocks, boycotts, and marches (Levinson, 2012). It is important to note that collective

action can also take place individually but still be in service of the group. For example, voting in blocks is a group strategy but each individual votes individually. Collective action therefore refers to an action a group takes together but does not always imply that the group is physically in the same place.

Empirical evidence demonstrates collective obligations impact on African Americans' active involvement in collective action. When deprivation is perceived as group-based and unjust, that relative deprivation is a strong predictor of collective action (Kelly & Breinlinger, 2012). African Americans with higher levels of collective obligation participate in political activities to a greater extent than those with lower levels (Olsen 1970; Shingles 1981, 86; Verba & Nie 1972; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978; Kawakammi & Dion, 1995) and regardless of their economic or education status, utilize the political process as a way to address discrimination (Henry & Munoz, 1991). Chong & Rogers (2005) similarly found a significant relationship between collective obligation and specific types of collective action (i.e. those that require solidarity over political content knowledge or skill such as protest, rallies and boycotts).<sup>41</sup>

The greatest example that we have of this relationship and of African Americans operating as a collective group in service of racial freedom is the Civil Rights Movement. During this time, hundreds of thousands of African Americans joined together and acted in numerous strategic ways to force the country to provide more just and humane treatment to African Americans. The outcomes of this collective action were undeniably significant, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, anti-poverty laws, education legislation, affirmative action laws, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These outcomes demonstrate the power that is possible

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<sup>41</sup> Note that Chong & Rogers (2005) make clear that all component parts of collective obligation have to be measured to demonstrate the correlation between collective obligation and collective action. See Chong & Rogers (2005) for a further discussion.

when African Americans come together to demand their racial freedom through united and collective effort. Such collective action also heightened all Americans' consciousness about the brutal and unjust treatment of African Americans overall (Klareman, 1994).

There has not been a group movement of the same magnitude involving African Americans as a collective until recently. This past year, in response to the brutal and often deadly treatment of African Americans by police enforcement across the United States, various groups merged under the campaign title #BlackLivesMatter. African Americans joined forces through rallies, protests and demonstrations and literally shouted their demands for more just, safe and anti-racist policing practices. The outcomes of #BlackLivesMatter are unclear, in large part because the movement is still in very early stages. Yet arguably this modern day collective action has spurred an increased national consciousness of police brutality against African Americans, a consciousness permitted to escape the active minds of many Americans for far too long.

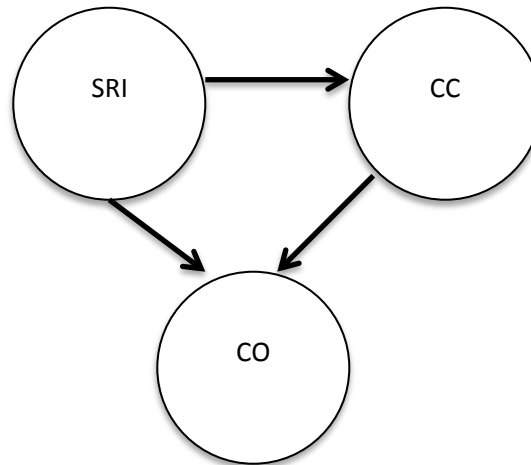
### **Situating Collective Obligation in the Broader Framework**

The idea of leveraging group identity for collective obligation brings us back to the previous pillars of this framework. While collective obligation draws on existing concepts, there is a unique value to collective obligation in this work. Specifically, collective obligation *intentionally* and deeply focuses African Americans on their racial group and positions African Americans to be responsible for it. The focus on responsibility to the group is what differentiates collective obligation from a sound racial identity.

Yet, collective obligation is inextricably linked to the previous two pillars. First, collective obligation reiterates that a sound racial identity is the foundational concept for preparing

African Americans to navigate and transform a racist society. Collective Obligation is built from group identity. Group identity is automatically embedded in a sound racial identity. That is, by having a sound racial identity, African Americans necessarily believe that they are a part of a group called and described as African American (racial centrality). Since collective obligation cannot develop without group identity, by cultivating a sound racial identity in African Americans, we are automatically laying the groundwork for developing collective obligation.

A sound racial identity is not the only pillar implicated in collective obligation. Critical Consciousness similarly plays a foundational role in the development of collective obligation. Collective Obligation includes an understanding of the systemic and institutional factors that lead to the marginalization of a group. Further, collective obligation encompasses the belief that those factors or the systems that uphold them are arbitrary. This is the precise definition of critical reflection – a component of critical consciousness. Further, in order for an individual to be motivated to act on behalf of a group, s/he has to believe that acting would matter or make a difference, as well as that s/he has the individual capacity to act (Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam, 1990). This is the precise definition of self-efficacy. Here we can see that the order of the pillars in this framework is intentional. If we adequately equip African Americans with a sound racial identity and nurture critical consciousness, we are 2/3 of the way towards building African Americans collective obligation.



**Figure 7: Relationship between SRI, CC and Collective Obligation**

But collective obligation is not produced naturally. What collective obligation offers, that neither a sound racial identity nor critical consciousness does, is the entrenched connection between self and group. As described, a person with a sound racial identity doesn't necessarily have to feel any particular solidarity with another member of his racial group. They could simply stay at group identity, believing that they are a part of a group called African Americans, feeling a relative sense of pride about that (private regard), and understanding that the world's perception of them and their perception of themselves may not match (public regard). However, linked fate, which is embedded in collective obligation, necessitates the link between self and group. If I am led to believe that my fate is conditional on your fate, then I understand that, as a powerful documentary on Ethnic Studies states, "you are my other me" (Precious Knowledge, 2011). I understand that I can't aspire to my own racial freedom and not also consider yours. Thus, while a sound racial identity facilitates African Americans feeling that that they are a part of a group, it does not ensure that African Americans feel responsible to that group. This is the unique contribution of collective

obligation. Collective obligation draws on the understanding that one is a part of a group and generates a sense of responsibility through group consciousness and linked fate for that group.

A sense of linked fate is not randomly leveraged in collective obligation; rather, it is specifically leveraged towards group engagement and collective action. The specification of the type of action that follows the motivation of collective obligation is the other unique value that the concept adds to the framework. This is entirely different from a critical consciousness, which similarly focuses African Americans on action. While critical consciousness does presuppose action, it doesn't define that action explicitly as collective. As such, one could leverage critical consciousness for purely individual ends. This might be the most adequate way of describing Keyonna's choice. Collective Obligation, on the other hand, encourages African Americans to consider collective action by locating the deprivation of the group in systems and structures.

Overall, the primary practical value of collective obligation is grounded in the engagement of collective action. We know empirically that with all beliefs embedded in collective obligation, African Americans are more likely to participate in collective efforts. By embedding African Americans with a sense of collective obligation, then, we are offering them a specific strategy for achieving racial liberation— collective uplift and social transformation. Though not discussed fully in this work, we can imagine that there are other values of embedding a deep sense of collective obligation in African Americans. First, there may be a relational value. African Americans may feel closer to each other in communities, the country and most locally their schools. Second, there may be a psychological value. With both critical consciousness and collective obligation combined, African Americans may be less inclined to



interpret instances of racism as personal and connected to themselves as individuals. Further they may feel less isolated in their day-to-day experiences with racist practices and subjection to racist ideologies.

### **A Necessary Inclusion**

My focus on collective action isn't meant to dismiss the power and necessity of other steps on the pathway to change. Anthony's interactions with Mr. Geraldo in Chapter 2, a single African American acting against an individual system, clearly demonstrated an important method for racial progress. One could also argue that Anthony's refusal to let Mr. Geraldo speak inaccurately about the country's founding was in preservation of group rights, and to that end served the group. Yet neither this kind of action alone, nor this kind of action en masse, would shift systemic and institutional racism. As I write this dissertation, the outcomes of the Civil Rights Movement are being undone. In June 2013, the Supreme Court in a 5-4 decision overturned sections of the Voting Rights Act, claiming that things have dramatically changed in the United States and that current conditions no longer warrant certain precautions. Clearly, however, racism remains, and immediately following the Supreme Court's actions, voting laws were changed in North Carolina, Texas and Virginia almost immediately, disenfranchising African Americans (Brandesky, Chen, & Tigas, 2014). It initially took collective action to get strong and equal voting rights for African Americans in place, so why would it take anything less to get them re-instated? Further, why would it take anything less to ensure that they can't be dismantled again? Other types of strategic interventions are certainly required and a sound racial identity and critical consciousness help African Americans access various forms of motivation and action. However, if we are to have any hope of positioning African Americans to deconstruct racist structures and

institutions within an emancipatory framework, the additional focus on building a collective and working for that collective is necessary. Without a sense of collectivity and a responsibility to the collective, we stand to lose a million Keyonna's in the fight for racial justice.

## Chapter 5.

### Liberation Centered Academic Identity

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*Rakia sat at a desk shifting noisily from side to side, willing me to look up and pay attention. Today was our sixth afternoon detention because just like yesterday and all the days before, Rakia refused to complete a single piece of schoolwork. After extensive conversations with her about her choices, implementing a string of consequences ranging from missed recess to a peer intervention and practically running home after her every day in the hopes of five minutes with her mother, I was exhausted and had chosen to be silent and work diligently on my own. At the end of the hour, I said my first words to her from my desk without looking up, "You're excused." Instead of bolting through the door as she usually did, Rakia walked over to me and picked up the book I'd been reading. She turned it over, read the words on the back out loud and then flipped through the pages before she brought her gaze back to me. "Ms. El-Amin," she said carefully, "Did you go to college?" I turned to look at her, puzzled by her question. "Of course, I did... You have to go to college to be a teacher." "Oh," she said, quietly handing the book to me. "I didn't know **we** went to college..."*

Academic achievement undeniably opens up a pathway to survive and thrive in our current racial context and thus must be a focus of an emancipatory framework. I intentionally use the word achievement to be clear that I am not talking about education in the broader sense. Education can occur anywhere, outside and inside formal institutions, with or without measures, with or without guidance. What I am referring to is a formal education and in the context of that, the way that we understand "achievement" within a traditional formal schooling paradigm.<sup>42</sup>

Both research and lived experience establishes that access to academic knowledge and more particularly, the ability to demonstrate that knowledge in mainstream formats (e.g. proficiency tests, college entrance and graduation), increases economic, social and political capital (Chavous et al., 2003). In fact, academic achievement correlates to benefits in three critical domains of life: health, employment and income, and social and psychological factors (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009). People with higher educational attainment tend to have healthier lives (Pierce, Fiore, Novotny, Hatziandreu, & Davis, 1989),

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<sup>42</sup> I am not however specifying measures of achievement because these measures and benchmarks are consistently shifting over time.

suffer less from chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart conditions (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006) and have overall better nutrition (Robinson et al., 2004). Higher educational attainment and higher achievement on standardized tests is associated both with better jobs and with higher incomes (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007). For example, college educated individuals earn nearly twice as much as those individuals with just a high school diploma (Carnevale & Cheah, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2012). In fact, “college headed households are the only households whose incomes have grown between 1991 & 2012” (Pew Research Center, 2012). Education levels are also associated with subjective quality of life measures, with those who have more education being less depressed, less anxious, having fewer aches and pains, and lower levels of malaise (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009; Ross & van Willigen, 1997). Lastly, academic attainment not only impacts how people live but also how long; college graduates can expect to live at least 5 years longer than people who have not finished high school (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009).

Despite the powerful impact of academic achievement on life outcomes, African Americans are on average receiving diminished access to education in this country. In 2010, less than half of all African American male students (47%) graduated from high school (Holzman, Jackson, & Beaudry, 2012) and African Americans overall currently have the second highest high school drop out rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). African Americans’ access to education is particularly bleak compared to those opportunities accessed by White Americans. A lower proportion of African Americans enroll in college (Bennett & Xie, 2003, p. 567) (Bennett & Xie, 2003, p. 567; Wimberly, 2002) and attend highly selective universities in comparison to White Americans (Casselmann, 2014) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Of those African Americans that do get to college, a larger percentage are attending 2 year colleges in comparison to White Americans (Stephan

& Rosenbaum, 2013, p. 2000). Further, only 39.9% of college matriculants actually graduate with a degree, in comparison to 61% of White Americans (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

Numbers alone cannot paint the full picture of the consequent life stories and experiences of African Americans given this academic landscape. But they do help fuel urgency about equipping African Americans with tools, frameworks and mindsets that can help them access academic success.

Racist ideology and practice play significant roles in African Americans' academic attainment process and outcomes. First, racist ideologies and practices infect the *provision* of education to African Americans. Racism is linked to the consistent underfunding of schools that serve primarily African Americans (Kozol, 2012, p. 287), unjust and disproportionate discipline practices for African Americans (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), teaching practices that disenfranchise African Americans while privileging others (Sleeter, 2004) and the over-identification and excessive tracking of African Americans into special education (Blanchett, 2006; Harry & Anderson, 1994).<sup>43</sup> Further, racist ideologies and practices infect African Americans' reception of educational services, as Theresa Perry (2003) explains:

The dilemma of achievement for African Americans is tied to a) their identity as members of a caste-like minority group; (b) the larger society's ideology of Black intellectual inferiority and its reproduction in the mass media and in everyday interactions; (c) their identity as members of a group whose culture is seen, by all segments of the society, even other people of color, as simultaneously inferior and attractive; and (d) their identity as American citizens. These dilemmas contained in these realities, make the task of achievement for African Americans distinctive. (p.79)

If the task of academic achievement in formal school settings for African Americans is unique, it stands to reason that African Americans need distinctive tools to navigate this task.

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<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that I am not discussing the very real role that schools as institutions have in reproducing racist practices or a racially unequal society. See social re-production theory (Bowles & Gintis, 2002, Bourdieu, 1977). This is because I am discussing the theoretical model devoid of our current school(ing) set up to ensure the vision is not hampered by practicality. Further discussion on how this framework can be applied within existing school structures, cultures and frames will be discussed briefly at the end of this paper and more substantively in future work.

One possible useful tool is an intentionally crafted academic identity that takes into account the dilemmas of achievement in a racist society, and equips African Americans with internal capacities to manage and eliminate those dilemmas.

### **What is an Academic Identity?**

As described in Chapter One, identity is a complex concept and consists of multiple dimensions. An academic identity is the identity an individual has specifically with regard to their academic performance (Welch & Hodges, 1997) . This includes the way individual thinks about themselves in regard to academics and the value academics has in their lives. African Americans' academic identity is a powerful means to help them gain deeper access to academic achievement in a racist society and is particularly useful lever in an emancipatory schooling framework. Empirical research demonstrates that positive academic identities are correlated with academic motivations, school engagement, persistence in academic tasks and subsequently academic performance (Welch & Hodges, 1997, p.37; Oyserman, Grant & Ager, 1995; Carter, 2005, Bandura, 1997; Harter, 1991; Pintrich, Roeser, & DeGroot, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). Thus, a positive academic identity can have invaluable impacts on African Americans' *actual* academic success. Schools play an unparalleled role in academic identity development as students form their academic identities primarily (albeit not entirely) in light of their experiences in schools (Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009, p. 76-77). Thus schools are well positioned to embed an academic identity in African Americans that is both cognizant of and responsive to the racist forces in their lives.

Current scholarship offers suggestions about how such an academic identity might be formed. A large body of research across disciplines finds that having certain mindsets, beliefs

and values helps African Americans develop positive academic identities in spite of racist forces (Carter, D., 2005; 2008; Oyserman, Hariss & Bebee, 2001). Specifically, scholars find that the intentional cultivation of specific mindsets, beliefs and values can help African Americans develop a positive academic identity where achieving is deeply ingrained in one's understanding of what it means to be African American and "achieving is an act of resistance" against racism (Carter, D.; 2005; Floyd, 1996; Mehan, Hubbard & Villanueva, 1994; O'Connor, 1997; Sanders, 1997). The closest example in the literature to an academic identity specific to the racial dilemmas faced by African Americans is Critical Race Achievement Ideology, conceptualized by Dorinda Carter. Carter (2008) studies nine high achieving African American students in a predominantly white school to better understand what knowledge and beliefs they draw on to achieve in what she refers to as a "culturally oppressive learning environment" (p. 479). Through a mixed-methods analysis, Carter concludes that 6 tenets serve as the crux of achievement for these African Americans. (1) Students believe in themselves and feel that individual effort and self-accountability lead to school success. (2) Students view achievement as a human, race-less characteristic embedded in their sense of self as a racial being. (3) Students possess a critical consciousness about racism. (4) Students possess a pragmatic attitude about the value of schooling for their future. (5) Students value multicultural competence as a skill for success. (6) Students develop adaptive strategies for overcoming racism that allow them to maintain high academic achievement and strong racial/ethnic self-definitions. Carter (2008) terms these tenets a Critical Race Achievement Ideology and suggests that educators may want to build this ideology within African Americans broadly given the success it has for these students in a racially oppressive context.

