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Taking it to the Stage: Performing Arts Education and African American Male Academic  
Identity Development

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### **Abstract**

This case study examines the relationship between school-based performing arts participation and academic identity development for African American male high school students. Participants addressed how their engagement in a school-based performing arts program influenced their academic achievement and school experiences. The researcher used African American Male Academic Identity Development theory, a proposed framework, to address the following questions: What are the experiences of African American males who participate in school-based performing arts programs? How do performing arts education experiences influence the academic identity development of African American male high school students? Based upon the data derived from this study the author argues that school-based performing arts participation may improve academic performance, engender positive school experiences and encourage affirmative racial identity development for African American male high school students. Findings from this study contribute to the body of literature on the relationship between arts education and academic achievement among African American males.

Key Terms: Academic Identity Development, African American, Culturally Relevant Instruction, School-Based Performing Arts.

## Taking it to the Stage: Performing Arts Education and African American Male Academic Identity Development

### Introduction

As educators and policy makers strive to improve outcomes for students of color in Pre-K through 12 schools, a growing body of research demonstrates that school-based arts engagement may enhance academic achievement for African American males (Kazembe, 2014; Thomas, 2011; Walton, 2015). Numerous studies demonstrate strong connections between arts participation and academic performance for students in U.S. schools (Bradley, Bonbright, & Dooling, 2013; Caterall, 1998; College Board, 2013; Dupont, 1992; Gazzaniga, 2008; Ludwig, Marklein, & Song, 2016; Rupert, 2006, Whisman & Hixson, 2012). Focused research demonstrates that school-based arts participation can help improve student performance in reading comprehension (Kabilan & Kamarrudin, 2010; Standly, 2008) and mathematics (Moore & Linder, 2012), and indicates that school-based arts participation can contribute to enhanced cognitive development (Hetland & Winner, 2004), and improved performance on standardized assessments (College Board, 2013; Whisman & Hixson, 2012).

Findings from studies that show that arts education enhances student achievement and cognitive development are important, because such information indicates that school-based arts programs may serve as a critical component for improving academic outcomes for African American males in U.S. schools (Kazembe, 2014; Rupert, 2006; Walton & Wiggan, 2010; 2014). Historically, structural differences in educational opportunities have contributed to disparities in academic performance between African American males and their counterparts in other racial and ethnic groups (Hargrave, Tyler, Thompson & Danner, 2016; United States Department of Education, 2014). African American males experience racialized educational practices that often create negative school experiences and thwart high academic performance. (Howard, 2014; Schott Foundation, 2015). School-based inequities that hamper achievement among African American males include discriminatory disciplinary practices (Butler, Lewis, Moore, & Scott, 2012), disproportional special education placement patterns (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), race-based academic tracking policies (Kohli, 2014), lack of access to qualified teachers (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012), and inequitable school resource allocation (Ostrander, 2015). Educational research shows that race-based differences in instructional and administrative practices contribute to the problem of academic underperformance for African American males. Such outcomes include lower grades, lower test scores, negative overall school experiences and higher dropout rates than their peers in other racial and ethnic groups (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Arora, 2012; Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012; Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Stanco, 2012). While many studies focus on the disparities in achievement between African American males and their peers (Ransaw & Majors, 2016; Schott Foundation, 2015), a growing body of research demonstrates that African American males can, and do, excel academically when they receive rigorous, culturally relevant instruction and have school experiences that encourage high academic achievement and promote college attendance (Brooms, 2014). The use of culturally relevant teaching pedagogies and student support practices have been proven to promote African American males' academic success (Henfield & McGee, 2012; Hill, 2013). Additionally, school environments that create a sense of belonging and community are important elements for enhancing school achievement for Black male students (Boykin, Lilja, & Tyler, 2004; Harper & Associates, 2014).

Many studies that analyze

high academic achievement among African American males examine their performance within the traditional content areas, such as English/language arts, mathematics, science, and history/social studies (Council of Great City Schools, 2012; Hughes, Hassell, Kumasi, Rawson, & Hitson, 2012; Moses & Moses, 2012). Such studies show that when African American males receive challenging instruction from highly qualified teachers, they perform at high levels, have positive school experiences, and attend college (Harper, 2014; McGee, 2013).

