"It Just Made Me Want to Do Better for Myself": Performing Arts Education and Academic Performance for African American Male High School Students

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Abstract

A wide body of research has been conducted which examines the relationship between arts engagement and academic performance for the general population of students in U.S. schools. To date, few studies have been conducted that examine the effects of arts-based learning experiences on African American males' academic performance. To address this gap in the literature, this case study uses interviews and post-graduation outcomes to explore the effects of school-based performing arts engagement on academic performance among African American male high school students. Findings from this project indicate that immersion in school-based performing arts learning experiences strengthens academic skills development, improves overall school

performance, and enhances post-school outcomes for African American male high school students. These findings suggest that bolstering arts-based school curricula and increasing access to performing arts learning experiences may improve school outcomes for African American males who attend U.S. public schools.

Introduction

In an effort to address racial disparities in academic outcomes among students in U.S. schools, researchers are identifying strategies and practices that enhance academic performance and improve school experiences for African American males. A growing body of research is developing which identifies methods and procedures that help African American males improve grades, strengthen academic skills, complete high school and enter higher education programs. Much of this research is concentrated within the traditional content areas of mathematics, English/language arts, science and social studies (Grant, Crompton & Ford, 2015; King & Flowers, 2014; Warren, Douglas, & Howard, 2016; Wright, Counsell, Goings, Freeman, Hollee, & Peat, 2016). Additional studies emphasize familial and community-based support systems which engender academic success among African American males (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013; Rhoden, 2017).

While such studies provide valuable information, there is proof that school-based arts engagement has the potential to bolster academic performance and engender more positive and supportive school experiences for African American males (Thomas, 2011; Walton, 2015). To date, very few studies have been conducted which examine this phenomenon, but the existing research provides some evidence that curriculum-based arts engagement supports improved academic performance for African American males (Walton & Wiggan, 2014). Additionally, research indicates that school-based arts learning experiences promote positive racial and cultural identity development and create more positive school experiences for African American males (Walton, 2015; Watson, Washington, & Stepteau-Watson, 2015).

While a small body of research focuses on relationships between arts education and African American males' academic performance, a much larger body of literature exists that explores the effects of arts-based learning on the general population of students in U.S. schools. Data indicates that learning in and through the arts may improve school performance and strengthen specific academic skills (Ludwig, Marklein & Song, 2016; Moore & Linder, 2012). Additionally, focused research indicates that school-based arts participation may strengthen standardized test performance (The College Board, 2013) and contribute to enhanced cognitive development (Hetland & Winner, 2004). Findings from studies which suggest that arts-based education enhances student achievement and spurs cognitive development are important, because such information implies that structured arts-based learning experiences

may help African American males have more positive school experiences and improve their overall academic performance.

The potential of arts-based learning to improve educational outcomes for African American males must be examined more closely. Historically, race-based differences in educational opportunities have contributed to the disparities in school performance that exist between African American males and their peers in other racial and ethnic groups (Hargrave, Tyler, Thompson, & Danner, 2016). African American males often experience racialized instructional and administrative practices which engender negative school experiences and hamper academic achievement (Schott Foundation, 2015). Denial of access to highly qualified teachers, discriminatory discipline practices, and disproportionately high special education placement patterns are some of the educational inequities that African American males experience in schools (Barrett, McEachin, Mills & Valant, 2018; Partee, 2014; USDOE, 2016). To address the structural inequities that impede high academic achievement among African American males, it is imperative that researchers explore school-based performing arts teaching and learning as viable and effective strategies for improving their academic outcomes.

The study presented here contributes to the literature by providing richer and more detailed information on the relationship between school-based performing arts engagement, school experiences and academic performance for African American male high school students. This case study provides anecdotal data which indicates that intensive, school-based performing arts engagement may be a factor in enhancing academic skill development and improving overall academic achievement for African American male high school students.

Factors that Impede African American Males' School Performance

Educational literature documents significant disparities in academic performance between African American males and their counterparts in other racial and ethnic groups. Generally speaking, African American males underperform on a variety of key academic indicators (NCES, 2017b; Nitardy, Duke, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2015). Data demonstrates that African American males do not perform as well as their counterparts on standardized tests of achievement in math, English language arts (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2018; Reardon, Kalogrides, Ho, Shear, Shores, & Fahle, 2016), reading (Hansen, Levesque, Quintero, & Valant, 2018; NCES, 2017b), science (Quinn & Cooc, 2015), and social studies (King & Flowers, 2014). The persistent difference in school performance between African American males and their peers in other racial and ethnic groups is commonly referred to as an achievement gap. This description has come under increased scrutiny and is considered problematic by a growing number of scholars and practitioners (Carter & Welner, 2016; Yates, 2018). Framing racial differences in academic performance as a function of

individualized academic achievement is a troubling and persistent phenomenon. This explanation suggests that academic performance is based on an individual's innate academic ability and the effort spent on academic concerns (Chambers, 2009). Current and recent studies demonstrate that the academic difficulties African American males experience are not the result of a lack of ability or effort, but are reflective of specific educational practices and policies that thwart high academic achievement and impede school completion (Bottiani, Bradshaw & Mendelsohn, 2016; Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Wood, Harris, & Howard, 2018). Studies which examine racial disparities in educational outcomes identify several factors that contribute to the academic difficulties experienced by many school-aged African American males. Practices which exacerbate academic underperformance for African American males include low teacher expectations, disproportionate special education placement rates and excessively high rates of suspensions and expulsions (Liou & Rotherman-Fuller, 2016; Losen, Hodson, Ee, & Martinez, 2015; USGAO, 2018).

Low teacher expectation is a school-based factor that impedes African American males' academic performance. Recent studies show that teacher expectations reflect racial biases concerning the behavior and abilities of African American males (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz & Green, 2015). It is estimated that 80 percent of the U.S. teaching force is White (NCES, 2017a), and research indicates that student-teacher demographic mismatch has a significant impact on teacher expectations. White and other non-Black teachers are less likely to expect Black students to graduate from high school and complete a four-year degree (Boser, Wilhelm, & Hanna, 2014; Gershenson et al., 2016; Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018). Additionally, secondary teachers have lower expectations of African American students, other students of color, and students from low income backgrounds (Boser et al., 2014). Racially biased negative teacher expectations are more strongly held for African American males than they are for African American females. Even when African American males meet high academic standards, teachers' negative beliefs about them persist (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, & Jennings, 2010).

Teacher expectations of their students' capabilities are an important predictor of current and future academic achievement. Students with teachers who expect them to obtain a college degree have a higher probability of completing a four-year college program (Boser et al., 2014; Gershenson et al., 2016; Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018). Conversely, data indicates that negative assumptions teachers hold concerning the academic potential of African American students may thwart school performance and negatively impact future academic outcomes. Low expectations can lead teachers to provide less rigorous instruction, offer limited or no feedback on student errors, give less positive feedback after correct answers, and provide less time to answer questions (Workman, 2012). When repeated over a school year or

for multiple school years, such teacher behaviors damage African American males' confidence in their academic abilities and negatively affect their school performance (Hargrave et al., 2016).

Another phenomenon that stymies African American males' academic performance is the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline. Black males are relegated to out of school disciplinary procedures at higher rates than their counterparts in all other racial and ethnic categories (USGAO, 2018; Wood, Harris III, & Howard, 2018). Statistics demonstrate African American males are 2 to 5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their White counterparts (Loveless, 2017). The excessive number of suspensions and expulsions experienced by African American males has a deleterious effect on their academic performance, largely because it leads to significant reductions in time spent in the classroom. Lost class time reduces instruction received, hampers academic achievement and often leads African American males to drop out of school (Bottiani et al., 2016; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguero, 2010). The disproportionately high levels of disciplinary exclusion African American males experience precipitates feelings of injustice and abrades their belief that schools are safe spaces for learning (Bottiani et al., 2016). Thus, the consistently disproportionate level of suspensions and expulsions experienced by African American males thwarts high academic performance and frustrates positive academic identity development.