Although Carter's (2008) Critical Race Achievement Ideology informs my framework, it has some significant limitations that make it unsuitable to serve as the fourth pillar on its own. Most importantly, Carter demonstrates how CRAI helps her sample of African Americans navigate society, but not how to transform it. Carter selected individuals who were enrolled in a college prep course or AP courses, or who were consistent honor roll students. They were demonstrably academic "achievers" and hence potentially skilled academic navigators. She did not focus, however, on the transformative interests and behaviors of the group towards comprehensive racial liberation. This was not the purpose of her study. As a result, we don't know if CRAI influences African Americans to consider achievement in a fully transformational realm. Carter (2008) does state that the students in her example viewed achievement as a way to engage in collective struggle: in other words, as a way to participate in and honor the long battle African Americans have had in this country to access education. That is admirable, but does not necessarily demonstrate that these students have a transformational vision. I have defined transformation as direct action towards collective racial liberation, which is more demanding than just achieving to pay tribute to the collective struggle or defy stereotypes. Thus, CRAI offers only a starting point rather than an end goal.<sup>44</sup>

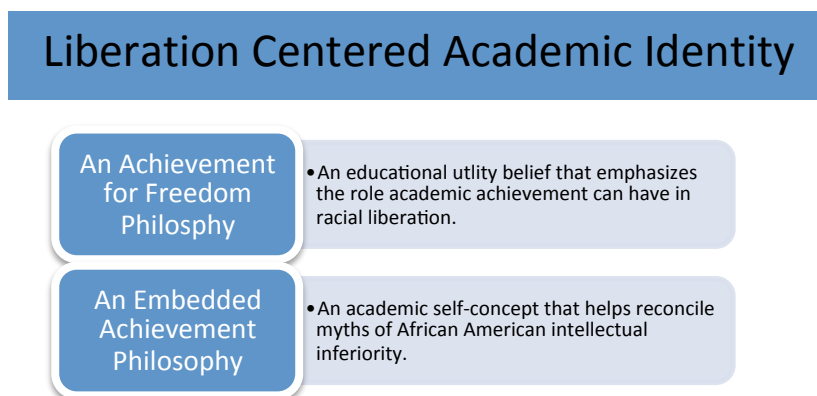
I thus propose a **Liberation Centered Achievement Identity (LCAI)** as the fourth pillar of my framework. LCAI is an academic identity schema that I constructed using existing

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<sup>44</sup> The reader might also notice that two of the previous pillars of this framework are embedded in Carter (2008) CRAI; a Sound Racial Identity and Critical Consciousness. This is useful and speaks to the interconnections between the pillars of this work, but this is also confusing for pedagogical purposes. An educator looking at CRAI as it is written, has a lot to do and may feel overwhelmed by all of the elements embedded in it. Thus, I prefer to outline how the previous concepts of a sound racial identity and critical consciousness play a role in a positive academic identity for African Americans without including them as subcomponents of an academic identity.



theoretical and empirical works of scholars who define ideologies, beliefs and mindsets that African Americans draw on for academic success in a racist context. This pillar has two components, each which speaks to a different dimension of an academic identity. Academic identities are generally understood to be multi-dimensional (Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009; Wright, 2011), although psychologists and educational researchers tend to describe and analyze the dimensions somewhat differently from one another. LCAI addresses two specific dimensions, African Americans' a) academic self-concept (their beliefs about their ability to achieve) cultivated through an Embedded Achievement Philosophy, and b) educational utility beliefs (their understanding about the purpose of achievement) cultivated through an Achievement for Freedom Philosophy. Taken together these two components of a Liberation Centered Academic Identity intend to help African Americans access achievement's navigational value and to better leverage academic achievement for racial liberation or transformation.



**Figure 8: Relationship of each subcomponent to categories of an Academic Identity as described in the literature.**

A Liberation Centered Academic Identity does not encompass actual academic skills and it is not a substitute for the pre-requisite academic knowledge that African Americans need to be

successful in K-12 and post-secondary educational settings. Schools using this framework need to generate clear academic literacy in students across all content areas. Instead, LCAI addresses mindsets, beliefs and values that are specific to the racialized task of achievement for African Americans and is intended to motivate and complement academic literacy. Just like the other pillars in this framework, an academic identity is a dynamic construct that is continuously shaped, reshaped and shaped again (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012), thus a school adopting this framework could not build an LCAI once and then never again. Just like all the other pillars in this work, having an LCAI is a continuous part of the struggle and must be cultivated and nurtured in all aspects of a school's program each day, again and again.

In the following chapter, I introduce and define each component of a Liberation Centered Academic Identity. I then highlight LCAI's relationship to the other pillars in this work. Because this chapter develops a new construct rather than explicating a concept that already exists, this chapter reads a bit differently to the previous three. I present empirical data to justify the theoretical principles that guided my development of LCAI and to provide evidence for components of LCAI where such evidence exists. However given it is a new concept, there is not yet direct empirical validation of the concept as a whole.

### **A. An Embedded Achievement Philosophy**

The first component of a Liberation Centered Academic Identity is termed an Embedded Achievement Philosophy. An Embedded Achievement Philosophy is a positive academic self-concept, specifically designed for African Americans.

### *What is an Academic Self-Concept?*

An academic self-concept is the way an individual views themselves in relation to academic achievement or “the constellation of perceptions that an individual holds about their academic abilities” (Okeke, Howard, Kurz-Costes, & Rowley, 2009, p.1). Academic self-concepts are often intertwined with whether an individual believes that they personally possess the necessary skills and dispositions to be academically successful (sometimes referred to as academic self-efficacy). In general, scholars agree that a positive academic self-concept is necessary for an overall positive academic identity (Marsh, Trautwein, Ludtke, & Koller, 2008). This is because positive academic self concepts help people commit to persisting in an academic domain (Howard, 2013; Marsh, Trautwein, Ludtke, Koller & Baumert, 2006; Marsh, 1990) even in complex situations or on complex tasks (Bandura, 1997). For example, a positive academic self-concept might lead an individual to say, “I believe I can achieve so I will strive to achieve.” As a result, academic self-concepts are correlated to academic outcomes ranging from GPA’s to high school graduation (Helmke & Van Aken, 1995; Marsh & Yeung, 1997; Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004).

### **Complicating Factors for African Americans in Building a Positive Academic Self-Concept**

Despite their overall value, it is difficult for African Americans to build optimal or positive academic self-concepts in our current racial landscape. Our society consistently intimates that African Americans are less intelligent and, therefore, less academically accomplished than other members of the population (Bobo & Charles, 2009). Views of African American inferiority are present in our framing (ex: achievement gap), our expectations (Cokley, 2006),

the media (Perry, 2003) and in daily interactions (Perry, 2003). Overall, these messages are relentless and pervasive. As one African American CEO put it, in the United States, “the longest running propaganda campaign is that of Black intellectual inferiority” (Chicago Tribune, 2013). Cokley (2014) upholds this sentiment stating, “being Black in this country has always been associated with inferiority, especially with intellectual and academic inferiority.” (p.19)

Black achievement inferiority ideology is so normal that individuals and institutions often disseminate these messages with no shame or guilt attached (Perry, 2003). As a personal example, several years ago, as an Executive Director for a high-powered non-profit organization, I participated in a funding meeting with the CEO of Bank of America – the country’s largest bank. At the end of the meeting, the CEO came up to me and thanked me for my presentation. He ended with what he thought was an added compliment, “I was so surprised by how great you did in there... you know being black.” He patted me on the shoulder and walked away. He seemed to feel no fear of expressing this opinion amidst a crowd full of his investors and community delegates. These types of interactions combined with national messages, can lead African Americans to disassociate themselves or their racial group from certain forms of academic achievement (Smalls, White, Chavous & Sellers, 2007). Rakia’s inquiry of whether or not African Americans go to college and her subsequent astonishment that they do is just one example of this dissociation.

This reality is inherently problematic and is indicative of a culture of racial supremacy, it also poses severe complications for the development of a positive academic self-concept. There are at least two components of self-identity – a personal and a social portion. The social component is “that part of an individual’s self concept which derives from his knowledge of

his/her membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63; Turner et al., 1997). In other words, individuals incorporate others’ evaluations of them into their own self-views (Molloy, Ram & Gest, 2011). As such, African Americans’ academic self-concepts are typically impacted by the views of the broader society (Small, White, Chavous & Sellers, 2007; Wong, Eccles & Sameroff, 2003), which can negatively affect even the best attempts at educating African Americans.

Stereotype threat is perhaps the most well-known example of how external beliefs about a group can influence internal perceptions of one’s own ability. Stereotype threat means that the performance of an individual is harmed in tasks where a stereotype about their group is present (Steele, 1997). Researchers document that members of the group being stereotyped underperform in comparison with non-group members across a variety of tasks almost all the time (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Kellow & Jones, 2008; Good, Aronson & Harder, 2008). This phenomena translates across gender, race or other group classifications (e.g., the elderly). For African Americans, stereotype threat is prevalent in the academic domain (Steele & Aronson, 1995). When African Americans are primed to think about their race before academic exams, they do markedly worse on those exams than if their race had not been primed (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

As stereotype threat demonstrates, negative messages about an individual’s social group cannot easily be ignored. According to Grant, Oyserman & Ager (1995), when a person feels that they aren’t “the same” or “similar” to those who achieve, the belief that they can succeed themselves declines (p. 1226). Altschul, Oyserman & Bybee (2006) similarly assert that when academic achievement is separated from one’s identity, African American youth

are less able to find sufficient motivational attention to override negative messages and stay focused on school success. Thus, developing a positive academic self-concept for African Americans involves the dual task of assembling a positive sense of self while simultaneously discrediting negative identities attributed to the racial group (Oyserman et al., 1995).

### **The Need for a Contextualized and Deliberate Academic Self-Concept for African Americans**

My interaction with Rakia presented in the opening of the chapter, highlights how complex it can be to reconcile the complex dilemmas described above without intentional and direct support. In future conversations, Rakia revealed that as she was flipping through my book, she tried to merge her existing knowledge of African Americans' achievement (in this case, that they didn't achieve enough for higher education) with my intellectual capabilities *as* an African American. Put simply, she was trying to reconcile my seeming academic achievement with the soundtrack playing in her mind about African Americans' negative achievement identity. Further, she was trying to understand her own academic identity by asking herself if she was similar or different to me as someone who was doing well (Oyserman et al., 1995).

The fact that Rakia even had to ask whether or not I went to college (because I was African American) points to a clearly missing counter-message about African American intellectuality, capability and actual efficacy. Rakia went to a school that was 100% African American and lived in Atlanta, a city with a thriving black middle and upper class and home to two of the most well-known Historically Black Colleges and she still was not clear that a) African Americans go to college and b) they can and do extremely well on all axes of academic performance. This is absurd. Mind-bogglingly, we do almost nothing to intentionally help African Americans counter or resist the pervasive messages of society in

schools (Perry, 2003). How does an individual thrive when they are urged to achieve yet experience consistent internal and external assaults on their competence? Without robust counter messages, how do we expect Rokia (as an African American) to develop an academic self-concept that is distinctly different from the academic self-concept society imposes on her? Further, and directly associated to the goal of my framework, how likely is it that Rokia would be well positioned to attain the academic outcomes that are linked to thriving in the U.S. without a positive academic self-concept? Educators need to be as direct and relentless in providing African Americans with positive messages about their racial groups' academic competence as society is in presenting negative messages. We cannot expect African Americans to naturally create these counter messages on their own.

### **What is an Embedded Achievement Philosophy?**

I therefore assert that educators should intentionally replace or intentionally build within African Americans an academic self-concept that can mediate the influence of racist forces; or an Embedded Achievement Philosophy. An Embedded Achievement Philosophy is an omnipresent counter-narrative to the existing negative messages about African Americans.

Named by Oyserman, Grant and Ager (1995), an Embedded Achievement Philosophy refers to the belief that achievement is embedded in one's identity and in the case of African Americans, in one's racial identity.<sup>45</sup> Individuals with an Embedded Achievement Philosophy believe that the "goal" of academic achievement is entrenched in their group identity. For example, African Americans with an Embedded Achievement Philosophy might say, "To be

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<sup>45</sup> Note that Oyserman, Grant & Ager (1995) use the term embeddedness and embedded achievement. I have added philosophy to clarify that the concept is a belief system or a set of beliefs.

an African American means being strong and intelligent...” (Oyserman, Brickman & Rhodes, 2007, p.98).<sup>46</sup>

Although termed differently (e.g. critical race achievement ideology, racialized philosophy of achievement), other scholars similarly assert that conceptualizing academic achievement as necessarily embedded within one’s racial identity is important to developing a positive academic self-concept for African Americans and helps African Americans attain high levels of academic success (Azibo, 1991; Perry, 2003, Carter, 2005) despite racist forces. In her study of high achieving African Americans in predominantly white schools, Dorinda Carter (2008) found that high achieving African Americans viewed academic achievement as a human trait, embedded in their sense of self. The students in her sample commented that they knew they were smart because they were Black and similarly that achievement was a necessary part of what it meant to be African American. Carter (2008) concluded that a contributing factor to the students’ actual academic success was this precise view of achievement as inextricably linked to their racial identity.

Overall, an Embedded Achievement Philosophy aligns the notion of racial identity and academic attainment (i.e. I am Black and therefore I am academically competent) in contrast to prevailing messages that try to separate the two (i.e. to be Black and to be smart is rare or impossible). “This congruence is more than just a fluid moving back and forth between conflicting identities or seeing two identities as compatible, it is a bending of identities, such that one implies the other” (Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009, p.95).

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<sup>46</sup> Oyserman, Grant & Ager (1995) assert embedded achievement philosophy as a component of racial identity in their theoretical work. In my framework, embeddedness is being used as separate from a sound racial identity. The pedagogical reasons for this will be further explained below. It is worth stating that Oyserman et al., are the only theorists that conceptualize an embeddedness as a distinct dimension of racial identity. This is not to negate their emphasis but rather to ensure the reader is clear that this frameworks discussion of it as separate is aligned to the broader literature while different form Oyserman, Grant & Ager themselves.



## **The Impact of an Embedded Achievement Philosophy in a Racist Society**

There are two important outcomes of an Embedded Achievement Philosophy for African Americans in the context of a racist society. First, an Embedded Achievement Philosophy gives African Americans an internal defense against the pervasive message of African American academic inferiority and second, it can be operationalized as a motivation to achieve.

### *Moderating Existing Messages – An Internal Source of Resistance*

An Embedded Achievement Philosophy for African Americans moderates the prevailing and dominant messages of African American intellectual inferiority. On the one hand, societal messages are communicating that to be Black is, by proxy, to be intellectually inferior and on the other hand, the mechanism of embedded achievement is reminding African Americans that academic skills are an embodied part of their racial selves. As Oyserman et al. (1995) state, “By conceptualizing achievement as embedded within one’s sense of self as a Black person, it is unlikely that adolescents will experience contradiction and tension between being an achiever and being ‘Black’” (p.1220).