While the findings of such studies provide important information, more research should be conducted on the connections between school-based performing arts education and academic achievement for African American males. Performing arts education consists of school-based instruction in dance, music and theater that are guided by national, state and local standards and are taught through classroom instruction, individualized practice, rehearsals and performances (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014). The goals of school-based performing arts are to help students deepen their understanding of the performing arts, learn to communicate through the performing arts and develop performing arts proficiency (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014). Additionally, effective performing arts education experiences use students' culture to promote positive ethnic and racial identity, encourage high achievement and help redirect the feelings of anxiety, anger and alienation students of color often experience in U.S. schools (Engdahl, 2012; Kazembe, 2014; Walton & Wiggan, 2010, 2014). Existing studies link performing arts learning and participation to enhanced academic achievement and improved cognitive development (Gazzaniga, 2008; Hetland & Winner, 2004; Thomas, Singh & Klopfenstein, 2013). Findings from studies that examine the connections between arts participation and high achievement are promising and have the potential to provide a foundation for developing curricula and instructional practices that can improve school performance for African American males (Kazembe, 2014; Thomas, 2011; Walton, 2015; Walton & Wiggan, 2014). More research is required to build a comprehensive body of knowledge on arts-based education and African American males' academic achievement. To address the identified gap in the literature, this explorative case study examines the relationship between school-based performing arts participation and academic identity development for African American males who attended and graduated from an arts-based high school.

### **Research Questions**

To conduct this study, the researcher asked a sample of African American male graduates of an arts-based high school to discuss how school-based performing arts participation influenced their academic achievement and school experiences. This analysis was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What are the experiences of African American males who participate in standards-driven performing arts education programs at an urban high school?
- (2) How do performing arts education experiences influence the academic identity development of African American male high school students?

The findings of the study indicate that structured, school-centered performing arts learning opportunities may help strengthen academic identity development and improve school performance for African American male high school students.

## **Literature Review**

### **African American Males' Academic Identity Development**

While educational research confirms that identifying with academics is a critical element for motivation and achievement (Marsh & Craven, 2006; Matthews, 2014; Prince & Nurius, 2014), African American male students experience educational practices that compromise high academic performance and thwart efforts to formulate positive academic identities (Hargrave et al., 2016; Moore & Lewis, 2014). Researchers have identified several factors that contribute to the academic underperformance many African American males experience. Such factors include excessively high rates of suspensions and expulsions, disproportionate placement in special education programs, and low teacher expectations (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016, Smith & Harper, 2015).

The disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline is a persistent detriment to African American males' academic performance. African American males are two to five times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their White counterparts (Loveless, 2017). The excessive suspensions and expulsions experienced by African American males lead to significant reductions in time spent in the classroom. Lost class time reduces instruction received, impedes academic achievement and often leads African American males to drop-out of school (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelsohn, 2016; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). The disproportionately high rates of suspensions and expulsions experienced by African American males erode their confidence in schools as safe spaces for learning and engender feelings of injustice. Thus, persistent patterns of exclusionary discipline thwart high academic performance and frustrate positive academic identity development for African American males.

The excessively high rate of special education placement African American males experience is an additional factor that compromises their academic performance. Since the inception of mandated educational 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 from other groups (Kunjufu, 2009). Studies show that African American males are more likely to be placed in programs for students with intellectual, learning and behavioral disabilities (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; United States Department of Education, 2016). Additionally, African American males are more inclined to be placed in special education programs and less likely to be enrolled in honors courses than their White male peers (Toldson, 2011). Disproportionate special education placement is problematic, because it impedes positive academic identity development for African American males. Students in special education programs are more likely to repeat a grade, more prone to suspension and expulsion, and experience more parental contact for problem behavior and poor academic performance (Losen, Hodson, Ee, & Martinez, 2015; Toldson, 2011). Moreover, special education placement limits students' access to favorable school experiences, stigmatizes students as having limited learning abilities and often leads teachers to provide them with less rigorous instruction (Hammer, 2012).

Low teacher expectation is an additional element that impedes positive academic identity development for African American male students (Matthews, 2014). Several recent studies indicate that teacher expectations reflect racial biases concerning the behavior and academic abilities of African American males (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz & Green, 2015). While teachers of various racial and ethnic groups harbor negative perceptions of African American students' academic abilities, research demonstrates that deficit thinking by White teachers is particularly problematic (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz & Green, 2015).