In addition to disproportionate exclusionary discipline and low teacher expectations, African American males experience excessively high special education placement rates. Since the inception of mandated programs for students with disabilities in U.S. public schools, African American males have been placed in special education programs at greater rates than their peers in other groups (Kunjufu, 2009; Losen et al., 2015; USDOE, 2016). Studies show that African American males have an increased likelihood of being placed in programs for students with intellectual, learning, and behavioral disabilities (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Harry & Klingner, 2014; USDOE, 2016). Additionally, African American students are prone to be placed in special education programs and are less likely to be placed in honors courses and gifted programs than their White male peers (USDOE, 2016; Wright, Ford, & Young, 2017). Excessive special education placement patterns have a decidedly negative impact on African American male students. Students in special education programs have an increased likelihood of repeating a grade, are more likely to be suspended or expelled, and are more disposed to have their parents contacted for problem behavior and poor academic performance (Craft & Howley, 2018; Losen et al., 2015; Toldson, 2011). Furthermore, special education placement diminishes students' access to positive school experiences, characterizes students as having limited learning abilities, and encourages teachers to provide students with less rigorous instruction (Craft & Howley, 2018; Hammer, 2012).

Taken together, low teacher expectations, inequitable exclusionary discipline practices and disproportionately high special education placement rates are representative of some of the factors that lead many African American males to underperform academically. Such evidence demonstrates that racial and ethnic disparities in school performance are not merely a function of individualized student achievement. Biased and inequitable school-based instructional and administrative practices contribute significantly to this problem. It is imperative for researchers and practitioners to identify practices which enhance academic achievement for African American males and students in other marginalized groups. The study presented here provides evidence that an infusion of performing arts-based learning opportunities may provide a pathway for improving academic performance for African American male students.

Performing Arts Education, Cognitive Development, and Academic Achievement

While the body of literature confirms the negative impact of discriminatory educational practices on African American males' academic performance, more research is developing which underscores the factors that promote high academic performance for students in this population (Patton, Miller, Gabarino, Gale, & Kornfield, 2016). Instructional models that boost African American males' performance in literacy, English/language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, and technology are receiving increased attention (Davis, 2014; Dobbie & Fryer, 2015; Drum, 2016; Moore & Lewis, 2014). Most studies which examine effective methods for teaching African American males have been conducted within the traditional content areas, but few studies explore the relationship between school-based performing arts education and African American males' academic achievement.

While there is a paucity of literature on existing relationships between performing arts education and African American males' academic performance, a large body of research exists which identifies positive correlations between arts engagement, enhanced academic achievement and cognitive development for students who receive education and training in and through the arts. Much of the existing literature analyzes the effects of arts-based instructional methodologies on students' academic performance and cognitive development. Such information is important for understanding the educational impact of arts education. There is a parallel body of information that examines the relationship between participation in pre-professional arts programs, academic performance and school outcomes. Both sources of information must be analyzed in order to examine relationships between arts education program participation, academic performance and student outcomes.

Data attained from urban high schools that offer a conservatory style, arts-based education provides evidence of potential correlations between receiving an intensive arts-oriented, high school education and improved academic performance. Arts-based high schools are

distinguishable from comprehensive high schools in that they offer students a rigorous, standards-based, college preparatory academic course of study along with intensive preparation in the performing, visual or technical arts (Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, 2019). Such programs are pre-professional in scope and prepare students for college and for careers in the arts (Chicago High School for the Arts, 2019). Public arts-based high schools are selective; students must either audition or demonstrate an established level of artistic competence as part of the admissions process (Chicago High School for the Arts, 2019; Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, 2019). Additionally, arts-based high schools generally have lower teacher student ratios and smaller class sizes than non-arts oriented high schools (Great Schools, 2019; US News, 2019). Moreover, students in arts-based high schools tend to have greater access to Advanced Placement and Honors level courses (Great Schools, 2019; US News, 2019).

School district and state accountability data from fifteen urban public, arts-based high schools located in five major geographic regions of the U.S. provide some evidence that students who receive a pre-professional, arts-based, college preparatory education experience enhanced academic outcomes when compared with students who attend non-arts-based high schools (Alabama School of Fine Arts, 2019; Arizona School for the Arts, 2018; Baltimore City Public Schools, 2019; Boston Arts Academy, 2019; Chicago High School for the Arts, 2019; Cincinnati Public Schools, 2019; Dekalb County School District, 2019; Detroit Public Schools Community District, 2019; Duke Ellington School of the Arts, 2019; Great Schools, 2019; Houston Independent School District, 2019; Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, 2019; Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2019; Milwaukee Public Schools, 2019; New York City Department of Education, 2018; Oakland School for the Arts, 2018; US News, 2019a; US News, 2019b; US News, 2019c; US News, 2019d). A careful review of school performance data indicates that students who attend urban, arts-based high schools often outperform their in-district peers on a variety of state-wide, standards-based assessments (Alabama School of Fine Arts, 2019; Arizona School of the Arts, 2018; Baltimore City Public Schools, 2019; Boston Arts Academy, 2019; Chicago High School for the Arts, 2019; Cincinnati Public Schools, 2019; Dekalb County School District, 2019; Detroit Public Schools, 2019; Duke Ellington School of the Arts, 2019; Greatschools.org, 2019; Houston Independent School District, 2019; Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, 2019; Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2019; New York City Department of Education, 2018; Oakland School for the Arts, 2018; US News, 2019a; US News, 2019c). Comparisons indicate that, on average, higher percentages of students who attend urban, arts-based high schools perform at or above proficiency in reading than their local district peers and their in-state counterparts (Alabama School of Fine Arts, 2019; Baltimore City Public Schools, 2019; Boston Arts Academy, 2019; Chicago High School for the Arts, 2019; Cincinnati Public Schools, 2019; Duke Ellington School of the Arts, 2019; Houston Independent School

District, 2019; Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, 2019; Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2019; New York City Department of Education, 2018; Oakland School for the Arts, 2019; US News, 2019). In several instances, higher percentages of students in arts-based high schools performed at or above proficiency in mathematics than their local and state-wide counterparts (Alabama School of Fine Arts, 2019; Cincinnati Public Schools, 2019; Dekalb County School District, 2019; Houston Independent School District, 2019; Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, 2019; Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2019; New York City Department of Education, 2018; Oakland School for the Arts, 2019; US News, 2019). Enhanced performance is not restricted to reading and math. Students who attend urban, arts-based high schools often outperform their local and in-state counterparts on end-of-grade assessments in science and social studies as well (Alabama School of Fine Arts, 2019; Chicago High School for the Arts, 2019; Dekalb County School District, 2019; Houston Independent School District, 2019; Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2019; New York City Department of Education, 2018; Oakland School for the Arts, 2019).