This effect is particularly important because it is precisely the tension described above, that scholars suggest leads African Americans to exhibit oppositional academic behaviors (e.g. resist those behaviors most commonly associated with academics or resist academic achievement entirely).<sup>47</sup> In other words, if academic achievement or the associated behaviors that lead to academic achievement are believed to belong to an out-group, an individual could feel they have to violate or leave their in-group in order to access academic achievement. Na’lah Suan Nasir (2011) expands on this dilemma: “in schools, academic

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<sup>47</sup> See Chapter One for an overview of John Ogbu’s hypothesis of “acting white.”

identities can be problematic for many African American students, in part, researchers argue, because they conflict with students' definitions of what it means to be a member of their racial group" (p. 23). An Embedded Achievement resolves this issue. If one doesn't ever conceive of academic achievement or the associated behaviors as belonging to any group in particular and, instead sees academic achievement or the associated behaviors as an integral component of their own racial identity membership, the decision *between* racial identity and academic achievement need not occur. In sum, an Embedded Achievement Philosophy provides a powerful solution to a common dilemma for African Americans; it aligns racial identity and academic achievement, eliminating the need for African Americans to choose between one or the other, or to reconcile the two as if they are somehow disparate.

*An Embedded Achievement Philosophy as Motivation to Achieve*

An Embedded Achievement Philosophy can also facilitate motivation to achieve through the desire to enact group identity (Oyserman, Brickman & Rhodes, 2007). Various bodies of literature on racial identity demonstrate that when individuals believe their racial identity is important to them, they strive to live up to the factors they believe make up that racial identification (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Ford & Harris III, 1997; Phelps, Taylor, & Gerard, 2001; Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997).<sup>48</sup> This makes sense if we consider racial identity as a socially constructed identity, or an identity that is reinforced and sustained through relationships to others and the world. Using this lens, racial identities provide "information about the norms, expectations, and behaviors relevant to group membership" (Oyserman, 2007 in Oyserman, Brickman & Rhodes, 2007, p.92). "One's perceived identity,

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<sup>48</sup> For this motivation to occur, a person has to have a sound racial identity; in particular, racial centrality, or a belief that their racial identity is important to them. The relationship between a Liberation Centered Academic Identity and a sound racial identity will be further discussed at the end of this section. It should be clear however that a sound racial identity is a necessary pre-cursor to adequately cultivating this specific academic self-concept.

along with the desire to reinforce and express that identity, can move an individual to regulate his or her behavior in ways that are consistent with that identity” (Matthews, Banerjee & Lauremann, 2014, p.2358). Therefore, if African Americans believe academic achievement is embedded in their Black identity, then the goal to achieve may be sought out through their desire to act and think in ways deemed “Black.”

Scholars have also found that an Embedded Achievement Philosophy can lead African Americans to be motivated to pursue achievement as an act of resistance. In a study of 28 African American students in an urban school district, Sanders (1997) found that students with a high understanding of racial discrimination (low public regard/critical consciousness – see Chapters 1 and 2 for a refresher) viewed achievement as an act of resistance – taking on a “prove-them-wrong” attitude. Essentially, African Americans in his study “saw their academic success as an opportunity to prove to a racist society that stereotypes depicting African Americans as lazy and intellectually inferior are false” (p.89). Similarly, Dorinda Carter (2008) found that believing achievement to be a part of one’s racial identity can sometimes facilitate a “prove them wrong” attitude... or almost exactly as Sanders asserts, “achievement as a response to racism.” Understanding the nature of this effect is simple. African Americans with an Embedded Achievement Philosophy can clearly see that those who believe African Americans are intellectually inferior are wrong and misguided because those stereotypes are blatantly out of line with what they know to be true. As such, they seek to live up to their embedded academic potential in part to show those who wrongly view them as academically inadequate they are mistaken. This is not dissimilar to the effect of either a sound racial identity – specifically the role of high private regard (feeling positively about African Americans) in combination with low public regard (knowing that society has negative opinions of African Americans) discussed in Chapter One. Nor is it dissimilar to

the impact of a critical consciousness discussed in Chapter Two. Yet, this impact is specific to academic achievement. Thus, despite any seeming redundancy in the framework, an Embedded Achievement Philosophy plays a distinct role in positioning African Americans for racial liberation.

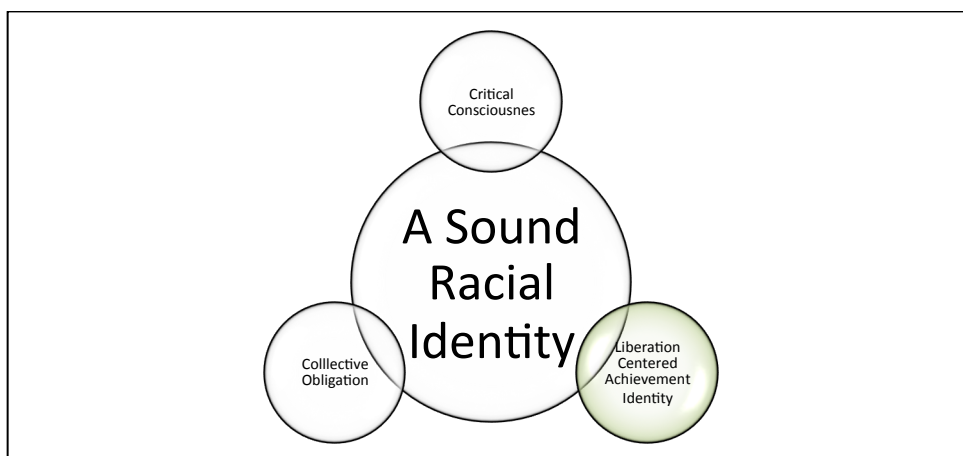
There is even further documentation about the relationship between an Embedded Achievement Philosophy and academic motivation. Oyserman, Harrison and Bybee (2001) found that when African Americans had an Embedded Achievement Philosophy, they also had higher levels of academic efficacy – that is, they believed they could achieve in school. Similarly, Spencer et al. (2001) found that students who had a proactive Afrocentric orientation had higher academic achievement and higher self-esteem than students who had Eurocentric orientations. Although an Afrocentric orientation is not exactly the same as what is being discussed here, an Afrocentric orientation often includes an Embedded Achievement Philosophy through the cultural teachings that African Americans are descendants from Kings and Queens in Africa who had great intellectual accomplishments and successes (Shujaa, 1994).

These desires or motivations are, of course, not causal. We cannot say that if an African American has an Embedded Achievement Philosophy, s/he will necessarily be motivated to achieve based on a desire to enact group identity or develop an achievement as resistance philosophy. Still, a goal of a Liberation Centered Academic Identity is to equip African Americans with an academic identity that best positions them to attain academic achievement and its correlated benefits. Therefore, with no known negative effects of an Embedded Achievement Philosophy and, at the very least, powerful evidence that this belief

counters racially oppressive messaging – a significant force in the lives of African Americans – it is critical to include it in an emancipatory school model.

### **How is an Embedded Achievement Philosophy related to other Pillars in the Framework?**

An Embedded Achievement cannot exist for African Americans without a sound racial identity. A Sound Racial Identity is a necessary pre-cursor for the development of an Embedded Achievement Philosophy and therefore of a Liberation Centered Achievement Identity. Recall the following figure from Chapter One.



**Figure 9: Relationship between A Sound Racial Identity, Critical Consciousness & LCAI**

The idea that achievement is embedded in one's racial group is directly related to, and flows from, a sound racial identity and particularly high racial centrality. As discussed, a successful achievement identity for African Americans must combat the messages that African Americans as a racial group cannot be academically successful. To do this, there must be counter-messages that assert that African Americans can and do achieve. Logically, these messages would only resonate, and more importantly motivate, an African American who

fundamentally believed their race to be an important part of their identity. This is the precise definition of high racial centrality. It is not possible, therefore, to cultivate an Embedded Achievement Philosophy or an overall Liberation Centered Academic Identity as it is conceptualized in this work without first cultivating or simultaneously nurturing a sound racial identity.

Recall from Chapter One that a benefit of a sound racial identity, particularly of high private regard, is that African Americans have a positive view of African Americans despite low public regard or their knowledge that the United States has a negative view of African Americans. Thus, it could seem to readers that an Embedded Achievement Philosophy is redundant in this framework. Yet, one can have high positive regard about African Americans generally and not necessarily translate that into a deep sense of academic competence. An Embedded Achievement Philosophy translates positive beliefs into an academic domain. Although it is possible there are redundant messages between high private regard and an Embedded Achievement Philosophy – there is no reason to bemoan this redundancy. Adding an additional element to this framework that tries to ensure a positive academic self-concept for African Americans can only maximize the power of the framework. The racialized and racist context in which African Americans are expected to achieve has a significant impact on the way that they build a relationship to academic achievement – a claim supported by evidence presented throughout this section. We can combat the impact of that external force on African Americans by intentionally embedding an internal resiliency in African Americans specific to academics.

### **Necessary Yet Insufficient**

That said, an Embedded Achievement Philosophy by itself only helps African Americans to thrive despite current conditions. Therefore, cultivating an Embedded Achievement Philosophy is navigational and does not, on its own necessarily lead to substantive social and racial change. For all intents and purposes an Embedded Achievement Philosophy is a raincoat. A raincoat serves to protect us from the rain, but it does not have the power to stop it from raining. Similarly, an Embedded Achievement Philosophy doesn't change the racist conditions that uphold African American intellectual inferiority ideology. It simply protects African Americans from the consequences of this ideology. Yet, even with a raincoat, it is still entirely possible to get wet. Thus, we must also be attentive to the fact that it is raining in the first place. The next element in a Liberation Centered Achievement Identity moves from a navigational strategy to a transformational one.

### **B. An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy**

The second component of a Liberation Centered Academic Identity is an Achievement for Freedom Philosophy. An Embedded Achievement Philosophy focuses on an African American's individual psychology so that they are better positioned to attain the navigational benefits of achievement. This next component moves to the role achievement can play for the African American collective. Overall, an Achievement for Freedom Philosophy clarifies the relationship between an individual's personal academic achievement and broader racial liberation efforts.

An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy is the educational utility value in an academic identity for African Americans and responds to the following questions a) what is the purpose of academic achievement in a racist society and b) what value does academic

achievement have for African Americans individually and for African Americans collectively. The answer an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy provides to the question above is oppositional to our pre-existing responses. As such, an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy is likely to be one of the harder components of this educational framework for educators to engender.

In the following section, I will define an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy. I will then explain why an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy should replace our existing education utility value of achievement for African Americans. Essentially, I assert that an Achievement for Freedom Philosophy is a) more accurate and b) more useful for racial transformation. I will further assert that the value of academic achievement that we currently offer African Americans is misguided and detrimental to the goals of this framework. Put simply, our current value hinders transformation. An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy on the other hand demands it.

### **Examining Our Current Value Proposition for Achievement to African Americans**

Ten years ago a guest visitor asked my 5<sup>th</sup> grade class why they should do well in school. Amidst some spectacular answers like, “Ms. El-Amin said we should” or “to learn to read so I can get my license” two primary answers emerged: “To get a good job” and “To go to college.” It is not far fetched to imagine that African American students today would give similar answers. This is because my students’ responses reflected a long-standing master narrative in the U.S about the value and purpose of academic achievement (Hanson, 2011). This particular narrative claims that academic achievement helps individuals successfully move through society and thrive in it – we achieve to lift ourselves up, to go to college, to



get a good job and sometimes in the case of African Americans, to show others we can do it (achievement as resistance).<sup>49</sup>

Current school models that receive the most attention and reverence for their “successful” education of African Americans often explicitly adopt this purpose of academic achievement (Lack, 2009; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2004). These schools emphatically suggest that the purpose of achieving in K-12 schooling is college access. For example, KIPP Academies, perhaps the most well known and largest of the recently lauded schools for African Americans, has the following mission:

KIPP academies strive to create a respected, influential and national network of public schools that are successful in helping students from educationally underserved communities develop the knowledge, skills, character and habits needed to succeed in college and the competitive world beyond ([www.kipp.org](http://www.kipp.org)).

Uncommon Schools, another well-known network of schools that serves predominately African Americans, has as a similar core mission: “To prepare low-income students to graduate from college.”

Highlighting esteem for these models in our contemporary landscape, Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan recently said the following:

For all the educational challenges we face, I am actually extremely optimistic. We have many more examples of schools today that beat the odds than ever before. And no system of schools testifies to that fact more powerfully than KIPP's 82 schools and 21,000 students. Like KIPP, we believe schools must set high expectations for all students and prepare all students for college and careers. (2010).

Although Secretary Duncan is speaking of KIPP Academies in particular, he is similarly reinforcing the goal of K-12 education as preparation for college and career. Further, in his clear admiration of KIPP, he is suggesting that schools are successful if they achieve college

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<sup>49</sup> This concept – achievement as resistance- is explained in the previous section of this chapter. It is a motivation that may occur from having an embedded achievement philosophy.

and career preparation. Yet, despite our Secretary of Education's profound faith in KIPP's purpose, a purpose of academic achievement rooted *solely* in college access and career attainment is problematic when we evaluate it against the needs of African Americans in a racist society. It may sound odd for me to suggest this, especially since I opened the chapter with daunting statistics about African Americans' lack of access to education, specifically college and thus their diminished economic/employment outcomes. How could I bemoan an achievement purpose that is emphatically reinforcing African Americans' succeed on two clear indicators for thriving in our society? Daunting statistics help explain.

Over 33% of African American students attend high poverty schools in comparison with 4% of White Americans, 13% of Asian Americans and 25% of Native Americans (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). African Americans get bachelor degrees at almost half the rate of White Americans (40% of White Americans obtained bachelor degrees in comparison to 20% of African Americans in 2014) and Black students are three times more likely to be suspended than their white peers meaning they are excluded from schooling more often than White Americans (Lewin, 2014). Were I to continue, it would be clear that across every axis of academic achievement, African Americans remain systematically disenfranchised. It would further be clear that these numbers are relatively consistent over time (Darity & Myers, 1998), across geography (Autor, Katz, & Kearney, 2008) and social class (Dawson, 1995). Thus, it is not possible for these numbers to point to individual circumstances or need, they instead point to collective conditions and needs.

This reality calls into question the purpose of achievement upheld by KIPP and endorsed by our Secretary of Education as it speaks only of individual attainment and access. Despite being applauded, it misses something important to the ability of African Americans to

transform society; it doesn't communicate *how and why* academic achievement might serve as a tool for deconstructing collective conditions. Nor does it encourage the use of academic achievement towards collective justice. Consequently and troublingly, despite the consistency of statistics such as those shared above, African Americans can adopt the purpose of achievement currently emphasized, and be considered both to themselves and to others "successful," without having ever engaged with issues of African American racial inequity.

This is simply inadequate in pursuit of a more racially just society. As argued in the opening, African Americans reaching purely navigational outcomes (job security, college access) even in large droves, is not likely to forge the substantial social change required to see a racially equitable society. Preparing all kids for college success and careers is important and it is necessary. This preparation changes the relationship of individuals to any number of conditions – poverty, health, well-being. But it is not sufficient. Preparing all kids for college success and careers doesn't automatically or directly shift the underlying conditions, structures or policies that create, perpetuate and sustain those conditions in the first place. If educators rely on the purpose of achievement that the United States puts forth for African Americans, educators are essentially only actively preparing African Americans for navigation.

African Americans who are going to be prepared to engage in racial transformation on the other hand need a more intentional academic purpose; one that clarifies the purpose of achievement for transformation or social change. To be clear, I am not asserting that our current achievement purpose or narrative does not "work." For all and intents and purposes, many African Americans draw on the achievement ideology to get a good job or rise economically move through our system and achieve great ends. I am instead arguing that

our current narrative is not appropriate if we are truly concerned about positioning African Americans to seriously engage in the struggle for racial justice.

### **An Alternative Narrative - Defining an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy**

As such, I put forth an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy as a replacement to the dominant rationale for academic achievement for African Americans. An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy asserts that school achievement is a vehicle for individual transformation but most importantly for collective liberation and transformation. This means you achieve not just because your individual attainment of economic and social capital can alter your relationship to life opportunities, but because through the attainment of academic, economic and social capital you are better positioned to alter the life opportunities of others, and specific to the goals of this framework; other African Americans. Further, with the benefits associated with academic achievement you are optimally situated to dismantle systemic and institutional barriers that may be working against you and those you care about. Put simply, an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy asserts that a) academic achievement helps African Americans move more easily through society (navigate it), but most importantly b) academic achievement can be a lever for racial justice (transformation) for African Americans *if* it is used towards those ends.