The adverse effects of low teacher expectations are larger and more damaging for African American male students. (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016). It is more common for White teachers to have lower academic expectations for Black male students than they do for their White male counterparts (Webb & Thomas, 2015). Additionally, White and other non-Black teachers were more likely to predict Black male students would not finish high school and less likely to graduate from high school than their Black female peers (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016). Moreover, negative interactions with teachers damage African American males' academic self-concepts (Hargrave, Tyler, Thompson & Danner, 2016). Even when African American males meet high academic standards, teachers' negative beliefs about them persist (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges & Jennings, 2010).

### **Education and Academic Identity Development**

While research substantiates the negative effects of school-based structural racism, a contrasting body of scholarship exists that identifies the factors that promote high academic achievement and school success for African American males. Specific strategies that bolster African American males' performance in literacy, English/language arts, mathematics, science, and technology are receiving increased attention (Davis, 2014, Emdin, 2011; Moses & Moses, 2012; Tatum, 2012; Wright, 2011). Such strategies include providing more rigorous instruction, engaging students in culturally relevant learning experiences, ensuring access to highly qualified teachers, establishing high expectations for students, and enlisting support from parents and peers (Emdin, 2011; Gay, 2018; Harper & Associates, 2014; Hughes-Hassell et al., 2012; Moses & Moses, 2012).

Most research that addresses effective strategies for teaching African American males has been conducted in the traditional content areas, but few studies examine the connections between school-based performing arts education and high academic achievement among students in this population. One explanation for this may be that researchers have less access to data on school-based arts programs. In many states, arts education indicators are not a required component of school accountability plans (Kisida, Morrison, & Tuttle, 2017). Thus, there is little incentive for schools to collect data that track arts enrollment and achievement. Additionally, the necessity to improve school outcomes for African American males has narrowed the scope of the body of research to specific outcomes, such as strengthening Black males' subject and skill-based achievement scores, enhancing grade point averages and raising graduation rates. This may lead researchers to discount the arts as a potential pathway for strengthening academic performance among African American males.

Much of the existing scholarship on the impact of performing arts education has been conducted on the general population of students in U.S. schools, irrespective of race, gender and socioeconomic status. Data derived from these studies consistently links performing arts participation with enhanced academic achievement and improved cognitive development (Caterall, 1998; Gazzaniga, 2008; Hetland & Winner, 2004; Rose & Magnotta, 2012). Results from a study conducted by Gazzaniga and associates (2008) indicate that school-based music training improves reading acquisition and geometric reasoning skills. Findings also demonstrate that structured, consistent involvement in the arts can strengthen achievement motivation and that training in acting can improve memory (Gazzaniga, 2008). In a meta-analysis of 16 studies of the effects of classroom drama on students' cognitive development, Hetland and Winner (2004) determined that the use of theater-based instructional strategies correlated with improved reading skills, enhanced oral language development, positive self-esteem development, and advanced moral reasoning abilities. Additional studies show that arts education can enhance academic

achievement. High school students with higher levels of arts involvement earn higher grades and perform better on standardized assessments than their counterparts with less exposure (Caterall, 1998).

While the majority of studies that examine arts participation and academic achievement have been conducted irrespective of race and gender, a few studies explore the relationship between performing arts education and school performance for African American males. Thomas (2011) revealed positive correlations between African American males' participation in school music programs and achievement on standardized English/language arts and mathematics assessments. Additionally, Kazembe (2014) proposed using a Black Arts curricular framework to promote critical literacy and improve academic engagement for urban African American male students. Walton and Wiggan (2010) use existing research to recommend arts education as a model for reducing the disproportional placement of African American males in special education programs. Additionally, the authors examine Readers' Theater as an effective strategy for improving African American males' reading comprehension skills (Walton & Wiggan, 2014). Such explorations are promising and may lead to the development of in-school arts programs that bolster positive academic identity development and encourage improved school outcomes for African American males in K-12 school settings (Kazembe, 2014; Thomas, 2011; Walton & Wiggan, 2010, 2014). More research investigating the impact of performing arts education on school achievement for African American males is needed.