There is evidence that students who attend the urban, arts-based high schools identified in this literature review experience enhanced post school outcomes. All fifteen schools had graduation rates of at least ninety percent, which, in each case, exceeded local district and state averages (Alabama School of Fine Arts, 2019; Arizona School for the Arts, 2018; Baltimore City Public Schools, 2019; Boston Arts Academy, 2019; Chicago High School for the Arts, 2019; Cincinnati Public Schools, 2019; Dekalb County School District, 2019; Detroit Public Schools, 2019; Duke Ellington School of the Arts, 2019; Great Schools, 2018; Houston Independent School District, 2019; Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, 2019; Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2019; Milwaukee Public Schools, 2019; New York City Department of Education, 2018; Oakland School for the Arts, 2019; US News, 2019a; US News, 2019b; US News, 2019c; US News, 2019d). Additionally, in most of the cases, students who attended arts-based high schools were better prepared to attend college and had rates of college attendance that exceeded local and state-wide averages. In eleven of fifteen cases, students who attended urban, arts-based high schools posted SAT and ACT scores that were above state and national averages (Alabama School of Fine Arts, 2019; Arizona School for the Arts, 2019; Baltimore City Public Schools, 2019; California Department of Education, 2018; Cincinnati Public Schools, 2019; Dekalb County School District, 2019; Duke Ellington School of the Arts, 2019; Houston Independent School District, 2019; Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, 2019; Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2019; New York City Department of Education, 2018; Oakland School for the Arts, 2019). Additionally, students at several schools surveyed have higher pass rates on Advanced Placement examinations than their local and statewide counterparts (Great Schools, 2018; US News, 2019a; US News, 2019b; 2019c; 2019d). They graduate from high school and matriculate directly into college at higher rates than their within-district and statewide peers (Alabama School of Fine Arts, 2019;

Boston Arts Academy, 2019; Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 2018; Chicago High School for the Arts, 2019; Cincinnati Public Schools, 2019; Dekalb County School District, 2019; Detroit Public Schools, 2019; Duke Ellington School of the Arts, 2019; Great Schools, 2019; Houston Independent School District, 2019; Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, 2019; Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2019; New York City Department of Education, 2018; Oakland School for the Arts, 2019; US News, 2019a; US News, 2019b; US News, 2019c; US News, 2019d).

The data attained from schools that offer a conservatory style, pre-professional arts-based education is particularly relevant to this study because these learning environments provide culturally and socioeconomically diverse student populations with advanced training in the performing and visual arts, in concert with rigorous, standards-based academic instruction. Many of these schools are similar to the school featured in the study, in that they serve significant populations of African American students, Latino students, students from low income backgrounds and students with disabilities (Baltimore City Public Schools, 2019; California Department of Education, 2018; Chicago High School for the Arts, 2019; Cincinnati Public Schools, 2019; Dekalb County School District, 2019; Duke Ellington School of the Arts, 2019; Houston Independent School District, 2019; Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2019; Oakland School for the Arts, 2019). Urban arts-based high schools often serve student populations that roughly match the diversity of the general population of the cities and communities they are located in (Data USA, 2019). Several schools included in this analysis serve larger populations of African American students than there are in the general populations of the cities they are located in (Chicago High School for the Arts, 2019; Cincinnati Public Schools, 2019; Dekalb County School District, Detroit Public Schools, 2019; Duke Ellington School of the Arts, 2019).

Survey data obtained from graduates of arts-based high schools offers additional insights on the potential benefits of receiving a rigorous, arts-based high school education. The Strategic National Arts Alumni Project provides a wealth of detailed information on the efficacy of arts education for students who attend specialized, pre-professional arts-based high schools (Strategic National Arts Alumni Project [SNAAP], 2017). In the organization's most recent high school level analysis, a total of 1,156 participants who attended and graduated from nine arts-based high schools between 2007 and 2017 participated (SNAAP, 2017). Information provided by respondents suggests that a high quality pre-professional arts-based high school education correlates with increased school completion and enhanced post-secondary attendance. Ninety nine percent of respondents reported completing their high school diplomas and 92% pursued and attained at least an undergraduate degree after graduation. Ninety percent of undergraduate degree receiving participants attained art-related degrees. Overall, 70% of participants felt their high school academic and artistic experiences prepared

them very well for post-secondary education, and 24% stated that it prepared them to further their education somewhat.

Respondents also reported having positive school experiences (SNAAP, 2017). Seventy percent of participants rated their high school experiences as excellent and another 25% stated they had good experiences overall. Eighty percent stated they would definitely attend their arts-based high school all over again, if given the opportunity, and an additional 14% said they would probably attend this school again. Ninety-five percent said they would recommend their school to other students like them and 71% stated that they still felt some connection with the school since graduating.

SNAAP (2017) study participants furnish valuable information for understanding the correlation between a pre-professional, arts-based high school education and students' academic and cognitive development. Sixty seven percent stated that their academic and arts experiences helped them develop their ability to think critically and to analyze arguments and information, while 28% said it helped some (SNAAP, 2017). Eighty one percent felt their high school experiences helped them strengthen their creative thinking and problem-solving skills, while an additional 16% said it helped them some. In terms of acquiring a broad knowledge base and education, 66% said it helped them very much, and 30% said it helped them some. Fifty-six and 49% stated that their arts-based educations helped them improve their writing and speaking skills respectively.

Moreover, participants credited their pre-professional arts-based education with helping them develop critical social skills (SNAAP, 2017). Seventy percent felt that their experiences helped them improve their interpersonal relationship building and collaborative learning skills very much, and 23% said it helped some. Fifty nine percent said it helped strengthen their leadership skills very much and 31% said it helped some. Sixty seven percent stated their experiences often led them to have serious conversations with students who were from different ethnic groups or religious backgrounds or who held different political beliefs or personal values.

While research reveals positive correspondences between receiving a conservatory-style, arts-based education, enhanced academic performance and improved school experiences, it must be noted that such findings do not demonstrate causal relationships. The positive school outcomes exhibited by students who go to arts-based high schools may be the result of other factors, such as smaller class sizes, greater access to highly qualified teachers, or active participation in more rigorous college preparatory academic experiences. More research must be conducted to determine which specific factors are responsible for the comparatively high levels of achievement shown by students who attend arts-based high schools.

In order to more fully understand the potential benefits of an arts-based education, careful consideration must be given to the research on connections between arts-oriented learning experiences provided in traditional school settings and in quasi-experimental research contexts. In a widely cited meta-analysis of 16 studies on the effects of classroom drama on students' cognitive development, the implementation of theatre-based instructional strategies correlated with improved reading skills, enhanced oral language development, positive self-esteem development and advanced moral reasoning abilities (Hetland & Winner, 2004). Gazzaniga and associates (2008) conducted a series of neurological studies which examined the relationships between engagement in various arts disciplines and cognitive development. Findings from this group of studies suggest that there are positive relationships between music training, reading acquisition, and geometric reasoning skills (Jonidas, 2008; Spelke, 2008; Wandell, Dougherty, Ben-Shacar, Gayle, Deutsch, & Tsang, 2008). Additionally, data from this cluster of research projects indicate positive correspondences between consistent, structured involvement in the arts and improvements in achievement motivation (Gazzaniga, 2008). Moreover, outcomes demonstrate clear and positive correlations between training in acting and improved memory (Posner, Rothbart, Sheese, & Kieras, 2008). In an evaluative study of arts integration and its impact on disadvantaged student populations, Robinson identified drama integration as an evidence-based measure for increasing performance in reading, math, social skills, receptive/expressive language and creative thinking (Robinson, 2013). Dance integration is a practice which correlates with improved basic reading skills like consonant sound recognition, vowel segmentation and phoneme segmentation (McMahon, Rose, & Parks, 2003). Along the same lines, integration of visual arts indicates positive correlations with increased reading and math achievement, improved writing performance, and enhanced empathetic behavior for disadvantaged students (Duma, 2014; Trainin, Andrzejszak, & Poldberg, 2006; Jurand, 2008). Additionally, multi-arts integration is a practice that has shown evidence of positive relationships with math achievement, creativity, critical thinking, self-efficacy, motivation, cooperation and student engagement (Caterall & Waldorf, 1999; Duma, 2014; Lorimer, 2011; Prager, 2006; Scriven, 2008; Smith & McKnight, 2009). Moreover, studies show multi-arts integration correlates positively with increased reading achievement (Robinson, 2013).