The messages described above may not be overwhelmingly present in our modern landscape, however the belief that education is a mechanism for collective freedom and intentionally cultivating African Americans in this belief, is not original or even innovative. In fact, this purpose of achievement is mined from the historical conceptions and purpose of education in African American history and has long historical roots in the African

American tradition (Bush, 2004; Williams, 2005). Theresa Perry (2003) helps us understand this legacy:

“To be able to ... read and write was a mighty weapon in the slaves’ struggle for freedom. Literate slaves filed petitions, protesting and challenging their enslavement; they forged passes for themselves and others, thus allowing escape from the horrors of slavery. Literate slaves read newspapers and pamphlets and kept themselves and the slave community informed about the antislavery movement and the war. Denmark Vesey, David Walker, Nat Turner, and other literate slaves led rebellions and wrote pamphlets and tracts denouncing and exposing the slave system. They read the Bible, interpreting its message in a way that supported resistance and rebellions. While learning to read was an individual achievement, it was fundamentally a communal act (p.14-15).

Here Theresa Perry emphasizes that this education purpose was first and foremost about the collective.<sup>50</sup> She also emphasizes that embedded in this orientation was a responsibility:

“Becoming literate obliged one to teach others. Learning and teaching were two sides of the same coin, part of the same moment. Literacy was not something you kept for yourself; it was to be passed on to others, to the community. Literacy was something to share. (p.14)<sup>51</sup>

Gurin and Epps (1975) refer to this embodied sense of collective responsibility in the academic domain as collective achievement. In speaking of collective achievement, the authors state:

“Collective Achievement focuses on the collective commitments and action of the students through which they tried to exact legal, economic, and social changes that would benefit Black people. The activists were striving to achieve, but they were working for group products and accomplishments rather than individual goals.” (p. 189).

As Gurin et al., and Perry describe, African Americans have known for decades that in order for academic achievement to operate as a tool towards racial justice, it has to be used as a tool for racial justice. In other words, my attendance at Harvard does not naturally benefit

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<sup>50</sup> Another commonly known concept rooted in this belief is “racial uplift” – or the ideology that educated blacks are responsible for the welfare of the race. I am choosing not to speak further of racial uplift however because it is a contested concept in so much that it can refer to “elite or middle class African Americans” reforming the character or socializing other African Americans. This is not exactly what I am referring to in this chapter and therefore will not be further discussed.

<sup>51</sup> Theresa Perry (2005) calls this orientation Freedom for Literacy and Literacy for Freedom. I have chosen not to use her terminology for a few reasons. 1) She is using the term Literacy to speak specifically to the act of reading and writing given the historical context. Although there is a broader conception of Literacy in education and that she herself alludes to, I find the use of the word achievement in place of literacy much more clear. 2) I find Achievement For Freedom easier to recall and restate than Literacy for Freedom and Freedom for Literacy and suspect practitioners drawing on this framework might as well.

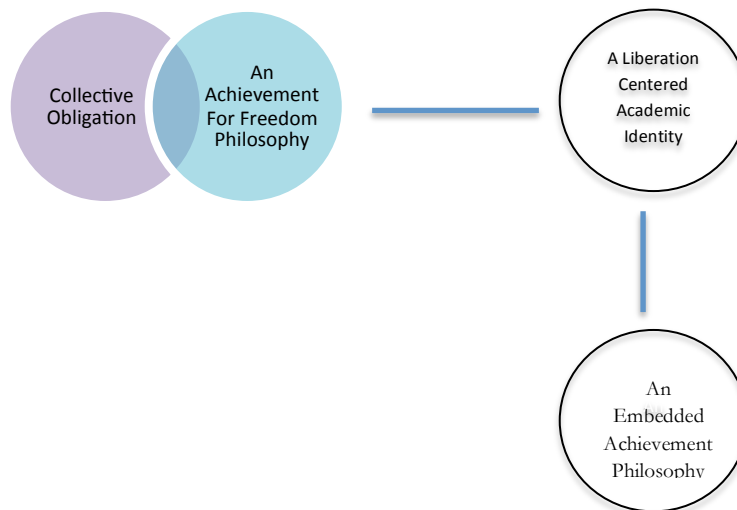
other African Americans unless I apply what I have learned to the lives of others or use economic or social capital towards others racial liberation.

An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy prescribes that African Americans believe they have a responsibility to the collective and further demands a commitment to the collective, but it does not prescribe strategy. Leveraging academic achievement for collective ends can take the form of sharing one's knowledge with others (as Theresa Perry describes), the use of accumulated financial capital from the benefits of achieving towards the financial sustainability of the community, or the leveraging of social and intellectual capital to advocate for structural change. Within this framework, no one strategy is preferred. The idea is simply that African Americans must believe that they have to use their academic achievement for collective gain in order for achievement to play a role in true racial change.

In sum, an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy draws on historical understanding and wisdom and endeavors to re-insert notions of collectivity and racial transformation into the contemporary landscape.<sup>52</sup> If practitioners cultivate all of the pillars of this framework in tandem as suggested, this should easily extend from the previous pillar, collective obligation. This is because an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy reframes academic achievement as collective action – an action taken by the group for the groups liberation. African Americans who have a sense of collective obligation are therefore more likely to understand and to adopt an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy.

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<sup>52</sup> Although this work is focused on K-12, it is worth noting that higher education has held on to this orientation or philosophy of schooling particularly in HBCU's (Franklin, 2007) This may be because these schools were founded for these purposes, were not subjected to Brown vs. Board of Education and thus could maintain missions rooted in the unique needs of their dominant population – African Americans.

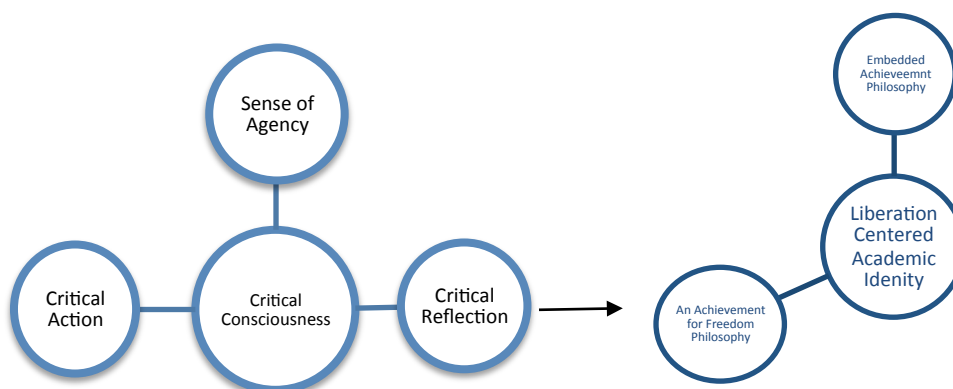


**Figure 10: The Relationship between Collective Obligation and a Liberation Centered Academic Identity**

### Replacing Myth with Truth – From Navigation to Transformation

An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy is imperative in the fight for racial liberation for two reasons. First, an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy is clear about the continuing nature of racist forces.

As noted in Chapter Two, a clear understanding that racism persists is critical to preparing African Americans to fight for racial justice. African Americans cannot break free from conditions of injustice if they are a) unclear that injustice exists or b) misunderstand the nature of that injustice. Knowing and understanding the nature of racist forces is therefore, a critical component of generating motivation for transformative action. An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy leverages critical consciousness (specifically critical reflection) and draws on the same motivation. An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy reinforces in its very name, the enduring nature of racism in an academic context. Achievement is pursued in the quest FOR freedom.



**Figure 11: The relationship between Critical Reflection and an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy**

I demonstrated in chapter two that critical reflection about racist forces is a key lever for action – and action is a necessary pre-requisite for social change. It is precisely for this reason that our current academic narrative is dangerous if not a barrier to racial liberation for African Americans. It scrubs racism from the picture and in so doing sets African Americans up to miss the important role that achievement can play in racial liberation. Allow me to explain further.

*Truth One: Racism matters for African American Achievement*

The United States is promoted as a meritocracy in an academic domain – people succeed academically on their own merit and are responsible for their individual academic success. This belief ignores structural conditions rooted in racism and the consequences of those conditions (Oyserman, Grant & Ager, 1995; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Carter, 2005; Cokley, 2014). As Kwate & Meyer (2010) state, “even if unintended the promise of quality inherent in meritocracy ideology serves to elide racism” (p.1). This ideology instead upholds



that with just enough hard work everyone can achieve great ends (Lipset, 1997). Media portrayals of African Americans in an education context similarly purport this message. Films such as *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Freedom Fighters* (2007), *Stand And Deliver* (1998), all depict African Americans who are able to overcome the barriers of their environment and circumstance by working hard towards academic achievement. This all occurs in spite of challenges that are likely associated with a racist context (e.g. disparities in quality school materials, violent neighborhoods and class barriers). In our contemporary landscape, the KIPP model previously described also reflects this ideology. KIPP promotes two core values for its African American students that are intended to motivate achievement; work hard, be nice (Mathews, 2009). I do not intend to dismiss the value and need for African Americans to work hard in order to achieve academically. I instead want to highlight that messages that imply that working hard is the sole route to academic achievement is simply not true and further this notion is confusing if it is not coupled with factual messages about the continuing role of racism African Americans lives.

The preliminary results of a mixed-methods study I am involved in may offer some insight into the consequence of this persistent ideology. In this study of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students across 6 schools in the North, all students are asked, “Do you think people of all races have an equal chance to succeed in the U.S.?” Early findings reveal that in response to this question, African American students predominately say one of two things (1) yes, of course and (2) first say yes but then as they continue to respond contradict themselves by introducing instances of racism. Their confusion causes them to backtrack and revise their answer because they realize that their initial assertion conflicts with their lived experience in a racist society.

Clearly, students in both categories are confused. There is actually a simple response to the posed question. The answer is no, people of all races do not have an equal chance to succeed in the U.S. Without knowing this conclusively, how is it possible that any of the African American students who responded in either way are prepared to engage in transformative racial liberation work? The first set of students would likely see no reason to use academics as a means for racial justice, believing that racial justice has already been achieved, and the second set of students -- while perhaps able to see a reason to leverage achievement towards racial justice -- are unsteady and unsure that this is something that needs to be done in the first place. This is likely an effect of African Americans living in a society rampant with meritocracy messages and no other intentional clarification specific to the task of African American achievement. Thus, African Americans need a new or refined message that makes their achievement context abundantly clear.

That is, for African Americans, (1) hard work doesn't always necessarily mean achievement, given institutional racist forces and (2) for African Americans, academic achievement doesn't necessarily yield correlated economic and social benefits. In fact, according to the Federal Reserve, White high school dropouts make more money than African American high school graduates (The Federal Reserve, 2013). Moreover, college educated African Americans are more likely to be unemployed than college-educated White Americans (Casselman, 2014) and overall high wage occupations are more likely to be held by White Americans even when controlling for education (Casselman, 2014). As demonstrated, academic achievement does not in fact guarantee a new or better position in life for African Americans even with hard work. It is quite possible for an African American to achieve academically and to still, as a result of other barriers -- long standing economic debt, racist practices and policies -- be relegated to marginal and disenfranchised life opportunities. "Work Hard, Be Nice" matters,

but for African Americans, it isn't a silver bullet. This clarification is critical to properly motivate African Americans to use achievement towards racial equity.

*Truth Two: Achievement Doesn't Necessarily change African Americans lives*

Yet, even further clarification for African Americans is required for racial liberation and to ensure African Americans can and will leverage achievement towards racial transformation. Just as academic achievement doesn't necessarily produce better navigational opportunities for all African Americans, it also doesn't necessarily produce transformative outcomes or the attainment of racial freedom.

National rhetoric suggests to African Americans that certain benchmarks of achievement are marks of complete individual transformation. As described, popular culture is littered with examples or stories of African Americans who were able through an education to achieve great ends and for all and intents and purposes be free. This freedom is insinuated by the description of individuals' lives as complete or as comprehensively "successful." It is also insinuated by the use of the word "freedom" when education or academic achievement, is discussed. For example, "Education is Freedom" is a national non-profit organization. The mission of the organization is to "provide comprehensive college planning services and produce life changing results for students and families" (Education Is Freedom, 2015). College access in this example is being touted as freedom and there is also an embedded promise of college graduation leading to life changing outcomes. But this is once again confusing for African Americans. Education can change outcomes and has a profound impact in doing so, but for African Americans it doesn't necessarily. More specifically, academic achievement of which college access and graduation is a part, does not grant racial "freedom." Racism persists even within the walls of the most prestigious institutions and

affects, whether or not admitted or articulated, even the most renowned African Americans (Gasim, Abiola, & Travers, 2015). Examples of this abound: President Barack Obama's entanglements with racist ideologies and individuals was detailed earlier in this work, renowned scholar Henry Louis Gates recently was detained and arrested as he attempted to enter his house because he was perceived to be an intruder walking in the "wrong neighborhood," and even Oprah, one of the richest if not the richest African American in the U.S, shared last year that she was followed by a woman who thought she might steal, while shopping in Chicago (Hauser, 2013).

Therefore, if African Americans adopt the value of achievement our society often asserts and internalize achievement as it is positioned in our society – as freedom all its own or as transformative all its own – they are set up to be disappointed when they "arrive" and yet are not "safe" or "free." For example, if I personally bought into the myth that achievement itself was transformative, I might have been shocked when I arrived at Harvard – believed to be the greatest educational institution in our country and a clear marker of my achievement – when a white male undergraduate used the N word at a dining room table, my boss suggested that racism no longer existed or when the institution required me as a residential employee to call my bosses "House Masters" despite the clear historical significance and harm of that language for African Americans. These personal examples and the examples of the professionals above highlight the falsehood embedded in our belief that academic achievement is fully transformative for the African American individual. Academic achievement may change an individual's circumstances, but it does not concomitantly change the world that individuals live in. An individual is not free from racial harm as a result of academic achievement.

*The Reproduction of “Hokey Hope”*

Thus our current academic achievement purpose, which fails to pay due diligence and articulate racist realities, produces what Jeff- Duncan Andrade terms “hokey hope.” It “delegitimizes the pain that urban youth experience as a result of a persistently unequal society” (2009, p.3) and it may lead African Americans to dismiss or feel confused by their experiences, with respect to racist structures and principles. We could imagine that the second child in the study above who was confused about racism’s existence might be a prime case for this. Even for African Americans who do not feel this tension – the current achievement narrative that purports individual determination or hard work = outcomes, provides false hope. It does African Americans no good to believe in a paradigm that we know as educated adults is false, just as it does African Americans no good to try to reconcile their lived experience with the myths embedded in our current achievement messages when we know it can not be done.

An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy eliminates this turmoil altogether. The Philosophy allows African Americans to hold on to their existing knowledge about racist forces while simultaneously harboring a sense of agency and a belief that their racist reality can be re-shaped. In other words, Freedom remains at large, but as the title of this philosophy also insinuates, achievement has the power or potential to help it to be acquired. By offering a clear focus on the existence of racist barriers and the pursuit of achievement as a mechanism to deconstruct those barriers, an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy instead engenders what Jeff Duncan-Andrade calls “Critical Hope” – a hope that demands a committed and active struggle.

There could be some concern that an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy is providing a debilitating message to African Americans by being so explicit about the consequences of our racist reality on achievement outcomes. Yet, I am not suggesting we say to African Americans, “Yes, the United States is racist, doesn’t that suck.” I am instead suggesting and an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy is instead saying, “Yes, the United States is racist, get an education and use that education to do something about it.” In other words, An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy forges “agency through a language of skepticism and possibility” (Giroux, 2011, p. 1). This same philosophy is embedded in chapter two regarding critical consciousness. In that chapter, I discussed that knowing about institutional racism might help African Americans stay away from self-blame in circumstances where structural and institutional implications are at play. Further I discussed both the theoretical possibility and outlined the empirical literature that shows that knowledge of racism can motivate African Americans to action (Hart & Atkins, 2002).