### **The Current Study**

A careful review of the literature demonstrates that there is a paucity of information on the relationship between school-based performing arts involvement and academic achievement for Black male students. The study described in this article was conducted to fill some of the gaps in the literature by exploring whether performing arts education experiences influence academic identity development among African American males. The research questions that guided this analysis are as follows:

- 1) What are the experiences of African American male students who participate in standards-driven performing arts education programs at an urban high school?
- 2) How do performing arts education experiences influence the academic identity development of African American male high school students?

### **African American Male Academic Identity Development Theory**

To address the questions that guided this study the researcher implemented African American Male Academic Identity Development (AAMAID) theory as a framework for examining the effects of performing arts participation on African American males' school achievement (Walton, 2015). AAMAID combines elements of Academic Self-Concept theory (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Matthews, 2014) and Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to build a model for understanding how African American males perceive their academic abilities and how such perceptions influence school performance. AAMAID maintains that African American males' academic identity formation is influenced both by internal psychosocial processes and by racialized educational practices that negatively influence their school performance. AAMAID is both analytical and prescriptive; it describes the factors that influence African American males' academic identity development and provides recommendations for improving their academic outcomes.

As disparities in academic performance between African American males and their counterparts persist, new



models for understanding the factors that influence academic identity development are necessary. AAMAID provides a model for understanding how persistent, racially biased educational practices induce academic disengagement, contribute to poor school performance, and engender negative academic identity development among African American males. Additionally, AAMAID provides insights into specific practices and conditions that can strengthen African American males' school experiences and improve their academic identity development.

#### AAMAID

rests on five key concepts:

- 1) Positive academic identity development is a critical component for motivation and achievement in school (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 for students. African American males, like students from other racial backgrounds, may have content specific academic identities that coincide with their performance in those subject areas (Marsh & Shavelson 1985; Matthews, 2014).
- 4) As a group, African American males face educational risk factors that hamper high academic achievement. They often have inexperienced and poorly qualified teachers (Mets, 2015), 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 positive academic identity development for Black male students (Kohli, 2014).
- 5) Culturally relevant instructional and administrative practices significantly improve school performance and enhance African American males' academic identity formation (Gay, 2018; Kunjufu, 2010).

The concepts outlined within the AAMAID framework were used as guideposts for developing research questions and examining artifacts for information that provides insights into how school-based performing arts engagement influences African American males' academic performance and school experiences.

#### **Research Method**

An interpretive case study (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002) was used as the implement of analysis for this research project. This method allowed the researcher to develop an intensive description and analysis of the thoughts, ideas and respective experiences of research participants (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002). The case under investigation examined the experiences of five African American male graduates of Piedmont School of the Arts (PSOA), an arts-based combination middle and high school of 1150 students in Regent City, a large metropolitan area in North Carolina. PSOA is racially and ethnically diverse and has a student population that is 49% Black, 37% White, 7% Hispanic, 5% two or more races, less than 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native and below 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. In terms of gender, 73% of the students are female and 27% male. Additionally, 42% of the students come from low income backgrounds (GreatSchools.org, 2018). In terms of student performance, PSOA is the third highest performing high school in a 36 high school district and is rated above average in school quality in comparison to other schools in the state (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 2018).

PSOA students perform above their peers in the state on end-of-grade tests in math, reading and science. Moreover, PSOA students have a 95% high school graduation rate and outperform their counterparts on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Despite the school's above average student performance profile, there are significant disparities in performance, with White students scoring higher than their Black and Hispanic peers on state-wide math, reading and science tests of achievement.

PSOA is an arts magnet public secondary school with a pre-professional arts education curriculum spanning the performing and visual arts. Admission to the school is by audition, and students may choose one of ten majors: Band, Orchestra, Piano, Chorus, Dance, Musical Theatre, Costume Design (high school only), Technical Theatre (high school only) and Visual Arts. Middle school students major in one area, and high school students can major in two disciplines. PSOA students take core subject classes in English, math, science and social studies, coupled with intensive learning experiences in the arts. Arts-based learning includes daily classroom instruction bolstered by opportunities to exhibit and perform works for peers, school staff, parents, and the public. In addition to in-class experiences, student performances and exhibitions are a part of the curriculum and are held in small and large venues on site, in the community and at state-wide and national events. After a year of attendance, students are required to select specific arts specialties they will focus on throughout their high school careers. The selection of majors is required after a year of attendance to ensure that students have enough time to take all of the courses needed to meet their graduation requirements and to experience the level of engagement necessary for students in a pre-professional arts education program.