While most studies that explore arts engagement and academic performance have been conducted irrespective of race and gender, there are a few studies that examine relationships between performing art engagement and academic performance for African American males. Thomas (2011) revealed positive correlations between African American males' involvement in school music programs and achievement on standardized assessments of English/language arts and mathematics skills. Kazembe (2014) proposed using a Black Arts curricular framework to promote critical literacy and enhance academic engagement for African

American male students. Walton and Wiggan utilize existing research to propose using the arts as a model for reducing race-based disproportionality in special education placement rates, and identify Readers' Theatre as an effective strategy for improving African American males' reading comprehension skills (Walton & Wiggan, 2010, 2014). Studies which explore the relationship between performing arts engagement and African American males' school performance may encourage the development of school-based arts programs that induce positive academic identity development and enhance academic outcomes for African American males in PreK-12 school settings (Kazembe, 2014; Thomas, 2011; Walton & Wiggan, 2010, 2014). More studies that examine the impact of performing arts education on school achievement for African American males are needed to fully describe the kinds of school interventions that can enhance outcomes for students in this population.

The research project described here was designed to fill gaps in the literature on performing arts education, school performance, and academic identity development for African American male high school students. Additional research is necessary to help educators and researchers develop an understanding of the general and specific benefits of performing arts education on African American males' cognitive development, school experiences, academic performance and post-school outcomes. Research on performing arts education may elicit important information for improving academic performance for African American male high school students. This study provides additional insights that can be used to enhance academic performance and improve school experiences for African American male high school students. The results presented may help practitioners and policymakers develop strategies for using the performing arts to strengthen academic performance and enhance school experiences for African American males in U.S. schools.

African American Male Academic Identity Development Theory

African American Male Academic Identity Development Theory (AAMAID) is a framework developed by the researcher as a tailored tool of analysis for the study (Walton, 2015). AAMAID combines elements of Academic Self-Concept Theory (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Matthews, 2014) and Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to provide a model for understanding how African American males' perceptions of their academic abilities influence school performance. Taken separately, Academic Self-Concept Theory examines how individuals develop self-perceptions of their global and domain specific academic abilities (Marsh, 2007; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985), and Critical Race Theory analyzes the ways in which structural racism in the U.S. engenders disparities in performance between African American students and their peers in other racial and ethnic groups (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Blending the models enabled the researcher to analyze how academic identity development among African American males is leveraged by internal psychosocial factors and by racialized educational practices that negatively affect school performance.

Additionally, the findings attained from the analysis provided potential prescriptions for improving academic outcomes for African American males. AAMAID is based on five central ideas:

1) Positive academic identity development is a critical component for motivation and achievement in school (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Marsh & Craven, 2006; Matthews, 2014).
2) Academic identity development and school performance are mutually engaged, reciprocal processes; academic performance directly affects academic identity formation, and academic identity formation influences future academic performance (Marsh, 2007; Prince & Nurius, 2014).
3) Academic identity development is a multifaceted process. Like students from other racial backgrounds, African American males have specific academic identities that coincide with their performance in specific subject areas (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Matthews, 2014).
4) African American males face educational risk factors which hamper high academic achievement. They often have inexperienced and poorly qualified teachers (Metz, 2015; USDOE Office of Civil Rights, 2018), are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school (USDOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014), and are at greater risk for special education placement (Smith & Harper, 2015). Such factors have a negative net effect on school performance and hamper positive academic identity development for African American male students (Stancil, 2018).
5) Culturally responsive instructional and administrative practices improve school performance and enhance academic identity formation for African American males (Gay, 2018; Kunjufu, 2010).

Method

The research questions which guided this study employ AAMAID to explore how school-based performing arts learning opportunities influence academic outcomes for African American male high school students:

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of African American male students who participate in a standards-driven performing arts education program at an urban high school?

Research Question 2: How do performing arts education experiences influence the academic identity development of African American male high school students?

Research Design

The aim of this study is to probe more deeply into the experiences of African American males who were engaged in school-based performing arts disciplines while they attended high school. This study followed all ethical clearance procedures outlined in the IRB, which was approved by the sponsoring university. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to the school, to research participants and to the teachers they referred to during interviews. As an additional precaution, a pseudonym was assigned to the city the study was conducted in. The researcher employed an interpretive case study methodology to examine the academic and school experiences of five African American males who attended Piedmont School of the Arts (PSOA), a combination middle and high school in Regent City, the largest metropolitan area in North Carolina, a state in the southeastern portion of the United States. An interpretive case study model was selected because it allowed the researcher to develop a rich description and analysis of the thoughts, ideas, and experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002). PSOA is a diverse arts-based public secondary school with a population of 1150 students. The ethnic and racial breakdown of the student population is 49% Black, 37% White, 7% Hispanic, 5% two-or-more races, less than 1% American Indian/Alaska Native and less than 1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. The gender breakdown is 73% female and 27% male. In terms of socioeconomic status, 42% of PSOA's students come from low income backgrounds (Great Schools, 2018). In reference to academic performance, PSOA is the 3rd highest performing high school in a 36-high school district and is ranked as above average in comparison with other schools across the state (North Carolina School Report Cards, 2019). Additionally, PSOA students outperform their counterparts from other Regent City schools on the Scholastic Aptitude Test and on state-wide end-of-grade assessments in math, reading and science. Moreover, 95% of PSOA's students graduate from high school. Despite the overall above average performance of PSOA students, there are significant disparities in performance, with Black and Hispanic students performing below their White counterparts on statewide end-of-grade math, reading and science achievement tests.

PSOA offers a pre-professional, standards-based arts education curriculum that covers the performing and visual arts. Admission to the school is determined by audition. After a year of attendance students are required to select a major from one of the following areas: Band, Orchestra, Piano, Chorus, Dance, Musical Theatre, Visual Arts, Costume Design (high school only) and Technical Theatre (high school only). The arts offerings are built around PSOA's core academic curriculum, which includes required standards-based courses in English, mathematics, science and social studies. Daily arts-based studies include classroom instruction coupled with opportunities to perform and showcase work for teachers, peers, other school staff members, parents and the general public. PSOA students perform and exhibit works in small and large venues on the school site, in the community and at state-wide and national programs. Outside performance and exhibit opportunities are considered

extracurricular activities that are designed to enhance in-class learning. Teachers, administrators and students consider them a vital part of the overall school experience (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 2020).

Standards-Based Arts Instruction in U. S. Schools

The arts learning experiences students at PSOA engaged in must be examined within the context of standards-based education guidelines that drive curriculum development and instructional practices in U.S. schools. The education students receive in U.S. public schools is determined by what are known as academic standards. Academic standards are specific guidelines that outline the knowledge and skills students are expected to demonstrate in English, mathematics, science, social sciences, fine arts, technology, and physical and health education (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2019a; Education World, 2019). Standards are concise, written descriptions of what students are expected to know and do in specific content areas at a particular age or grade level (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2019b; Education World, 2019). They are designed to ensure that students are prepared to achieve success in credit bearing higher education programs or in workforce training programs when they graduate from high school (Education World, 2019). Traditionally, academic standards are established by the state agencies which oversee and administer public education programs. Recently the United States has moved toward a set of national standards, more commonly referred to as the Common Core State Standards Initiative. This initiative is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices in Education and by the Council of Chief State School Officers (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2019a). Currently, forty-one states and the District of Columbia rely on the Common Core to establish academic standards to guide teaching and learning in U.S. public schools.