There is no empirical evidence that an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy will have this same effect, as it is a concept introduced only in this dissertation. However, there is a small body of work that may lend some insight. It may be empirically true that African Americans are more academically motivated by truthful messages even if those messages contain a depressive element. For example, in a study conducted by Mickelson (1990) with over 1,000 African American high school students, she found that African Americans tended to internalize what she called abstract attitudes towards education, for example, “Education is the key to success in the future.” Abstract attitudes, according to Mickelson reflect the dominant ideology about academic achievement, yet she noted, abstract attitudes failed to predict positive grades. However, other attitudes towards achievement that were counter to the dominant narrative did predict positive grades. These counter attitudes were based in

African American students' perceptions and experiences of racism. For example, "My parents say people like us are not always paid or promoted according to our education." Mickelson called these attitudes or beliefs concrete attitudes. It is precisely concrete attitudes that an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy aims to engender. Thus, although empirical work here is small, it is worth noting that being honest with African Americans about the tenuous relationship between African Americans and academic achievement may not just serve as motivation but may also translate that motivation into actual academic results.

*Truth Three: Academic Achievement does not on its own change society*

There is one final way that an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy is a more truthful purpose than our current purpose of schooling and as such is better able to position African Americans for transformative racial work. The myth about the relationship between academic achievement and freedom is not only perpetuated in regard to individuals, it is also perpetuated as it relates to collectives. In a speech just this year, First Lady Michelle Obama declared in a speech where she urged kids with terrible schools or struggling schools to attend school anyway, "Education will help solve issues like mass incarceration, racial profiling and voting rights and the kinds of challenges that shocked us of the past year" (Superville, 2015). Yet this is not entirely accurate. As previously mentioned, academic achievement only has the potential to move people beyond barriers and help them to secure a new position in life; it does not on its own change the conditions that have consequences for their collective. To explicate Michelle Obama's example then, access to education could mean that many individuals are not in the position to be incarcerated or to be marginalized by voting laws, but it doesn't mean that the systems or institutions that uphold and sustain racially unequal policies, laws and law enforcement change unless those who are educated

use their education towards those ends. “Education does not change the world, it can however, change people, who can change the world.”

Examples of this conflation of academic achievement and education as transformation are dangerous for African Americans and can render confusion about the role of achievement in racial liberation efforts. For example, “closing the achievement gap.”<sup>53</sup> Within our schooling efforts, eliminating the achievement gap is still lauded as the goal by both White and Black scholars alike (Valencia, 2015, p.3-33). While closing of the gap in achievement outcomes across racial and class demographics is in fact a laudable and necessary goal, it also simultaneously insufficient. Unless in so doing we have also eliminated the conditions that created the gap in the first place – closing the achievement gap is simply a pre-cursor to a larger endeavor. The achievement gap is a symptom, not the root (Viadero & Johnston, 2000). Again, schools currently applauded for their success with African Americans provide a good example of this misunderstanding. A criterion of a good paternalistic school (the term used to refer to many of these celebrated schools) according to Whitman (2008) is that it helps lift students out of poverty. This is perhaps noteworthy, yet to lift a student out of poverty is not to actually shift conditions of poverty at all. There is once again no discussion of the collective conditions in communities, in societies or in ourselves that lead to the preponderance/inundation of African Americans in lower economic spheres in the first place. Even if the vision was to lift each individual “out of poverty” in order to eventually lift all African Americans out of poverty, this is as discussed also misguided. As the past decades have shown and as I have reiterated in the opening and also in this chapter, this simply cannot be done at a scale fast or wide enough to truly upend racial inequities. In sum, certain

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<sup>53</sup> Note language around the gap in outcomes between African Americans and (typically) White Americans in the United States is referred to as “the achievement gap”, “the educational opportunity gap” and more broadly educational disparities, educational inequities, etc.



achievement markers – college going, college graduation – are therefore continually mistaken as an end goal in American society, implying that academic achievement in and of itself can transform society. As The New School economist Darrick Hamilton told NBC, “The data shows that a job or an education are not the panaceas we think they are” (NBC News, 2015). To truly position African Americans for creating a more racially just world, we need to get the message about academic achievement right. Academic achievement is limited in its transformation possibilities for African Americans, unless individual academic achievement is used for transformation.

Paulo Freire helps make this point in *Pedagogy of the City* (1993): “The need to master the dominant language is not only to survive but also better to fight for the transformation of an unjust and cruel society where the subordinate groups are rejected, insulted, and humiliated” (p. 135). Although Freire is talking about language and not education per se, his positioning overturns traditional rhetoric – one does not learn language to succeed in society only, but to survive in society for the purposes of transforming it. It is this same positioning that is embedded in an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy: individual gain only matters in so much that it is applied to the liberation of the collective. Transformation only occurs when transformation is sought.

### **Why we need an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy For Transformation – The Value of Truth Telling**

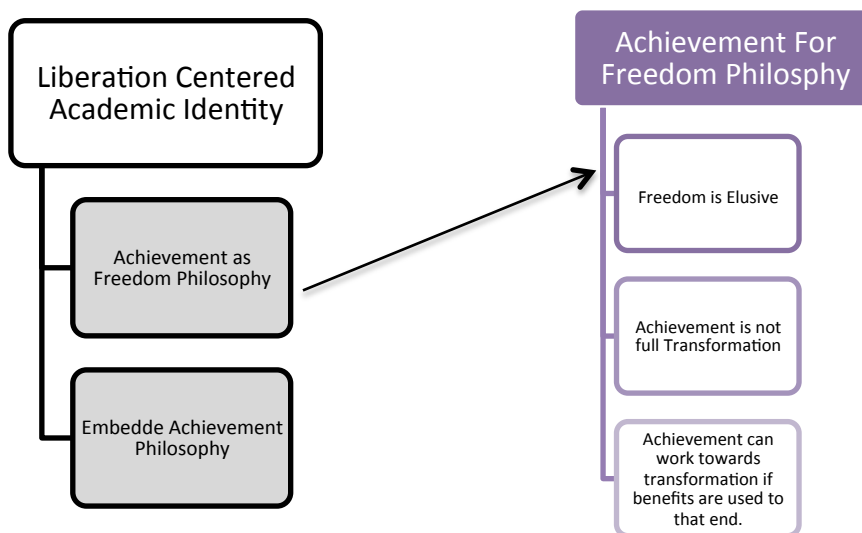
Such a shift in our narrative and in our thinking likely represents a significant change in the mindset of most Americans. As a personal example, in my third year of teaching, I was cleaning up my classroom with Brianna Miller. We were talking about our respective goals and desires and I casually mentioned that I hoped to pursue a Ph.D. “For what?” she asked,

shuffling books into the classroom library. “So that I can make a larger change for African Americans,” I responded. “Well if you had a Ph.D.,” she said as she jammed a book into the crowded shelf, “wouldn’t you have everything you needed as an African American?” I was struck immediately by Brianna’s reference to achievement or academic attainment as an end goal. Academic striving was done to achieve, and after having achieved, she seemed to believe the striving was done. As Friere (1993) says of oppressive societies, “the one pole aspires not to its liberation but to identification with its opposite pole” (p.73). In many respects our current achievement purpose does exactly this: we encourage African Americans to aspire for a different vision of themselves academically and in the world, but not necessarily to change the world in which they live.

In sum, in contrast and beholden to the goals of this framework – to help African Americans survive in this society and to change it – an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy is included in a Liberation Centered Academic Identity to clarify for African Americans the racially contextualized nature of academic achievement and to articulate achievement as a pathway for transformation. Even though academic achievement alone is a purely navigational outcome, achievement used towards transformative ends can assist African Americans in creating a new society.

African Americans do not just need access to a purpose of achievement that helps them achieve in solely individual ways, but also need access to a purpose of achievement from which they can understand its transformative possibilities and leverage their individual academic achievement for collective liberation. An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy is intended to do just this. Each of the three messages within an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy 1) Freedom remains elusive, 2) Achievement is not independently transformative

and 3) Achievement has a role in transformation if used towards these ends, needs careful cultivation in schooling practice for it to emerge as the guiding achievement philosophy in educating African Americans, and for it to stand up against dominant messages.



**Figure 12: All Three Messages Embedded in Achievement For Freedom Philosophy**

### **A Pedagogical Point – Building a Context of Achievement & Collective Struggle**

In previous chapters, I opted not to describe pedagogical approaches. However, in this chapter, I want to briefly overview one pedagogical process that can help build both an Embedded Achievement Philosophy and an Achievement For Freedom Philosophy. I have chosen to do this because a Liberation Centered Academic Identity is a new concept. Therefore, understanding how it might be cultivated can better clarify the pillar for educators.

To cultivate a Liberation Centered Academic Identity, a whole-school model should intentionally build for African Americans a “Context of Achievement & Collective Struggle.” A Context of Achievement & Collective Struggle simply means having knowledge of African Americans’ long history of fighting for the right, first, to be educated and second, to receive adequate education (Context of Struggle). It secondly means deeply embedding African Americans in examples, models and narratives of African Americans who have achieved academic success in spite of less than optimal contexts (Context of Achievement).

As Theresa Perry (2005) reminds us, “narratives or stories figure centrally in the construction of identities” (p.93). Theoretical and empirical research makes clear that African Americans who are exposed to stories about those that they view as similar to themselves and the narratives surrounding those people are likely to incorporate these narratives into the way that they view themselves (Wendt, 1994). Thus, if African Americans are exposed to images of African American achievement early, they likely won’t have to define school achievement as something for out-group identities only, or at the very least will likely have a base from which to push against dominant frames. They will know that there is a long history of Black intellectual achievement (Tatum, 1995, p.65). Yet, higher education remains one of the first places where African Americans have the “opportunity” to consult their history and mine this history for models (Halagao, 2010; Vasquez- Heilig, Brown & Brown, 2012). Yet, as I have previously noted, over 60% of African Americans never make it to college. Thus we need to be even more intentional in a K-12 whole school model about building a context of achievement.

Once again, this notion is not new but is instead drawn from the practices of African Americans historically. As Theresa Perry describes, stories about achievement were passed

on, informally and formally, whether in weekly assemblies, at church or graduation ceremonies. These stories were a central part of the creation of the collective identity of African Americans as literate achieving people” (Perry, 2005, p.93). Similarly, a Context of Struggle outlines for African Americans the enduring battle that African Americans have engaged in to receive first access to education at all, and second and still ongoing, access to quality education. This again includes a systemic review of historical and contemporary examples.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented an academic identity for African Americans that can be cultivated within a whole-school model. I asserted that the two subcomponents: an Embedded Achievement Philosophy and An Achievement For Freedom Philosophy could work in combination to position African Americans to resist the forces of racism rampant in the United States specific to academics and more importantly to be motivated to pursue academic achievement as a means to an end – racial liberation.

While a Liberation Centered Academic Identity doesn’t include academic content, it does however dictate academic behavior. In short, people do not have LCAI if they do not exhibit behaviors in accordance to this identity. As Burke & Hoelter (1988) explain, people choose behaviors that are consistent with their identities. Further as Nasir et al. (2011) assert, “if a student has a black academic identity where their racial identity and academic identities overlap and they view high achievement as necessary to be a model of African American student success, they are likely to participate in academic behaviors that are consistent with this identity” (p.8). This example from Nasir et al. is particularly salient as it reflects many of the beliefs present in an LCAI. Thus, educators should understand that an LCAI has not

been properly cultivated if behavior traits do not follow. This does not mean that African Americans don't have to be taught behavior traits, it just means that we should understand a Liberation Centered Achievement identity as both a psychological and a behavioral concept.

The dangers of misperceiving all academic achievement as preparation for transformation are ripe in this current educational context. What I am saying and putting forth in a Liberation Centered Academic Identity is entirely different if not oppositional. Existing methods for helping African Americans pursue academic achievement are everywhere, yet we must consider the motivations and achievement identity that will best position African Americans to navigate our world and transform it.

## CHAPTER 6. ACTIVISM SKILLS

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*Sasha sends me a text, “OMG Aaliyah!!!”... it says and nothing else. I shake my head. Some information would be nice. “What?” I reply. “Something happened in the school that was sooo not social justice.” I wait for the rest. “I was in the hallway just going to the bathroom and I heard a teacher tell a student, “I don’t like you. I have never liked you. No one will like you. You won’t be anybody.” My jaw drops as I read and I know texting is no longer adequate. Sasha answers on the first ring, “Can you believe it?” she says. We talk hurriedly, both exclaiming in anguish until suddenly I realize that I will need to say something more substantial. Clearly, these actions by a teacher were not acceptable, but what were the right next steps on our end? As if hearing my internal dialogue, Sasha urgently asks, “What should I do?” I am silent in response. “Ms. El-Amin,” she tries again, clearly moving the phone closer to her mouth. “Can you hear me? What should I do?”*

### **Introduction**

5 years ago, I was leading a project with 8 high school students of color including Sasha. A substantive goal for the project was to develop students’ critical consciousness about issues of injustice in schools. Therefore, a million thoughts ran through my mind while Sasha waited for me to answer her. First, I was proud she was able to see, name, and be outraged by a situation where a “just” practice was clearly not being employed. I was also pleased that Sasha knew people have to push beyond awareness to interruption to make social change. Her urgency implied that we were both complicit in the observed injustice without further action. In sum, Sasha was articulating her desire to move from critical reflection to critical action – a clear demonstration of her growing critical consciousness. I was thrilled.

Yet, my next reaction was unexpected. Instead of asking a thoughtful question or suggesting some possibilities for moving forward, I sat on the phone with my many layers of education and social capital – everything our current education paradigm might argue is all I needed to be “free” – and said nothing. A few minutes passed and then I realized my silence was

reflective of my own lack of skill. Put simply, I wasn't as skilled as I should have been in critical action. It wasn't that I was completely blank in that moment. I considered several possible routes: tell the principal, address the teacher, talk to the student who was victimized and rally together to push back. Yet, I could feel my deep hesitation, my lack of reflexivity, and more alarmingly, my fear. I was worried about my position as an outsider to the school and about Sasha's position as a student. These combined fears were enough to give me pause. I seriously considered telling her to do nothing. There are valid reasons that people seeking racial justice or any type of equality might pause before they take action. There are also times when inaction is the best course of action. Yet, in this case there was nothing strategic about my feelings. I was paralyzed because I couldn't access an arsenal of options or an analytic frame from which to decide the best way to move forward. So in response to Sasha's request, I only said, "I don't know."

My experience with Sasha clarified that "the ability to spot injustice is not organically linked to the ability to do something about it" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). "Knowledge is not exactly power. Knowledge is the power to know, to understand, but not to necessarily do or change" (Shor, 1992, p.6). Yet, as the purpose of this framework is to help African Americans survive and thrive in society and to transform it, the "power to change" – as Ira Shor named it – is entirely the point. There is not yet a pillar in this framework that focuses on the expertise of "doing." Previous pillars independently or in combination cultivate African Americans' ability to recognize the depths of our country's injustice and in so doing, generate motivation to work towards more equal ends, but none details precisely *how* African Americans translate their motivation to strategic and effective action. Two pillars assume action (critical consciousness and collective obligation) and thus educators might mistake



them for adequate preparation in transformation. However, as mentioned in their respective chapters, not only do critical consciousness and collective obligation not clarify how African Americans translate motivation to action, neither is explicitly concerned with how well the assumed action is completed. Sasha's experience provides a useful example of the missing link in these two pillars. Sasha had emerging critical consciousness and arguable an emerging sense of collective obligation. She didn't know the student she saw being chastised, but she felt a sense of obligation to him because he was subject to an unjust practice. Yet, despite an emerging sense of both critical consciousness and collective obligation, Sasha still didn't know what to do to expose, and more importantly remedy the situation. In this sense then, none of the previous pillars *guarantees* tangible transformational results. To produce radical change, African Americans need the capacity to act effectively against racist forces.

Civic engagement literature emphasizes preparing individuals to engage in action and prioritizes skill building as a mechanism for this preparation. Verba, Scholzman & Brady (1995) argue that effective civic action requires a desire to get involved (motivation), the ability to contribute something to the effort (capacity and skills) and connections to a network of individuals for whom they are going to be involved (opportunity). Lauren Hoffman (2009) similarly suggests that political action involves political clarity, political capacity and political collaboration. Hanson, Jessop, & Crawford (2012) assert three dimensions of youth civic engagement: (a) civic literacy or knowledge (b) civic competence or skills and (c) civic development or motivation. Evident in each of these categorizations is a focus on skills and hence skill-building. Therefore, to move African Americans from being motivated to act to doing so effectively, we must turn our attention to cultivating the fifth pillar in this framework, namely, **activism skills**.