Purposive criterion sampling (Gay, Mills, & Airasian 2012) and direct recruitment were used to secure five African American male PSOA graduates to participate in this study. The researcher used announcements on social media, telephone calls and direct personal appeals to identify eligible candidates. Eight potential respondents were contacted, and five met the research criteria and agreed to participate in this study. All five participants majored in a performing arts discipline, with four majoring in musical theater and one in choral music. Participants graduated from the school between 2003 and 2014. In all, four participants attended college, with three attending at the time of the study. One participant had attended college prior to the study, and a final respondent did not participate in any formalized postsecondary education programs. African American male graduates of PSOA were selected, because they shared a common experience central to addressing the research questions. As African American male performing arts graduates of PSOA, the five participants, Gary, Paris, Marcus, Cameron and Jason, shared experiences necessary for describing the potential influence performing arts participation may have had on their academic identity development and school experiences. In addition, the time between their graduations and their involvement in the study may have enabled them to provide additional insights into how school-based arts participation contributed to their academic performance, school experiences, and post-school outcomes. Moreover, their age and maturity may have equipped them to better articulate their school experiences than students who were attending PSOA at the time of the study.

To conduct this study, multiple sources of data were obtained, including two semi-structured interviews, proof of attendance, graduation records and information from online newspapers, websites and social media posts (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002). Proof of attendance and graduation records were used to verify self-reports of attendance and high school completion. Online newspapers and magazine articles were accessed in order to verify reports of participation in public productions. Additionally, information from online

articles written about participants provided information on the impact intensive performing arts involvement had on their academic performance and school experiences. Second interviews were conducted to ensure response consistency and allow participants to add, correct, or provide additional information. Each interview lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews with college attending participants were conducted by telephone, while in-person interviews were conducted with participants who were living in Regent City and were not attending college. Three in-person interviews were conducted in the researcher's office, and one was conducted in a participant's home. Interview data was collected digitally and transcribed through a computer-based application.

Interview data analysis relied on participants' reflections of how their daily experiences at an arts-based high school affected their academic performance and influenced their school experiences. Interview questions were drawn from the AAMAID framework and addressed how school-based performing arts influenced the academic identity development, school experiences and academic outcomes of the study participants. The interview questions provided participants with opportunities to discuss: (a) overall school enjoyment; (b) school safety; (c) positive and negative school experiences; (d) the quality of student-teacher interactions; (e) academic strengths and weaknesses; (f) experiences in academic and performing arts classes; and (g) the relationships between performing arts participation and academic achievement. Additionally, participants were asked to assess whether they felt PSOA was an effective school for African American males to attend. Examples of questions that addressed participants' school experiences include: "Did you feel safe at PSOA? Why or why not?" "Did you feel like you had good relationships with your teachers? Please explain why you felt these relationships were good or bad". Overall, did you think PSOA was a good school for African American males to attend? Why or why not?" Questions that targeted respondents' academic performance included "Describe yourself when you were a student at PSOA. How did you learn best?" "How did your involvement in the performing arts influence your performance in your academic classes? Was it positive, negative, or did it have no effect?" "Which experiences had the greatest impact on your academic success? Home experiences, school experiences or performing arts experiences? Please give examples." Constant comparative analysis was used to evaluate the collected data, because it enabled the researcher to generate and refine theory and allows for further testing and analysis (Conrad, Neuman, Haworth, & Scott, 1993). Simultaneous data collection and analysis was used to identify the concepts and themes generated in conversations with the participants (Creswell, 2003). This was achieved by organizing data as it was collected, writing memos, developing analytic files, and arranging information into emergent concepts and themes. The researcher read each line of transcript, took notes on significant statements made by participants and developed groups of subthemes. Using AAMAID as a framework, the researcher identified important statements that demonstrated how participants' involvement in school-based performing arts influenced their academic performance and school experiences. These clusters of meaning were then categorized into three central themes.