As with standards in other academic areas, fine arts education standards are guidelines that help determine what a good education in the arts should consist of. This includes a basic body of knowledge that allows students to understand and use each of the arts disciplines, to develop the intellectual tools needed to make qualitative judgments about artistic products, and to determine the level of rigor needed to challenge students to think, perform and grow to a level they were not at previously (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014). The knowledge and skills outlined in the fine arts standards serve as the foundation for assessing how well students understand, interpret and create within the fine arts disciplines.

The participants involved in this study received instruction and training based on the North Carolina Essential Standards for High School Theatre Arts (NCDPI, 2016). This set of standards establishes distinct objectives that teachers will use to design instructional and performance-based experiences. The NC Essential Standards for High School Theatre Arts

indicate what students should know and be able to do at three levels of development: beginning, intermediate and proficient. The beginning standards are established for students with little or no previous educational experience in Theatre Arts education, intermediate standards are established for students with significant K-8 experience or who have achieved beginning level high school standards, and proficient standards are designed for students who have attained intermediate standards at the high school level. Each standard has strands, or clarifying objectives, that address students' ability to demonstrate proficiency in the following theatre arts domains: Communication (C), Analysis (A), Aesthetics (AE) and Culture (C) (NCDPI, 2016).

For illustrative purposes, here is an example of a beginning level communications standard.

B.C.1.	Essential Standard	Clarifying Objectives
	Use movement, voice, and writing to communicate ideas and feelings.	B.C.1.1. – Use nonverbal expression to illustrate how human emotion affects the body and is conveyed through the body.
		B.C.1.2. – Apply vocal elements of volume, pitch, rate, tone, articulation, and vocal expression.
		B.C.1.3. – Understand how to read and write scripts that communicate conflict, plot and character.

Figure 1. Beginning Communications Standard

This standard would be used as the basis for writing lesson plans, developing instructional units and evaluating students' performance. Based on the clarifying objectives this standard would ensure that students would be immersed in activities, learning experiences and performance projects that challenge them to expand their ability to use the voice and physical movement to communicate a range of human emotions. This standard would also teach student to read and write plays that fit theatrical conventions and convey human thoughts, ideas and feelings. Additionally, it would provide teachers with a framework for assessing the level of mastery students demonstrate for the clarifying objectives.

Non-standards-based performing arts programs are what students would receive at community centers, religious institutions, private performing arts schools and other non-academic settings. In such settings there are no specific standards or objectives to guide instruction and establish expected levels of performance for students. Lesson and unit planning would be at

the behest of the teacher. Principles for ensuring students are taught specific skills to enhance verbal, physical, written and interpretive theatre skills would differ, depending on who the instructor is. The content and quality of instruction would vary greatly between teachers, classrooms and contexts. Additionally, instruction is product-focused, with a primary emphasis of performing plays, showcase performances, concerts and recitals. An organized process of teaching students to master specific skills and assessing student proficiency are not emphasized in non-standards based performing arts programs. The end-product of performance is the goal. In standards-based programs the learning process that prepares one for performance is just as important as the actual performance.

Study Participants

The chart below provides descriptions of the five respondents who participated in this study:

Name	Years at PSOA	Performing Arts Specialization	Education/Occupation	Age
Gary	1996-2003	Musical Theatre	Works in Financial Services/Professional	30
Paris	2010-2014	Musical Theatre	Musical Theater Student at Midwestern College Conservatory of Music (MCCM)*	19
Marcus	2010-2014	Musical Theatre	Musical Theater Student at Central State University of the Arts (CSUA)*	19
Cameron	2009-2013	Choral Music	Works in Customer Service	20
Jason	2008-2012	Musical Theatre	Central State University of the Arts (CSUA)*	21

Figure 2. Participants

All study participants attended and graduated from Piedmont School of the Arts. Each participant attended the school for four years of high school. Their graduation years ranged from 2003 to 2014. Four participants, Gary, Paris, Marcus and Jason specialized in musical theatre, and the fifth, Cameron majored in choral music. At the time of the study Marcus, Paris, and Jason were enrolled in performing arts-based university degree programs; Marcus and Paris were studying musical theatre and Jason's emphasis was dance. Gary had attended college for two years and was working in the financial services industry. Cameron did not

attend college. He was working as a customer service representative but had expressed a renewed interest in attending the local community college. During interviews the participants discussed and provided details about teachers who had taught them in classes and had directed them in various productions. They identified two African American male teachers in particular who had a positive impact on them; Mr. Marshall and Mr. Wilson. Mr. Marshall, is a veteran musical theater teacher who has taught at Piedmont School of the Arts for 24 years. Mr. Marshall is a nationally recognized theatre educator who was awarded the inaugural Tony Award for Theatre Education in 2016. Mr. Wilson taught Chorus/Choral Singing at PSOA. Respondent comments indicate that he was well respected by students and valued for his ability to teach lessons that had value and relevance for students beyond his classroom. He taught concepts and values that influenced students to make positive choices at home and in their respective communities. While teacher interviews were not a part of the research, the information respondents provided about them indicate their importance to analyzing and understanding the findings. Their centrality to the research warrants an introduction here.

Purposive criterion sampling was used to select the five men who took part in the study because it allowed for the collection of a sample that was most representative of the given population (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). The researcher employed announcements on Facebook, telephone calls and direct personal appeals to secure suitable candidates. Eight potential participants were contacted, but only five met the criteria and agreed to take part. The selected sample was identified as information rich in describing the potential influence performing arts education had on their academic performance. The sample size of 5 participants was deemed appropriate because it provided an ample amount of data needed to reach saturation based on the scope of the study (Creswell, 2003). African American male graduates of PSOA who were engaged in the performing arts curriculum were chosen because their experiences provided them with ideas and perspectives necessary for addressing the research questions. Additionally, as former PSOA students, participants had time to reflect on their experiences at the school, and may have been better suited to articulate responses to the interview questions than students currently in attendance.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method for this study. Interviews were conducted to obtain information on participants' attitudes, perceptions and experiences (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002). The semi-structured format was employed because it allowed new ideas to guide the dialog between the researcher and his participants. Participants sat for two interviews, each of which ran from 45 to 60 minutes. Second interviews were employed to check for consistency and to enable respondents to add additional information or correct erroneous initial responses. Interviews were conducted by telephone or in-person, depending on the subject's location at the time of the study. Interviews

with participants who were attending university programs were conducted by telephone, and face-to-face interviews were facilitated with participants who were not away at college and continued to reside in Regent City. The participant's office served as the location for three of the face-to-face interviews, and the final in-person session took place in a participant's home office. Long interviews were used because they presented opportunities to discover what cannot be seen, and allow for the exploration of alternative explanations of what can be seen (Glesne, 2006). All interviews were recorded using an electronic recording device and transcribed with a computer-based transcription program.

In addition to interview responses, graduation records and information from online newspapers, university websites and social media posts provided supplemental data that was used as additional sources of analysis. Graduation records enabled the researcher to verify attendance and completion reports. University websites were used to substantiate participants' enrollment and academic progress. Online newspaper articles and performing arts organization websites were used to verify reports of professional performances and to glean additional information on their post-school involvement in the performing arts.