Although there is no standard definition of activism in either scholarship or lived practice (Corning & Myers, 2002), activism is generally used to describe behaviors that promote a cause and challenges the status quo (Sherrod, 2006). The goal of challenging the status quo typically distinguishes activism from certain civic behavior such as voting. That said, civic behavior can have a powerful influence on activist goals and agendas (e.g. the pursuit of voting as a civil right in the Civil Rights Movement). It is logical to assume that both traditional civic behaviors leveraged towards racial liberation agendas and non-traditional behaviors (e.g. protest and demonstrations) will play a role in racism's undoing. Activism encompasses both strategies and is therefore, the closest existing term to the type of action African Americans might need to lead, participate in and sustain social transformation.

However, it is important to note that the greatest social change makers of our time are often referred to using other terms: rebels, dreamers, radicals, dissidents and revolutionaries. There are negative connotations associated with these terms, but they help paint a picture of the audacious and non-conformist nature African Americans may require to truly deconstruct racist forces and correspondingly the types. They correspondingly suggest the types of skills African Americans may need to develop to do so. In the words of Nathan Teske (2009), "to be a political activist in America is to be someone who is exceptional, unusual, or odd, someone who lives life against the common grain" (p. 27). Nothing yet in this framework ensures this disposition or produces the skills embedded in sustaining it. Activism skills are thus critical and cannot be ignored nor developed haphazardly. To do so, would render this framework functionally useless.

### **What Activism Skills should be taught in an Emancipatory Whole School Model?**

Just as there is no agreed upon term for engaging in social transformation, there is no scholarly work that outlines the set of skills African Americans need to effectively pursue racial liberation. This is likely because social transformation is a complex process involving many unforeseen obstacles, structural barriers, and uncertainties (Wheeler-Bell, 2014, p. 472). As a result, the precise strategies and the corresponding skills needed by individuals involved have to in part be determined in the moment. Wheeler-Bell (2014) expands:

Concrete strategies cannot be predicted prior to the events and also change as the movement evolves and faces new situations. For example, social movements may involve student protests, campaigning, petitions, labor strikes, organized boycotts, and so forth. The point is that the strategies taken by the movement depend upon uncertain circumstances, but fundamentally social movements are contentious politics aimed at radically transforming the status quo (Arditi, 2009). Therefore, when educating children to engage in social movements we are unable to pinpoint the exact strategies and education skills children should learn. (p. 472)

Accordingly, I will not offer a full set of skills in this chapter. Instead, I will suggest categories of skills that could be considered within an emancipatory school model and provide a few examples in each of those categories for pedagogical clarity.

#### *Defining Categories for Activist Skills Development*

Political science offers the most robust theoretical and empirical literature on skills for action from which to construct categories of activism skills for African Americans. Civic scholars suggest three specific domains that when developed position individuals for effective action: a) knowledge of civic processes and techniques – i.e. knowledge of how laws are constructed or passed, of power analysis, and of boycotting; b) technical skills for participation (e.g. how to craft a petition or organize a demonstration); and c) civic dispositions (e.g. a sense of

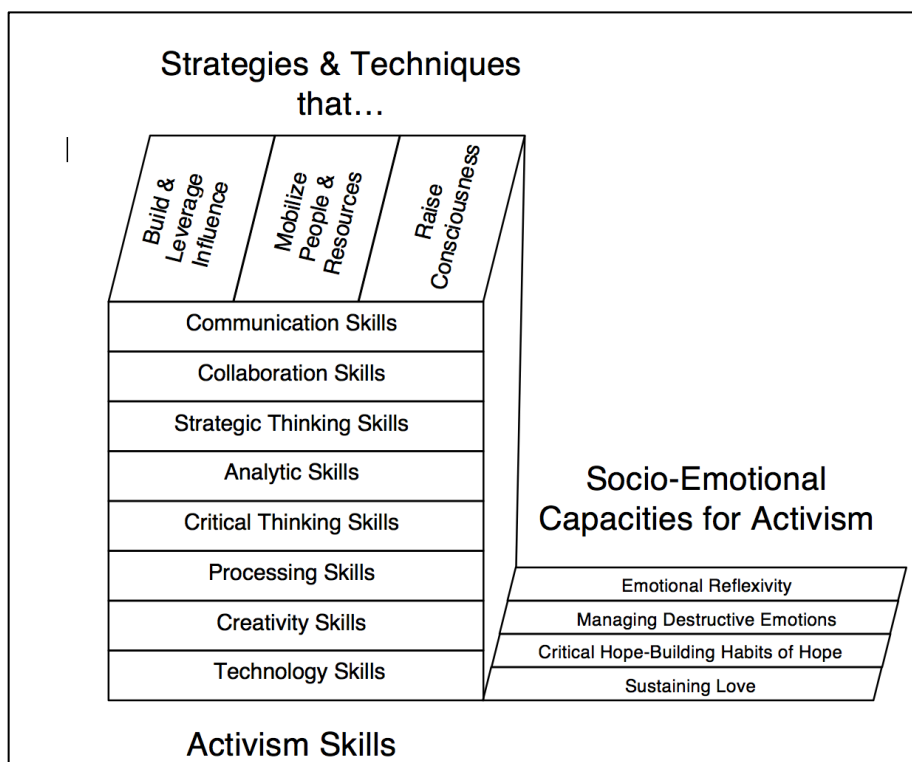
responsibility to the community) (Patrick, 2000, Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Torney-Purta & Vemmer, 2004). These domains for development apply to both traditional political participation such as voting and non-traditional political participation such as protesting. As such, Civil Rights leaders focused heavily on two of these domains to prepare African Americans for the largest and most effective national struggle for racial liberation in our history. CORE (Congress of Racial Equity) and SNCC (The Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) conducted trainings for African Americans in nonviolent activist strategies such as protests, sit-ins, and boycotts. The Highlander Folk School, which provided robust training for southern civil rights activists including Rosa Parks, conducted similar trainings on activism strategies while also focusing on African Americans' knowledge of civic processes, such as how to pass the reading test required at the time to vote. The Freedom Summer School of Mississippi and the Poor People's Campaign also developed African Americans' skills in critical thinking as well as in organizing and community development (Perlstein, 2002; 2005).

Civil rights leaders also provided focused and intentional training on an additional domain, not as frequently explored in political science literature; namely, emotion regulation and management. Several training organizations taught African Americans how to respond non-violently in the face of consistently aggressive behavior. Trainers simulated racist conditions and screamed racial slurs and spat on participants, forcing African Americans to practice managing various emotions such as anger and shame (Olds, 1963, p.18) Historians have credited such training with helping activists maintain their self-control and remain non-violent despite being subjected to stunning abuse (Ansbro, 2000, p.xxv). Oddly, political scientists and political psychologists have not carefully investigated the value or impact of

emotional regulation and management training for activists (Srivistava, 2005). Although more empirical evidence is needed, I hypothesize that socio-emotional skills will be necessary in a renewed and collective struggle for racial freedom. Chapter three made clear that transformation efforts aimed at deeply systemic racism is and will continue to be difficult and long-standing. Given the long and arduous journey facing African American activists, how could we not consider their emotional needs and well-being? For example, how do African Americans maintain hope in the face of considerable loss? How do they manage hurt or rage over time and how do they translate these emotions into productive ends rather than destructive ones? To ignore what seems to be an inevitable complex emotional journey would not set up African Americans for success.

Therefore, given the emphasis from Civil Rights leaders on training in activism techniques and activism skills and the similar emphasis in Political Science literature, on these two domains, I am adopting these two categorizations in this framework. Additionally, I am adding a third domain; socio-emotional capacities for activism. I have chosen not to adopt dispositions as a category for activism skill building even though it is suggested in political science literature as an area for intentional development. This is because civic and activist dispositions have likely been cultivated through the previous pillars. For example, responsibility to others, a key disposition for civic engagement (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2015) is generated through the third pillar collective obligation. Readiness to compromise personal interests to achieve shared ends is another civic disposition and is the precise definition of collective obligation and is also embodied in an liberation centered academic identity. Thus, the categories of skills I put forth to be covered in an emancipatory school model are a) activism techniques and strategies, b) technical activism

skills and c) socio-emotional capacities for activism. The following section will describe each in turn and offer a few examples for practitioners to draw on.



**Figure 13 - Suggested Domains of Skill Development For Racial Liberation**

### **A Review of the Three Domains of Skill Development for Racial Liberation**

#### *Activism Strategies & Techniques*

Activism strategies and techniques, refers to the various methods that African American individuals and groups might leverage in transformation efforts. As previously discussed, although it is important for African Americans to have individual capacity to upend racism in every day life, it is not likely that African Americans will achieve racial liberation through the efforts of one individual. A collective movement that involves both African Americans themselves as well as other allies across racial/ethnic groups is much more likely to force

significant change. Thus, African Americans need to be able to bring people together and to use collectives strategically and effectively. When considering strategies to be taught in an emancipatory school framework, practitioners should consider those strategies that facilitate group solidarity and action. Some examples include, but are not limited to, strategies that help African Americans do the following:

### 1. Build and Leverage Influence

- Strategies and techniques within this category might include but are not limited to coalition building, organizing, interest convergence, negotiation, brokerage- the ability to forge social connections between people previously unlinked persons or sites

### 2. Mobilize People & Resources

- Strategies and techniques within this category might include but are not limited to protest, demonstration, voting in blocks, fundraising, community organizing, letter writing campaigns, petitions, technology literacy

### 3. Raise Consciousness

- Strategies and techniques within this category might include but are not limited to research, YPAR, critical media strategies (i.e. twitter campaigns), arts & music as activism and civil disobedience.

It is important to note that some of the strategies listed serve multiple ends. For example a protest can be both a mobilizing technique, a consciousness raising strategy and a strategy for building influence.

*Technical Activism Skills*

Technical Activism Skills refer to skills that facilitate the effective planning and execution of activism strategies and techniques. Essentially these skills provide the foundation for activism. The forces of racism need to be attacked on both an individual and a group level. Therefore, African Americans need access to skills that are both independently harnessed and skills that can only be truly exercised in a group. When considering the skills to be taught in an emancipatory school model, educators should pay careful attention to develop both individual and collective skills. Some examples include but are not limited to:

1. Communication Skills
  - a. For example public speaking, debate, writing
2. Collaboration Skills
  - a. For example, group problem solving skills
3. Strategic Thinking Skills
  - a. For example the ability to set a vision and align goals to that vision.
4. Analytic Skills
  - a. For example weighing evidence and conducting risk and power analysis.
  - b. And analyzing and check the reliability of information, analyzing how conditions of community are related to policy.
  - c. Managing bias – the ability to have an opinion but still be open to new information and opinions as needed
5. Critical Thinking Skills
  - a. For example, critical literacy or the ability to dissect multiple perspectives, understand the position of written and oral material and deconstruct motives in written and oral text.



6. Processing Skills
  - a. For example the ability to gather and process information quickly and adjust course given information
7. Creativity Skills
  - a. For example, the capacity to imagine and the ability to see opportunity
8. Technology literacy
  - a. Up to date technology knowledge and competence

Many of these skills are already embedded in the traditional work of schools. Yet practitioners adopting this framework should consider not only how to build competence in these skills inside of traditional academic content but also how to ensure that these skills can be applied to activist actions and behaviors. For example, an African American who is a strong writer may not necessarily be able to craft a petition. Similarly an African American who is a strong orator may not necessarily be able to apply that skill to a televised political and social debate. In order for the above skills to be useful in the fight for racial justice they need to be able to be effectively applied to that fight. African Americans then require training and development that allows them to apply the listed skills (and others as they are determined) to the work of social transformation.

*Socio-Emotional Capacities for Activism*

“Rage, tears and confusion often follow even the most tentative discussion of racism...”  
 (Srivastava, 2005, p.1) In the struggle to achieve racial emancipation, African Americans are going to discuss racism constantly, they are going to engage with others who do not share their focus on racial equity and they are inevitably going to suffer losses (both personal and collective). Just as it is important to build skills to ensure that African Americans can

effectively dismantle racist forces, it is also important to proactively build skills to ensure that African Americans can sustain these efforts and to ensure that their emotional responses both serve their efforts and their personal life quality. The goals of this framework are to position African Americans to both thrive and survive in our racist context and to transform it. Surviving and thriving entails emotional stability and health. And transforming entails emotional regulation and management. The following are suggested socio-emotional capacities for activism

- Socio-Emotional Capacities for Activism
  - Emotional reflexivity
  - Managing destructive emotions (anger, shame, failure, loss)
  - Critical Hope – Building Habits of Hope
  - Sustaining Love

A focus on emotional regulation and management does not mean that African Americans' emotions should be regulated all the time in this model. Emotions even intense ones are significant motivators for action. The idea in this category however, is that African Americans can strategically manage their emotions to the best outcomes for themselves and their racial group and that they can generate other emotions that are useful in the struggle. (i.e. critical hope).

### **How is Activism Skills connected to other pillars?**

Unlike other pillars in this framework, activism skills are not deeply interconnected to other pillars in the sense that they require others to be developed. In fact, it is entirely possible to develop someone's activism skills separate from a sound racial identity, collective obligation or critical consciousness. I can understand how to engage in protest and also to debate without necessarily linking these actions to a particular self-identity or to a group cause.

Further, I can sign a petition or vote a certain way on an issue even without being critically aware of underlying factors related to that given issue. This fact makes activism skills a unique pillar in this framework.

However, activism skills unattached to any commitment to a cause could perhaps become obsolete or not be leveraged to their full potential. Therefore, just as collective obligation should be rooted in African Americans' sense of self as a racial group and a liberation centered achievement identity should similarly be rooted in the same, activism skills within this framework should be developed within the context of students understanding themselves as African Americans and more importantly as African Americans seeking and working for their racial freedom.



**Figure 14 - Context for Activism Skills Required for Transformation**

This context allows African Americans to draw on activism skills towards the specific goal of racial liberation and in fact might deepen African Americans' commitment to learning and mastering these skills. This is a simple fact of teaching and learning – those skills deemed

relevant to African Americans are often more easily adopted and used (Crump, Vaquero, & Milliken, 2008).

Although each of the previous pillars can be cultivated in absence of activism skills and activism skills in absence of each of the previous pillars, activism skill building plays a role in the development of each of the previous pillars. For example, activism experience can help develop African Americans' critical consciousness (Diemer, 2003; Youniss, Mclellan & Yates, 1997). If an African American organizes a demonstration around the housing practices in their neighborhood, they are likely forced to learn more about the city and state level policies that have shaped the context of that neighborhood. That knowledge building process can solidify that certain policies disenfranchise African Americans overall. Thus, practicing an action or activism training has the potential to deepen an individuals' understanding of systemic forces – or develop critical reflection (Levinson, 2012). Christens & Dolan (2011) studied an exemplary national youth organizing initiative (an activist organization that helps young people advocate for change) and found that the “most distinctive outcome of organizing (an activist strategy) was a critical awareness of social power and its impacts in local communities” (p. 539). This is the precise definition of critical reflection.

Activism skill building also impacts the development of other aspects of critical consciousness. If an African American is practicing how to organize a demonstration and is successful to this end; they see a group of people come together and rally for a cause and they can see changes as a result of the action they organized, this can increase an African American's sense of efficacy about making social changes (Kirshner, 2009; Christens & Dolan, 2011; Levinson, 2012; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012). In fact, “ the evidence about

civic development is strongest with particular emphasis on participants' growing sense of agency..." (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012, p. 290). To this end, Christens & Dolan (2011) also found that students who participated in their studied youth organizing program, "expressed confidence that they were prepared to take leadership and work with a group to make community change" (p.539). In a study of a YPAR initiative (a research based action initiative for youth) across 290 students in two high schools, Zeal & Terry (2013) also found that student participants asserted a link between their experience with action and their self-efficacy, stating "across our sample students acknowledged how the process of overcoming barriers led them to feel capable of the type of work that independent research and self- or group-coordinate action demands" (p.47).