### **Findings**

Analysis of the data 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." "Experiencing a Positive School Climate" emphasized how school safety, student-teacher relationships and collaborative learning opportunities affected the participants' academic identity development and school experiences. "Performing Arts had a Positive Impact on Academic Achievement" highlighted

how participant involvement in school-based performing arts influenced academic skill development, achievement motivation and post-secondary school attendance. “African American Males, Arts Based Performance, and Positive Racial Identity” addressed how participation in African American themed performance projects supported the development of a positive racial identity.

### **Theme One: Experiencing a Positive School Climate**

During interviews, all five participants reported experiencing a positive school climate while attending PSOA. Examples of questions that elicited information on school climate include “Did you enjoy attending PSOA?” “Did you feel safe at PSOA?” “Did you fit in socially at PSOA?” School climate is defined as the quality of experiences students, school personnel, and parents have in a particular school setting on a daily basis (Kramer, Watson, & Hodges, 2013; National School Climate Center, 2017). Additionally, school climate reflects the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices and organizational structures that govern schools (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012). A positive school climate promotes high academic achievement and encourages pro-social youth development (Kramer et al., 2013; National School Climate Center, 2017). Based on such findings, school climate is considered by researchers and practitioners as an important barometer of educational effectiveness. There are four primary factors used to assess school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and external environments. All participants addressed these four factors of school climate, and stated that they had positive experiences in three of the four indicators. The school climate indicator respondents expressed serious reservations about was the quality of the external environment surrounding the school. They all acknowledged that crime and violence occurred within the school’s neighborhood, but they credited the staff with maintaining a safe and orderly environment in the building and on school grounds.

Participants discussed school safety at length. There was an unexpected relationship between the quality of the external environment and the sense of safety students experienced at the school. PSOA is located in Kennedy Heights, a historically working-class African American community on the western cusp of Regent City’s downtown area. The median household income is \$23,117, which is significantly lower than the city-wide median income of \$61,017. Thefts, assaults, burglaries and other crimes occur more frequently in this community, as evidenced by a crime rate that is 60 percent higher than the city-wide average. The median home value in Kennedy Heights is \$75,600, which is well below the \$211,800 median home value in Regent City. Additionally, the high school graduation rate is 29 percent lower than the overall average graduation rate of Regent City students ([www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com); [www.niche.com](http://www.niche.com); [www.trulia.com](http://www.trulia.com)). Despite PSOA’s location, respondents reported experiencing the school as a safe learning environment. Gary explained that while drug dealing and shootings had taken place a few blocks from the school, he “never felt unsafe at the school.” School staff and security personnel collaborated to ensure that students were safe in the school and on school-grounds. Cameron agreed that PSOA was a safe learning environment:

They (teachers and administrators) made sure that 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.

Respondents frequently cited positive teacher-student relationships as a factor in creating a supportive school environment. Additionally, they identified specific teachers who helped foster a positive school climate for Black male students. Mr. Marshall was described as a staff

member who created a pro-social environment for African American male students. Mr. Marshall, an African American male musical theater teacher, connected with the respondents and supported their academic and artistic achievement. Cameron reflected:

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 at home or in our families, or things like that, you know.

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. He stated:

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

In addition to experiencing positive teacher-student relationships, participants also reported that teachers actively fostered beneficial student-to-student relationships. Paris recounted how his dance teacher, Mr. Hinton, encouraged him to mentor younger students and help them master dance routines. For Paris, coaching and supporting younger students eventually became second nature to him. He affirmed:

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.

Several respondents cited collaboration as a factor which helped foster a positive school climate. Research demonstrates that collaborative teaching and learning improves academic engagement and boosts school performance for African American males (Boykin, Lilja, & Tyler, 2004; Moore & Lewis, 2014). The widespread use of collaborative learning at PSOA reflects AAIMAID's argument that culturally relevant teaching and learning practices boost achievement among African American males (Walton, 2015).

Marcus discussed a particularly engaging collaborative learning experience from his musical theater class. The teacher developed an assignment in which students had to work in small groups to write and perform a short musical as a culminating activity for that semester. Marcus reported:

It was really interesting to see what different 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 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.

Developing and presenting a short musical production is a collaborative and self-directed learning experience that further supports the importance of safety, relationships and effective teaching and learning as factors contributing to the affirmative nature of the school climate respondents experienced at PSOA.