The interview protocol was piloted with subjects from a previous qualitative research project and was redesigned to improve the clarity of the questions. The protocol was comprised of broad-based, specific, open and closed ended questions which helped each participant organize and discuss his thoughts and ideas. Questions were aligned with the AAMAID (Walton, 2015) framework and addressed the relationship between performing arts participation, school performance, academic self-concept development and the potential effects of race on school experiences. Using the AAMAID framework allowed the researcher to frame interview questions in ways that address how involvement in school-based performing arts influenced their academic performance.

The questions used allowed participants to address (a) school enjoyment, (b) school safety, (c) positive and negative school experiences, (d) student-teacher interactions, (e) academic strengths and weaknesses, (f) experiences in academic and performing arts classes, (g) relationships between performing arts participation and academic achievement, and (h) their perceptions of PSOA's impact on African American male students.

Data Analysis

Interview data was analyzed by constant comparative analysis, an approach that allows the researcher to integrate data collection, coding and analysis (Conrad, Neuman, Haworth & Scott, 1993). Themes and concepts were identified through simultaneous data collection and analysis (Kolb, 2012). Simultaneous collection and analysis enabled the researcher to conduct immediate and fundamental examinations of interview data (Creswell, 2003; Ezzy, 2002).

Recorded interviews were digitally transcribed to text and the initial analysis was conducted through open coding (Charmaz, 2006). As each line of the transcripts were read, general codes of information were identified which summarized participants' thoughts on the relationship between school-based performing arts involvement, academic achievement, and school experiences. Next, axial coding was employed to refine understanding of the categories that initially emerged (Charmaz, 2006). General categories were then reread to develop subthemes which summarize the relationships between them. As a final step, selective coding was used to determine the central themes that encompass all data provided by the interview subjects (Kolb, 2012). During this phase, transcripts were reread to selectively code all data that relates to the identified central themes. For the purposes of this article three themes are discussed that explore the relationship between participants' performing arts engagement and academic achievement.

Findings

The researcher employed the AAMAID framework to sift through the data to identify practices and conditions that influenced the respondents' academic performance and school experiences. This process revealed three primary themes: "Experiencing a Positive School Climate," "Performing Arts Had a Positive Impact on Academic Achievement," and "African American Males, Arts-Based Performance, and Positive Racial Identity." The first theme, "Experiencing a Positive School Climate," highlights how positive student-teacher relationships and collaborative learning opportunities affected participants' academic identity development and school experiences. The second theme, "Performing Arts Had a Positive Impact on Academic Achievement" addresses how performing arts engagement influenced academic skill development, achievement motivation and post-secondary educational attainment. The third and final theme, "African American Males, Arts-Based Performance, and Positive Racial Identity" addressed how participation in African American themed performance projects encouraged participants to develop positive affinities for their racial identities.

Theme One: Experiencing a Positive School Climate

All five participants reported PSOA as a school that afforded them a positive school climate. School climate is an educational effectiveness indicator which examines the nature of the experiences students, school personnel, and parents have in a specific school environment on a daily basis (Kramer, Watson, & Hodges, 2013; National School Climate Council, 2007). Educational researchers and practitioners view school climate as a significant measurement of educational efficacy. School climate is assessed along four primary indicators: relationships, safety, teaching and learning, and external environments (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Study participants reported favorable evaluations of teacher-student

relationships, student-to-student relationships, school safety and teaching and learning experiences, but raised concerns about the external environment surrounding the school. Questions which evoked responses that addressed school climate included "Did you enjoy attending PSOA?" "Did you feel safe at PSOA?" and "Did you fit in socially at PSOA?"

During interviews, respondents frequently cited positive teacher-student relationships as a factor in creating a supportive school environment. Participants identified specific teachers who helped foster a positive school climate for Black male students. Several study subjects described Mr. Marshall as a staff member who contributed to creating a pro-social environment for African American male students. He was an African American male musical theatre teacher who connected with respondents and supported their academic and artistic development. Cameron demonstrated the impact of having a Black male teacher who helped him understand the relationship between his school experiences and his later life outcomes:

> Being a Black male, you know, he (Mr. Marshall) always connected with us and tried to push us, you know, so we knew there was something better out there than what we were surrounded by in our homes and in our families, or things like that, you know.[1]

Jason reported experiencing relationships with teachers that transcended classroom and performance-based interactions. He credits his teachers with providing him with the support he needed to graduate from high school and attend college:

> My teachers helped me for sure, in looking at a school and looking at scholarships, and even getting performance opportunities after college.

In addition to effective teacher-student relationships, several participants noted that their teachers promoted positive student-to-student relationships. Paris discussed how his dance instructor challenged him to help his younger and less experienced classmates learn and improve their execution of dance choreography. Opportunities to teach and support his classmates became a habitual and positive aspect of how he experienced dance class:

> I mean, like with them it came to a point where they didn't have to encourage me. I would try to help people, because I remember what it was like to be a freshman.

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[1] This quote and all subsequent quotes are from Walton, C. (2015). *Performing arts education and the academic identity development of African American male high school students* (Publication No. 3744316) [Doctoral Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Charlotte]. ProQuest Dissertation Publishing.

Participants also cited collaboration as an instructional component that helped create a positive school climate at PSOA. Studies demonstrate that collaborative instruction strengthens academic engagement and improves school performance for African American males (Boykin, Lilja, & Tyler, 2004; Moore & Lewis, 2014). Additionally, this practice is widely recognized as a culturally responsive instructional practice (Essien, 2017; Gay, 2018; Hale, 2016). The implementation of instructional strategies like collaborative teaching and learning at PSOA supports AAMAID's assertion that culturally responsive teaching practices strengthen academic performance for African American male students (Walton, 2015).

Marcus recounted a uniquely engaging learning activity from his musical theatre class that highlights the effectiveness of collaborative teaching and learning. His teacher developed an assignment in which students worked in small groups to develop, write and perform a short musical as a culminating end-of-semester assessment. Marcus shared:

> It was really interesting to see what groups came up with, and to collaborate and write your own music, or to choreograph your own dances, come with your story, write the script, all that kind of stuff, and as small as it is to do in your own black box room, it still really put out a lot of great work. You could see where a lot of people were in their lives, and things like that, and the stories they got to tell, and now that they had the opportunity to, they came up with some great stuff.

Creating and performing a short musical production is a self-guided and collaborative learning opportunity that reflects the importance of effective teaching, learning, and relationship building as factors that contributed to the positive school climate respondents experienced as students at PSOA.

A sense of safety was another aspect of positive school climate addressed at length by participants. Interviews revealed an unforeseen relationship between the perceived lack of safety in the external environment and the sense of safety respondents experienced at the school. PSOA is situated in Kennedy Heights, a predominantly working-class community located west of Regent City's downtown. Average household income is $23,117, which is considerably lower than city residents' overall average income of $61,017. The median home value in Kennedy Heights is $75,600, which is significantly lower than the $211,800 city-wide average home value in Regent City. Thefts, assaults and burglaries are more common in Kennedy Heights as well, as evidenced by a neighborhood crime rate that is 60 percent higher than the city's overall crime rate (City-Data, 2018; Niche, 2018).

Participant interviews revealed an unexpected, inverse relationship between the conditions in the surrounding neighborhood. Gary explained that while robberies and several shootings had

taken place a few blocks from the school, he "never felt unsafe at the school." Cameron agreed with Gary's assessment:

> They (teachers and administrators) made sure they protected us from any outside danger and any danger that was on the inside. They always protected us; they always let us know what was going on.