Thus, while both critical reflection and self-efficacy can be developed independent from training in activism skills, training in activism skills, which naturally assumes practice in action, has the potential to deepen critical reflection and self-efficacy. Levinson (2012) calls this the "virtuous cycle or feedback loop" of engaging in action. That is that engaging in meaningful action towards a meaningful goal can enhance other critical components related to achieving that goal. This includes but is not limited to knowledge of the problem, efficacy to fix the problem and a deepened commitment to the cause. Each of these outcomes is discussed in this dissertation an important part of achieving racial liberation. The interconnections between activism skills and the other pillars, further reinforces the notion that all of the pillars are most powerful when developed alongside each other and operate best as a set of liberation tools.

## **Conclusion**

The categories and skills in this chapter are a guide and need to be revised and revisited by practitioners as new conditions and manifestations of racism emerge and as new pathways for change reveal themselves. Further, as progress is made, strategies may become obsolete or minimally useful. More than any other this particular pillar is both fluid and contextual. It also may be one of the most critical. Without activism skills, we run the risk of leaving African Americans as both Sasha and I were; actively willing and yet simultaneously unprepared. There is no room in work towards racial justice for this error. There is no value in having troops armed and ready for battle with no training to engage.

## CHAPTER 7. SYNTHESIS & DISCUSSION

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### **Schools as a Platform for Change – Is it Feasible?**

I have presented each of the pillars and their individual and collective impact outside of the true context of schooling. Yet, I have simultaneously been clear that the framework presented is an educational one – designed to be implemented inside of school buildings. Thus, where does this emancipatory framework fit in the current educational landscape and how if at all is it possible to achieve within schools?

As mentioned in the opening, it has been long established and historically practiced that schools, given their far-reaching influence, can serve as central institutions to help encourage societal change (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Banks, 2001; Ayers, 2004, Gordan, 2009). The framework that I am presenting here, therefore, is not beyond the scope of what is possible within education. In fact, schools already influence many of the elements I address (though perhaps not intentionally). I *am* presenting a framework that would admittedly be radically different than the shape and purpose that our schools currently take. This difference, however, does not preclude feasibility.

I anticipate that even after reading this full dissertation and considering the urgency of liberation for African Americans, some may still doubt that it is possible to build a schooling model based on the outlined premises. How can we create schools designed to counteract and eliminate racism within a racist society? I argue that we will realize the answer through doing the work. Perhaps paradoxically, this is not a question that we can answer ahead of time precisely because we still live in a racist society. Instead, the very attempt to build a

comprehensive school that enacts this educational framework *models* the transformation desired by its implementation. In the words of Theresa Perry (2003), “The act of constructing an institution whose organization and operation counter the larger society’s ideology about an oppressed people is an act of resistance” (p. 85).

Just as we may wonder how it is possible to build a school like this within a racist society, we have to also ask how it is possible to eliminate a racist society without intense and intentional opposition. Do we really expect a society that has long benefited from the lasting consequences of explicit and implicit subordination of African Americans to overhaul their practices and adopt new practices that will serve to liberate their subordinates? History cautions us against this expectation. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963), one of our nation’s greatest leaders in societal transformation, clearly stated “freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it has to be taken by the oppressed.” A similar sentiment was voiced more recently by Professor Bronski in a sociology class I took at Harvard focused on Social Movements. At the end of a grueling semester tracing historic and sociopolitical paths of the Women’s Movement, The Gay Liberation movement and The Civil Rights movement, the professor stood before us and said “I hope one thing at least is clear... if you leave with nothing else from these histories, stories and social changes, understand this in no uncertain terms.... marginalized groups *never* get what they don’t fight for” (Personal Communication, December 2012). These words, and the words of Martin Luther King, are undeniably clear. There is no easy path for pursuing racial justice. Thus, this emancipatory framework should not be excluded based on the perceived difficulty to implement the strategy alone.

In spite of the anticipated difficulty, this educational framework is a particularly viable strategy because it is targeted at an institution that has *every* African American as a captive



audience at some point in their lives. Additionally, there are several existing structural opportunities that enhance the feasibility of further defining and implementing it. Though outside of the scope of this paper, it is easy to see how this framework might be best implemented and facilitated within a racially homogenous school. In building each of the five elements in African Americans, the ability to focus solely on this racial group in a school would likely operate as a significant benefit.<sup>54</sup> Although the notion of homogeneity sounds controversial, current segregationist practices, structures and policies make this strategy entirely possible.

According to Orfield & Boger (2005), students are more likely today to attend racially homogeneous schools and exist in racially homogeneous societies than in diverse ones. Due to this de facto segregation, African Americans, specifically in several major metropolitan cities and southern districts, attend schools that are almost entirely African American. This provides a pre-existing structure and school setting within which this framework could be applied. Further, with increased political investment, financial investment and educational investment in charter schools, there are accepted structures within which to build new schools that are a) explicitly mission-driven and b) focused exclusively on the needs of a specific subset of the population. Finally, recent expansion of charter school networks such as KIPP and Achievement First, whose student populations are almost 90% African American (and in many cases virtually 100% African American), have also demonstrated that

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<sup>54</sup> As a note throughout the dissertation, I have referred to African Americans as one monolithic group, not accounting for or discussing the very real diversity that lies beneath the racial category. Yet there is some value in discussing this group at aggregate and recognizing the homogeneous experience of marginalization and racism that they experience despite any valid or extensive variances. This variance should not be ignored in the use of this emancipatory framework but neither should it diminish its value or preclude its use.

it is entirely feasible and “acceptable” to have a racially homogenous school in a charter school setting and to tailor the education experience in specific ways.

Further increasing the practicality of my framework, each of the pillars presented can be uniquely nurtured in a school setting. Schools are uniquely positioned to have a role in shaping identities, whether schools want to or not. Given the amount of time adolescents spend in school, schools are spaces where they form, interrogate and solidify many axes of their identities, so much so that according to Akbar (1998), “the first function of education is to provide identity” (p. 2). One could argue that schools should not be responsible for shaping African Americans’ *racial identity*, yet the absence of shaping is still shaping. And as we saw in Ynecia’s narrative, in the absence of explicit positive shaping, racial identity takes on the mold that society has poured. It may be odd to cite a modern music artist in a dissertation, yet Tupac Shakur offers really interesting insight about the amount of time we have before society imposes a negative racial identity on African Americans. “You have five years in this country,” Tupac sings, before “America takes the heart and soul out of a black man.” As school begins for many at age three, they have an incredible opportunity to build sound racial identities. “It is easier to build strong children than it is to repair broken men.” (Douglass, 1845).

It is perhaps even more intuitive to see that each component of Critical Consciousness (critical reflection, self-efficacy and critical action) can be facilitated within the current context of schooling if so desired.<sup>55</sup> We know that schools help to shape the social theories and views that African Americans have during the course of their lives (Flannagan &

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<sup>55</sup> The anecdote in the critical consciousness section highlights how problematizing is not done in schools. But this lack of emphasis does not indicate that schools cannot cultivate this consciousness. The ability to do so still exists. Just like any other element in this framework would require intentionality in curriculum, teachers, teacher pedagogy, community relationships etc.

Campbell, 2003). Furthermore, the context and dynamics of teaching and learning provides an optimal space for the processes that lead to critical consciousness. Teachers have multiple and consistent opportunities to engage in “problematizing” and dialogue and to build African Americans’ beliefs in their ability to engage in meaningful social action (Youniss & Yates, 1997). Most obviously, schools have a unique opportunity to cultivate a Liberation Centered Achievement Identity, as this element is related to a central function of schooling. However, aside from this obvious association, LCAI is also a social identity – an identity built on what one understands of their race’s relationship to academics. Social science research makes clear that social identities are constructed in groups, and the most powerful location for this work is in the context of the peer group. The development of Collective Obligation particularly in a school that is homogenous fits into already existing goals of schools to build connections and solidarity between students. Finally, cultivating both Collective Obligation and building Activism Skills can also fall within existing school structures. Enrichment classes, extra-curricular activities and school culture building are just some basic spaces to infuse collective action into a whole-school model.

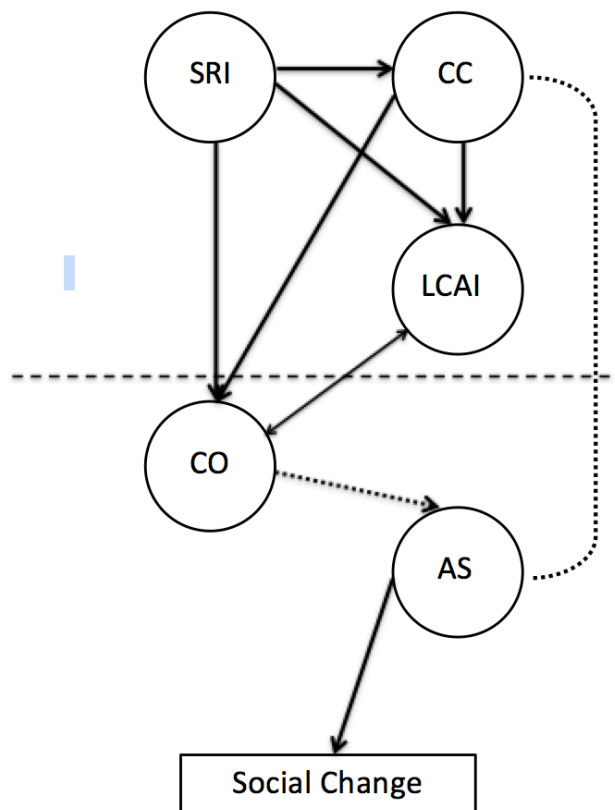
### **The Unique Benefits of a Whole-School Model**

Besides the fact that each pillar can be cultivated within a school, there is a strong rationale to consider a whole-school model specifically. The opening touched on these reasons but I would like to offer a few additional reasons in the hopes that this work serves as a foundation for practice. First, a whole-school model is an appropriate and necessary response to the gravity of the problem. Beverly Tatum (1997) helps explain this. In her seminal work, *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, Tatum likens racism in the United States to air. She claims that in every moment, in almost every circumstance, we

are breathing racist air. This happens, she asserts, regardless of whether or not we know it or want to be doing so. If racism is that pervasive, that present even in the moments when we don't notice it – as air is – why would we think that in just one social justice class or with one teacher who uses critical education pedagogy, we are going to develop children to be experts in resisting something so wide-spread and complex? Whole-school interventions have the opportunity to prepare African Americans for forging racial liberation on a more comprehensive basis. Racist forces are not going to be upended or transformed if we respond to them with isolated strategies.

### *Pillars as Interwoven and Fluid*

Whole-school models also give educators the opportunity to pay the necessary attention to each of the pillars in this framework and to give students the time to grapple with the insights, complexities and new skills learned. First, as noted all throughout this dissertation, the pillars are interconnected. While I discussed each pillar separately for the purpose of analytic and pedagogical value, it is really difficult to wrestle them apart when considering the outcome of liberation. Three of the pillars simply cannot exist without a Sound Racial Identity: (1) Critical consciousness (about race), (2) Collective Obligation and (3) Liberation Centered Achievement Identity. Critical Consciousness may also serve as a basis for Collective Obligation and a Liberation Centered Achievement Identity. Further, Collective Obligation helps facilitate a Liberation Centered Academic Identity, while Activism Skill building has the potential to deepen and enrich each one of the pillars. In Figure 14, below, we can see that the pillars build each other up and reinforce each other.



**Figure 14 – Interconnection of all 5 Pillars**

Additionally, each concept outlined in this framework needs to be understood as fluid and contextual. We cannot expect to develop these concepts within students on a single occasion – this is a long-term project. Just as educators would presume that when they teach African Americans how to do an algebra equation, African Americans should practice similar equations repeatedly to retain that knowledge. Similarly, all of the concepts in this work need to be practiced on multiple occasions and in multiple contexts. Racial Identity, for example, is fluid across contexts (Shelton & Sellers, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1994) meaning it can look different over time and in different spaces (Nasir, 2011). The various components of critical consciousness are cyclical, meaning that critical action can deepen critical reflection and also strengthen self-efficacy. Thus opportunities for all three dimensions need to be consistent, overlapping and repeated (Watts, Diemer & Voigt, 2011). A Liberation Centered Academic Identity, similar to a Sound Racial Identity, is a socially constructed identity that is subject to

the ever-changing context or social landscape (Nasir, 2011). Relatedly, there is no static end point of critical consciousness, collective obligation or even activism skills. For example, an African American might be proficient in the necessary activism skills for a given period but then in a few years need additional training given the shifting landscape. One poignant example is the need for social media training in activism skill training, which may not have been necessary or relevant even just a few years ago. Thus, given the fluid nature of the pillars presented, African Americans need continual exposure to them to be able to sustain them as integrated parts of their identity and for them to serve as potent sources for navigation and transformation. And given the interconnections, the pillars should be cultivated at the same time. This means of course, that schools drawing on this framework need to be in partnership with families and third-space organizations as well as religious organizations or other organizations central to African American communities. This will help ensure the liberation tools are cultivated in other domains and provide multiple opportunities for reinforcement.

Yet, schools are uniquely positioned to teach interwoven and multi-dimensional concepts. First, they have multiple entry points, daily opportunities and a rational reason to be in connection with families and communities. Second, schools have the power to integrate concepts, and to cycle them within integrative coursework, across grade levels and classrooms. They also have opportunities to use space and time in creative ways to further these concepts within electives and within cultural practices in the school setting (i.e. community rituals, school creeds and school celebrations). Of course as a former educator, I am not asserting that schools have a large amount of time that they are not already using, nor am I suggesting that embedding the liberation tools in this framework in a school-wide model would be simple for schools to do. I am suggesting rather that given the format and

shape of schooling, concepts that require consistent emphasis are perhaps best tackled by schools. And I am suggesting that given schools' ongoing access to African Americans over time – both over a day and over adolescence/emerging adulthood- they are distinctively powerful settings for nurturing the pillars discussed in this work.

### **Critical Considerations**

There are a few concerns that I can anticipate might arise from the implementation of an emancipatory framework as a whole-school model. First, is whether or not this development is necessary for all African Americans, or whether or not all African Americans would want to go to a school built on these concepts. While there may be some African Americans that do not desire to be a part of the struggle for racial liberation, I'd venture to say that all African Americans desire to live free from racism. Thus, every African American deserves the opportunity to at least be exposed and shaped within an emancipatory framework that can generate deeper proficiency in deconstructing that society.

Another concern is that an emancipatory model as a whole-school intervention would cause some African Americans harm, perhaps in the form of psychological trauma from anger or frustration. While, I have addressed this concern in other chapters, I do want to revisit it briefly here. It is true and probably likely that African Americans being educated through the framework presented, will experience a variety of emotions including depression, anxiety and anger. Yet, I don't see that as any different than what the existing world already does to them. This dissertation is littered with statistics about the harm that we do to African Americans for the purposes of oppressing them. If we are concerned about these emotions overwhelming African Americans, then we should be urgently working to eliminate the forces that cause them. Further, it may be justified to subject African Americans to some

manner of pain and frustration for the purposes of their liberation. Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2009) speaks of this in a discussion of what he calls Socratic Hope, which is a component of critical hope. He states we need to “share the sensibility that pain may have a path to justice.” (p.7).

This doesn't mean however that every African American would respond the same way to this framework as a whole-school model. Some African Americans may not evolve into truly committed beings for racial liberation. This however, is both ok and expected. It would be illogical for me to assert that everyone who is educated within an emancipatory framework is going to be Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Ella Baker or Rosa Parks. This just isn't how schooling works. As not all individuals who attend a Christian school leave their experience completely devoted to Christian principles and Christian faith, there is likely to be variation in African Americans' adoption of the various pillars. This does not mean however that the framework is ineffective, nor that it is not worth pursuing for African Americans who may be transformed and able to transform, as a result of their interaction with it. In sum, African Americans need an emancipatory school option. Even if an African American were not to adopt the pillars and the outcomes as presented, they at the very least would know that an option for navigation and transformation existed and have access to liberation tools should they choose at some point to use them.