### **Theme Two: Performing Arts Education had a Positive Impact on Academic Achievement**

All participants spoke at length about the relationship between immersion in the performing arts and academic performance. Questions that elicited responses about this

relationship 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?”, “What kinds of reading and writing assignments did you have to do in your performing arts classes?” Narratives provided detailed and nuanced information on the connections between school-based performing arts participation and academic achievement. All respondents concluded that their arts-based learning experiences had a positive impact on their academic performance.

Each participant addressed the connections between performing arts participation and academic skill development. Respondents reported that their performing arts experiences had a strong influence on their reading and writing skill development. All of the men interviewed had received advanced training in theater arts at PSOA and maintained that training in this discipline enhanced their vocabulary development and strengthened their reading comprehension skills. Paris shared:

Yeah, it (theater) 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 expand your vocabulary.

Musical theater students receive instruction and are provided with experiences that help them understand and analyze the meaning of written monologues, dialogs, and song lyrics. Paris indicated that the training and experiences he received in textual analysis enhanced his comprehension skills as well. He offered:

Then there is reading. You have to be able to understand the text when you are reading something. You find out different ways to understand text. You 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.

Several participants reported that their performing arts experiences enhanced their writing skills. Jason displayed a particularly well-developed understanding of the relationship between his school-based dance education experiences and 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 compose 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.

Participants maintained that school-based performing arts engagement enhanced their academic achievement motivation and served as a deterrent to school failure. Respondents explained that PSOA students must maintain at least a “C” average in order represent the school in extracurricular public performances. This motivated them to ensure that they posted at least a 2.0 GPA while attending the school. Most of the participants exceeded this academic standard, and three of the individuals in this study qualified for and took Advanced Placement courses while attending the school. Gary summed it up well:

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.

Respondents reported that public performances that occurred outside of their classes were considered extracurricular activities, and performances conducted in and for classes were part of the official school curriculum. Cameron noted that making sure he was eligible to perform in extracurricular shows was his primary motivation 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 really 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?

In addition to a reported positive impact on academic skill development and achievement motivation, conversations with participants revealed that their school-based performing arts experiences had a positive effect on their post-school outcomes. Four of the five participants attended college, and three participants conveyed that their rich experiences within a school-based performing arts high school was the primary reason why they attended college. Jason discussed how PSOA motivated him and other African American males to attend 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, and dance, and things like that.

Marcus shared a similar perspective. He stated that PSOA was a supportive and transformational school experience that made it possible for him and other students from underserved backgrounds to continue their educations beyond high school:

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.

The insights provided by all five respondents indicate that their performing arts learning experiences supported improved academic performance. Classroom and performance-based musical theater learning experiences enhanced their reading and writing skills, heightened academic achievement motivation and made college attendance more likely. For all participants, school-based performing arts engagement augmented their academic identity development.

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

Narratives provided by participants indicated that their experiences at PSOA helped them develop a stronger and more positive racial identity. Two questions were included to examine how their classroom-based and extracurricular learning opportunities were culturally relevant and had an impact on their racial and cultural 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?” Additionally, their reactions to several other school experience and academic performance related questions elicited responses that addressed racial identity formation. These questions include: “What was the best experience you had when you attended PSOA?” “What were your favorite academic classes at PSOA?”, “What were your favorite performing arts classes at PSOA?” Such questions led participants to discuss peak learning and performing arts experiences that were culturally relevant and enhanced racial identity development. Respondents cited two processes that helped them build positive African American male identities. First, they developed greater respect for African American literature, performance art, and culture by performing in plays and musicals written by African American playwrights. Secondly, African American male teachers used their personal experiences to help participants develop the attitudes, skills, and ideas necessary for them to enhance their academic identities and have positive post-school experiences.