Gary provided a more in-depth assessment of the differences in safety in the external environment and within the school setting:

> Piedmont School of the Arts was in the hood, so there was just like…I mean it was very real. If you went up the street from that school, you know, there was a bad element to it. I'm not being any kind of way about it. It was…people got shot around there all the time, I mean, not students, but there were drugs around there. It was a bad element, but I never felt unsafe at the school, in that regard. I know we had police officers in that school, and you know, the more the security gets bumped up over time, but yes, I felt physically safe at the school.

The respondents' involved in this study expressed agreement that PSOA provided them with a positive school climate. The learning environment at the school promoted student collaboration, fostered affirming teacher-student and student-student relationships, and offered students more safety than was available in the surrounding neighborhood. Taken together, information provided by the participants identifies school climate as a factor that promoted academic achievement, fostered artistic engagement and engendered positive school experiences.

Theme Two: Performing Arts Education Had a Positive Impact on Academic Achievement

Narratives provided by respondents included detailed information on the connections between school-based performing arts engagement and academic achievement. All respondents concluded that their arts-based learning experiences had a positive effect on their academic performance. Emergent subthemes included academic skill development, achievement motivation, and post-secondary educational attainment. Responses that supplied the researcher with insights into the relationship between arts learning experiences and academic achievement include "How did your involvement in the performing arts influence your performance in your academic classes?" "Have your performing arts experiences affected your reading and writing skills?" and "What kinds of reading and writing assignments did you have to do in your performing arts classes?"

Several respondents discussed the relationship between their performing arts learning experiences and their reading skill development. All interviewees received advanced theatre arts training at PSOA and maintained that training in this discipline fostered improved reading comprehension skill development. Musical theatre students receive instruction that helps them understand and analyze the deeper meanings of written monologues, dialogs, and song lyrics. Paris indicated that the textual analysis skills he attained enhanced his comprehension skills:

> You have to understand the text when you are reading something. You find out different ways to understand text. Your use theories to help you understand the text, and you find different ways to get into what the writer is saying and what the writer's intention was, so like yeah, it has definitely helped, definitely.

Participants also indicated that there was a connection between their experiences reading and analyzing scripts and improved vocabulary development. Paris recounted his experiences with this finding:

> Yeah, it (theatre training) has expanded my vocabulary. First of all, when you do shows, you have to say lines or particular words and you may be saying something that you would never say. You have to find out what it means, because you don't want people to think you don't know what you are saying, so then eventually you find out more things like that, which help you expand your vocabulary.

In addition to its impact on reading skill development several respondents suggested that their performing arts learning experiences strengthened writing skill development. Jason offered some critical observations about the potential influence his dance education experiences had on his writing skills:

> Composition and writing in English is not too different from composition in dance, and I think that was a huge one for me, that in terms of drawing a connection because I really love to choreograph, and I love to create different things, like create composition studies and things like that. I really love working with movement and with dance, and I think having a really strong background in English really helped me understand that the two are not that different.

The academic benefits participants experienced involved more than improvements in academic skill development. All respondents reported their school-based performing arts engagement strengthened their academic achievement motivation and functioned as a bulwark against school failure. Participants explained that PSOA students are required to maintain at least a "C" average in order to perform publicly in school-sponsored projects. This motivated

them to work harder academically to make sure they posted a GPA of at least 2.0 while in attendance at PSOA. Most of the participants surpassed this academic standard, with three of them qualifying for and taking Advanced Placement courses. Gary highlighted the relationship between academic achievement and having opportunities to perform in school-sponsored productions:

> If your grades weren't good you couldn't do a show, so that was an incentive at the school. You had to make at least a "C," like at least a 2.0, which I feel you could sneeze and make lots of times, but your grades had to be good. That's one thing about the school, your grades had to be decent to do extracurricular activities.

Cameron emphasized that making sure he was eligible to perform was an important factor in motivating him to strive for academic excellence:

> Having the opportunity to perform…it just made me want to do better for myself, so like, if I can't perform, then I don't have much, so that made me work hard to get better, and you know, just do better academically, because, if I can't perform, what am I here for?

Interviews with participants revealed that their school-based performing arts experiences increased the likelihood of college attendance. Four of the five participants attended college, with several stating directly that attending PSOA was the primary factor in determining whether or not they would go to college in the first place. Jason addressed how attending PSOA inspired him and his African American male peers to go to college:

> I also have friends who came there (PSOA) and didn't come from the best neighborhoods but are now pursuing higher education. They're in college, they're going to four-year universities and pursuing careers in drama, music, dance, and things like that.

Other respondents provided similar narratives. Marcus expressed that the rich learning and experiential opportunities offered at PSOA served as a transformative learning experience that made it feasible for him and other underserved students to pursue post-secondary educational opportunities:

> These kids, they find that at that school, you know. At least I know that I did, and I know that, we probably wouldn't even have gone to college had it not been for us attending Piedmont.

All five participants offered commentaries which demonstrate that their arts learning experiences at PSOA enhanced school performance and improved academic outcomes. Learning experiences attained in performing arts classes strengthened reading and writing skills, enhanced achievement motivation and improved the likelihood of college admission and attendance. All five participants provided evidence that establishes performing arts education as a factor in improving their academic identity development.

Theme Three: African American Males, Arts-Based Performance and Positive Racial Identity

Interview narratives provided by participants indicated that their academic and artistic experiences helped them develop stronger and more positive racial identities. Two questions in particular examined how their arts-based learning experiences were culturally responsive and helped shape positive racial identity development: 1) "Overall, did you think Piedmont School of the Arts is a good school for African American males to attend?" and 2) "What would you like to share with the current teachers and administrators at Piedmont School of the Arts that may help African American males improve their performance in the classroom and in performing arts situations?" Several other academic performance and school experience-related questions generated information on racial identity development. Such questions included "What was the best experience you had when you attended PSOA?" "What were your favorite academic classes at PSOA?" and "What were your favorite performing arts classes at PSOA?" Answers to these questions provided the researcher with insights into culturally responsive peak learning and performing arts experiences participants had that enhanced their racial identity development. Respondents identified two factors which helped them build more affirmative African American male dispositions. They reported that performing in plays, musicals and other performance works written by African American writers enabled them to develop a greater appreciation for African American cultural and historical experiences. Additionally, respondents observed that African American male teachers used their lived experiences to help participants activate the attitudes, skills and ideas needed to enhance their academic identities and engender positive post-school experiences.

The curricular choices African American male teachers made provided educational experiences that helped respondents develop more positive racial identities. The Musical Theatre curriculum employed at Piedmont School of the Arts is drawn from the K-12 Theatre Arts Standards established by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016). These performance-based standards guide what students should know and be able to do in the following areas: communication, analysis, aesthetics, and culture. While these standards describe artistic competencies, they do not identify particular plays or musicals teachers are required to use to teach and reinforce the standards. Participants indicate that their African American teachers purposely chose

performance material written and developed by and about African Americans. Rehearsing and performing in plays and musicals written from African American experiences enabled participants to use their creativity to explore their unique historical and cultural backgrounds in ways that are not available or possible in traditional classroom settings. Moreover, by selecting African American oriented works, African American instructors provided opportunities for Black males to be cast in starring and featured roles. Respondents agreed that they probably would not have had such opportunities if their instructors had chosen works written by white playwrights.