That said, I believe that most contemporary African Americans would see the immediate benefit of this framework to their lives. As I write this, our society is explicitly reminding African Americans that it is not physically safe for them to live here. In fact, it is shouting that they are not welcome to live here. The treacherous deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric



Gardner, Michael Brown and Walter Scott send a resounding message that present-day African Americans are hearing loud and clear. This is evidenced by African Americans' engagement in explicit collective activism over the last six months. As discussed in Chapter 3, the outcries, reactions and actions in response to recent events is the loudest collective cry African Americans have made publicly since the Civil Rights Moment. Thus, it may be logical that this is the precise time to re-introduce emancipatory schooling models into the United States education landscape and that African Americans would embrace emancipatory schools as pathways for development in a battle they have already begun. As educators, recent events fuels our responsibility, to prepare the next generation of African Americans to diminish and eliminate the enduring racist practices, people, institutions, systems and ideologies that permeate our home, through the use of this whole-school model.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Despite my conviction that whole-school models are uniquely positioned for the integration of liberation tools in education or that the time for moving forward is ripe, I am not attempting to say that there isn't an uphill battle ahead. As we know, acts of resistance, even if disguised as commonly accepted practice, are often not welcomed with open arms. Goals formulated in terms of collective benefits, as this school framework is, are more likely to be seen as threatening than those that promote individual benefits. Yet, this does not negate existing opportunities, nor suggest that the intervention is not worth pushing for. In fact, a fight in education to operate, organize and implement their own schooling model is a battle African Americans have fought for decades. As mentioned in the opening of this work, from the moment African Americans were forcefully brought to the U.S, there have been intentional efforts to override the larger system and re-claim education as a space for the

pursuit of their own liberation. African American slaves carved out “illegal” spaces to learn to read, write and reclaim their humanity (Williams, 2009). Pre-civil rights, “black segregated schools were intentionally organized in opposition to the ideology of black inferiority and white supremacy” (Perry, 2003). Similarly as mentioned, during the Civil Rights Movement, The Black Panthers, The Nation of Islam, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other groups all opened a variety of formal and informal schools with the intent of resisting dominant norms and leveraging education broadly as a medium for transformation (Anderson & Kharem, 2009).<sup>56</sup> All of these groups insisted that the “elimination of racial oppression *required* the development of a new consciousness with the African American community” – a consciousness that could be taught, cultivated and unleashed in schools (Perlstein, 2009, p.137). As such, African Americans have historical models and frameworks from which to draw strength for this particular resistance.

However, it does seem that we have forgotten who we used to be. In this vein, Theresa Perry (2003) issues a challenge to African Americans who are looking for inspiration on where and how to solve the dilemmas of racism. She says simply, we just have to be more like ourselves. In sum, the wisdom, the clarity and the strength to ignore a largely oppositional audience and do what is best for our children and youth is the epitome of African Americans ancestry. To move forward, we must take an intentional and deep look back.

This re-mining of our history is *just* the first step to gathering the courage, will and insight to implement the proposed emancipatory school framework. There is still much work to be done before a framework of this nature can be effectively implemented, and many questions

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<sup>56</sup> Liberation Schools, Clara Muhammad Schools, Independent Black Institutions, Black Supplementary Schools are just some examples.

left to answer. What practices best lead to the cultivation of a sound racial identity? What schooling structures best support the intentional cultivation of collective obligation? How do discipline practices and teacher pedagogy uphold the development of a critical consciousness? What books, curriculum or content help nurture a liberation centered academic identity? And how, within the context of a typical school day, do we effectively train African Americans on the needed political, social and socio-emotional skills to be solid activists? None of these questions can be answered here, but future work will lay out a comprehensive plan for a school committed to the navigational and transformational success of African Americans using the five pillars developed in this dissertation.

Although the journey towards building schools that uphold this framework is long, and the road to actually witnessing the thriving success and collective freedom of African Americans as a racial group is even longer, I remain committed to the journey. If not for anything else, then because of the promise I made to my former students. Their lives, their stories, and their very existence demands that we do not forget the urgency of equipping African Americans with the tools they need to survive in this world and find peace in a new one.

At the end of my third year of teaching, I read a poem to my graduating class of 5<sup>th</sup> graders. I'd heard it in a movie and it seemed to capture the profound effect that all of our collective experiences had on me:

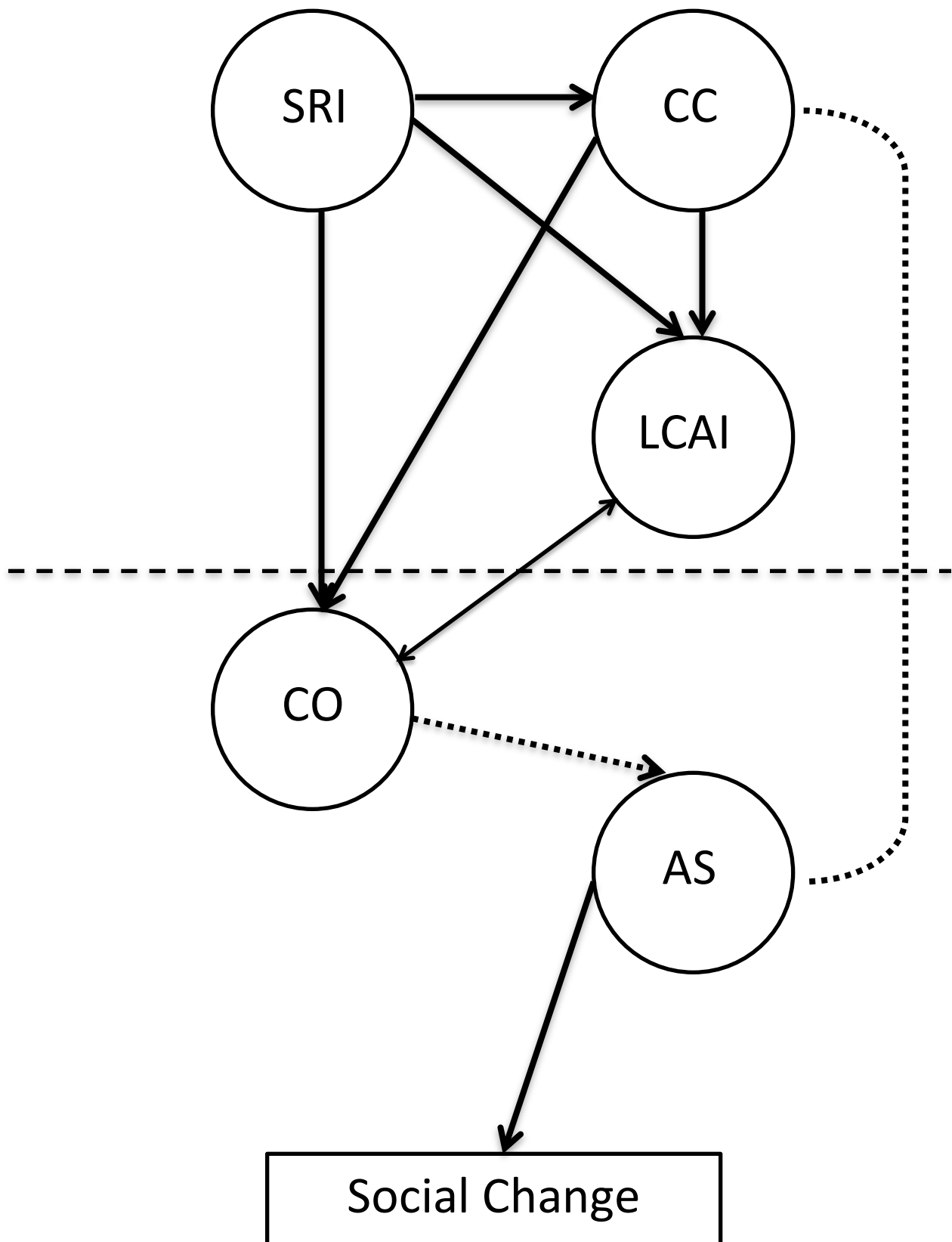
“here is the deepest secret nobody knows  
 (here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud  
 and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows  
 higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)  
 and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart  
 i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)

That afternoon as I milled about parents and students giving hugs and looking at diplomas and awards, Anthony Hargett changed my life. After introducing me to his mother, he grabbed my hand. “Ms. El-Amin,” he said in a fully serious tone, “if I give you my heart to carry, what will you do with it?” I stood in silence for a moment, oscillating between smiling at his literal interpretation and contemplating even its figurative meaning before I realized how good the question itself was. What would I do with it? I didn’t try to answer the question in the moment, but I knew (and I would argue that he did too) that by asking he was holding me responsible. And I have sought to live up to that responsibility. I have chosen to use his heart and the collective hearts of the African Americans I had the privilege to teach, learn from and meet in my educational journey to write this dissertation. I offer it in the hopes that it will provide some path and possibility for their collective relief and freedom.

## Appendix A – Racial Identity Dimensions

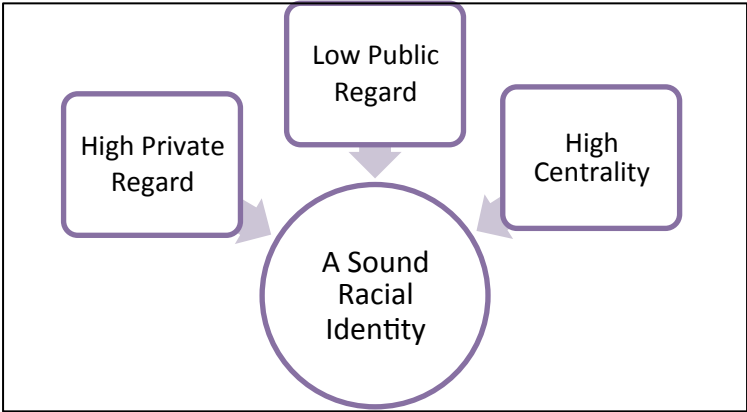
Racial Identity Dimensions	Meaning
Racial Salience	The extent to which race is relevant to a person's self-concept at a particular point in time or in a particular situation. This salience is fluid and may change depending on the context (school, work, etc.)
Racial Centrality	The extent to which a person considers his or her race to be an important part of his or her identity. This concept is stable and includes the hierarchy with which ones considers being African American as core to themselves (i.e Black woman vs. a woman who is black)
Private Regard	The degree to which individuals feel positively or negatively about being African Americans
Public Regard	An understanding of how "others" specifically other racial groups, view African Americans
Racial Ideology	An individuals' opinions, beliefs or attitudes about how a member of ones' race should act.

## Appendix B - Full Model of 5 Pillars

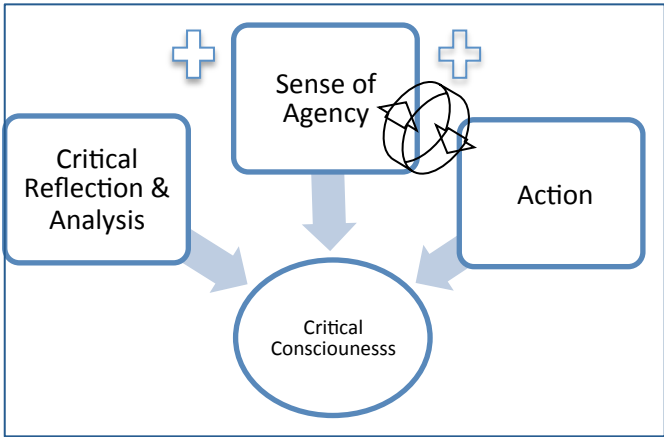


APPENDIX C: Models of the first Four Pillars

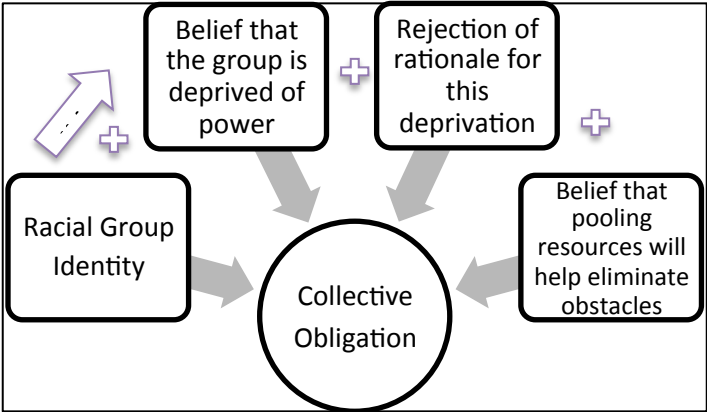
A SOUND RACIAL IDENTITY



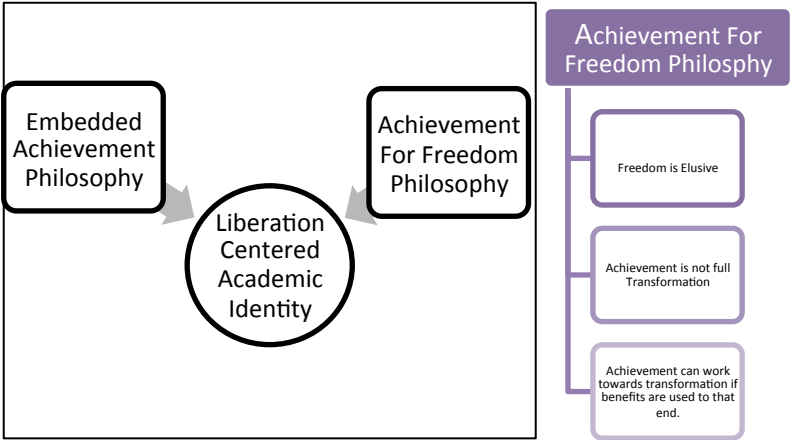
CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS



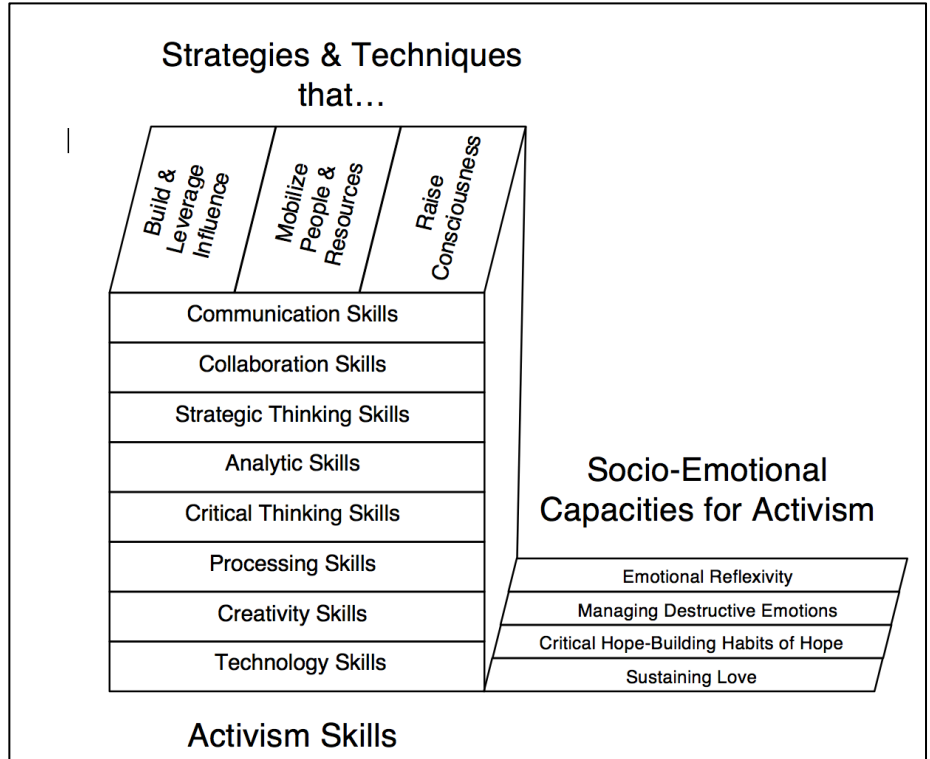
COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION



LIBERATION CENTERED ACADEMIC IDENTITY



## Appendix D: Activism Skills Model





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