Gary considered the effect performing the lead role in the Civil Rights era musical *Purlie* had on his academic and artistic identity. Being cast in the lead role of a production written by iconic African American stage and film artist Ossie Davis, and that features a predominantly Black cast, was a unique opportunity for a Black male student to have at PSOA, a school that generally promotes a Eurocentric academic and artistic curriculum. This experience was meaningful because it gave Gary and other members of the school's African American community the opportunity to show that Black productions were of high artistic quality, socially relevant and able to attract a wider, more diverse audience to the school's performances:

> There was probably this whole little underlying uproar about 'Why does it have to be people of color? So, when we did the show and it was so good, people were like 'Wow, people come to see you in these types of shows?' and 'These kids are good at it!' These are…these are the kids that people wrote off.

Paris shared a similar experience. For him, being cast in a leading role in the school's award-winning production of the musical adaptation of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* was a life-changing experience. Initially the musical was performed locally but was so well received it was ultimately chosen to be a mainstage production at the International Thespian Festival (ITF), a symposium and performance showcase for high school theatre programs. ITF is sponsored by the Educational Theatre Association and is hosted by the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Having the opportunity to perform a major role in a Black production at a major theatre venue enhanced his confidence and helped him understand that engaging in African American oriented performance experiences was a critical component of his artistic development. This experience boosted the academic and artistic relevance of his overall experience at PSOA. Paris shared the following thoughts on this experience:

> Of all the people, we were the mainstage production. Everyone loved us. We were the only group that got to perform twice, and it was just ridiculous. We got lots of love and appreciation for our art. That was like one of the best weeks I've had in my life,

just all-in-all, and that…I think that show really is what gave me confidence to be like wow, I think I'm good at this. This is something I can do.

Paris' and Gary's thoughts provide evidence that performing in African American musicals augmented their school experiences and enhanced their artistic self-perceptions. Having opportunities to perform prominent roles in dynamic Black productions enabled them to demonstrate a greater range of their artistic abilities to wider audiences. Their outstanding contributions in well-received, culturally relevant productions strengthened their confidence in their artistic abilities and shows that their performing arts engagement affirmed their school experiences.

In addition to the benefits derived from performing in Black musical theatre productions, respondents cited the instruction and mentoring they received from several African American male teachers as another factor that enhanced positive racial identity development and improved their school experiences. This finding is consistent with studies which indicate Black male teachers help dispel myths that African American males are anti-intellectual (Simmons, Carpenter, Ricks, Walker, Parks, & Davis, 2013). Additionally, African American male teachers support the success of African American students by serving as academic and personal role models who help them perform well academically in schools that often engage in racially biased and harmful educational practices.

Gary addressed how Mr. Wilson and Mr. Marshall, two African American male teachers, helped him and other Black males at PSOA develop more positive identities by openly challenging negative societal perceptions of Black men. He cited Mr. Wilson for helping him and other African American males recognize and challenge negative stereotypes. He also explained how Mr. Marshall, his choral music teacher, used the class to impart important lessons to the African American males in his class:

> His class would be pretty much half choir class and half life lessons class. He would tell us about standing up straight, speaking right. Sometimes he would just stop and then say 'Do you know how the world views you? Pull up your pants and stop playing around!' He always told us to "Stop shucking and jiving, stop signifying.'

Mr. Marshall's support for African American males extended beyond the classroom. He would often pull Gary aside in the hallways and encourage him to confront the negative societal images often held of Black men by carrying himself with pride and striving for artistic and academic excellence. Mr. Marshall's guidance enabled Gary to understand how his behavior and performance in class and on stage could affect his academic performance and post-school outcomes.

Gary's discussion highlights the positive effect caring and competent African American male teachers had on respondents' academic achievement and school experiences. The relationships Mr. Wilson and Mr. Marshall developed with the participants, and the ideas they shared added richness and relevance to respondents' school experiences. Mr. Wilson and Mr. Marshall used knowledge derived from their lived experiences to present a hidden curriculum replete with ideas that helped Black male students choose behaviors and attitudes that negate commonly held stereotypes (de Royston, 2011; Neve & Collett, 2018). By heightening their awareness of the additional scrutiny they may draw from White teachers and administrators, the African American male teachers enabled Gary and his peers to adopt behaviors that mitigate the negative effect racial stereotyping may have had on their school experiences and academic performance. Studying the performing arts with effective and involved African American male teachers served as a school-based, arts engaged learning opportunity that simultaneously helped respondents develop more positive racial and academic identities.

Conclusions and Implications

The collective responses of the participants demonstrate that African American male high school students can benefit from an education that integrates performing arts learning with rigorous academic instruction. Respondents recognized that their experiences at an arts-based high school strengthened their academic identities and cultivated positive school experiences. Additionally, they agreed that attending a well-designed arts-based high school that had a caring administrative and instructional staff engendered a positive school climate for African American male students.

Participants felt safe at school, enjoyed beneficial connections with teachers, and built collaborative relationships with their peers. They maintained that the blend of performing arts learning and challenging academics strengthened their academic skill development, bolstered achievement motivation and increased the likelihood of college attendance. Additionally, participants noted that their interactions with empathetic and effective Black male teachers prompted them to strive for academic and artistic excellence. Furthermore, study participants experienced an augmented sense of racial and cultural consciousness that resulted from performing in productions written by and about African American authors. Research results imply that school-based performing arts learning experiences strengthen academic engagement, improve post-school outcomes and enhance school experiences for African American males.

In addition to the data obtained from interviews, information gathered from other artifacts provide support for the findings outlined in the study. Further investigation of the participants' post-high school development highlights the continued positive impact of school-based performing arts learning opportunities. At the time of this writing, three of the five

respondents who attended arts-based universities have graduated and are actively pursuing careers in the performing arts. Information gleaned from theatre industry websites and social media posts reveal that Paris has been cast in a major role in a nationwide touring production of the award-winning musical *Hamilton.* A review of online newspaper articles confirm that Marcus is appearing in a regional touring production of *The Color Purple*, the musical that gave him and his classmates national exposure, enhanced his level of engagement and engendered increased confidence in his academic abilities. Furthermore, online newspaper articles and social media posts demonstrate that Jason will begin pursuing a Master's degree in Arts Management from a nationally recognized university and will assume a role as an artist-in-residence with the North Carolina Dance Festival. Evidence attained from researching supplementary sources of information provide additional evidence that performing arts educational experiences promote academic achievement, augment engagement and encourage positive post-school outcomes for African American males.

Overall, the body of literature is replete with research which shows that performing arts education can improve outcomes for the general population of students in U.S. schools. Few studies have examined the connection between school-based arts engagement and academic identity development among African American males. The data from this study should lead researchers, educators and policy makers to closely examine school-based performing arts education as a model for enhancing academic performance and school experiences for African American males. Future research should include qualitative and quantitative studies that identity possible connections between performing arts engagement, cognitive development and academic achievement for Black male students across K-12 school settings. Findings from such research could yield beneficial information concerning the relationships between school-based instruction in theatre, music and dance, overall school performance and standardized test achievement. Subsequent studies may help expand knowledge on the possible benefits of performing arts engagement on college attendance and degree attainment for African American males.

This project has connotations for policy makers as well. Findings from this study should motivate individuals and organizations that influence education policy to carefully review the literature on performing arts education and academic achievement, and use it inform their decision-making practices. Additionally, policymakers should examine whether African American males have equitable opportunities to engage in school-based performing arts learning experiences. Furthermore, they should develop pilot projects that integrate arts-based learning opportunities into schools that serve large numbers of African American male students. Finally, findings from this study should inspire educators to use the existing research to develop and incorporate standards-driven performing arts programs into the curricula at schools that serve African American males and students from other underserved populations.

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