Participants were afforded opportunities to develop more affirming racial identities as a result of the curricular choices their African American teachers had made. The musical theater curriculum at PSOA was developed under the guidelines specified within the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction’s K-12 Theatre Arts Standards (NCDPI, 2013). The standards are designed to guide what students should be able to know and do within the following four domains: communication, analysis, aesthetics, and culture. The standards are performance-based and describe artistic competencies, but they do not prescribe specific plays or musicals that must be used to teach and reinforce the standards. The respondents’ African American teachers skillfully selected works written and developed by and about African Americans. Performing in theatrical works written from African American perspectives provided participants with opportunities to explore and analyze their historical and cultural experiences from creative and participatory perspectives. Additionally, such culturally relevant performance experiences allowed participants to be cast in starring and featured roles, opportunities they most likely would not have had in works written by White playwrights. Gary discussed the impact that performing the lead role in *Purlie*, a civil rights themed musical with a predominantly Black cast, had on him. This was a unique opportunity for an African American male to have at PSOA, a school whose predominantly White teaching staff relied largely on American and Eurocentric artistic works in teaching and performance situations. He explained that this production created some controversy at the school, because it was the first African American musical performed there. This experience was important, because it gave African American students and staff members the opportunity to show that Black productions were viable, relevant, and could attract a wider, more diverse audience to the school’s performances. Additionally, this show enabled Gary and his African American peers to showcase their talents in featured roles. Gary stated:

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 doing good at it!’ These are...these are the kids that people wrote off.

For Paris, performing a leading role in the school’s production of the musical adaptation of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* was a transformational experience. The musical was performed locally and was selected for production at the International Thespian Festival, a conference and performance showcase for high school theater programs from around the world. Performing a major role in a predominantly Black production boosted his confidence in his



abilities and showed him that his African American cultural experience was an important aspect of his personal and artistic development. Additionally, participating in a Black production at PSOA added relevance to the academic and performing arts experiences he had had while he was a student at the school. Paris described his experience performing at the International Thespian Festival:

Of all the people, we were the main stage 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.

Gary and Paris's comments help illustrate the impact that performing in African American musicals had on their school engagement and artistic self-perceptions. These opportunities allowed them to display a wider range of their theatrical abilities to larger audiences. Their successful and well-received performances in culturally relevant productions enhanced their artistic self-confidence and demonstrated that performing arts involvement affirms school experiences for Black males.

In addition to the benefits derived from performing in African American musicals, participants cited the presence of strong and effective African American male teachers as a major factor in helping them build positive racial identities. The literature suggests that African American male teachers have a decidedly positive impact on African American students (Simmons, Carpenter, Ricks, Walker, Parks, & Davis, 2013). Studies demonstrate that Black male teachers are important, because they are able to challenge negative stereotypes propagated about African Americans by helping to dispel the societal myth that Black males are anti-intellectual. Additionally, they serve as role models for African American male students and help them navigate through racially biased and harmful educational practices.

Gary discussed how the arrival of two African American male teachers, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Marshall, improved the quality of his experiences at the school. He credited Mr. Wilson with helping him and the other African American males challenge societal stereotypes of African American men. Mr. Marshall, a choral music teacher, used his class to teach music and to impart important life lessons to the African American males in his classes:

He really took a lot of men of color under his wing, because he was the choir teacher and he taught Men's Ensemble, and so mainly a lot of the boys in his class were Black boys, and 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.'

In addition to the lessons imparted in class, Gary shared that Mr. Marshall would pull him aside and tell him how important it was for him to understand the negative stereotypes held about African American males. Mr. Marshall stressed that it was important for Gary and his peers to carry themselves with pride and dignity and to strive for academic and artistic excellence. Mr. Marshall helped Gary understand that his behavior and performance in class and on stage could affect his academic and post-school outcomes and experiences.

Gary's thoughts demonstrate the impact highly-qualified and caring African American

male teachers like Mr. Wilson had on participants' academic performance and school experiences. The relationships he forged and the insights he shared added relevancy and depth to Gary's school experiences. Mr. Wilson used his insider knowledge to impart a hidden curriculum that contained ideas that helped Black male students consider and adopt behaviors that belie existing stereotypes. By raising their consciousness of the additional scrutiny they may receive from White teachers and administrators, Mr. Wilson provided opportunities for Gary and other Black males to select attitudes and behaviors to mollify the negative effects racial stereotyping may have on their academic performance and overall school experiences. Studying with an effective and concerned African American male teacher like Mr. Wilson was a school-based and arts-engaged learning opportunity that enhanced respondents' school experiences and strengthened academic performance.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

All five participants agreed that attending a performing arts-based high school enhanced their academic identities and fostered positive school experiences. Their collective responses indicate that African American male high school students can benefit from an education that combines performing arts training and rigorous academic instruction. Respondents expressed the belief that attending a well-structured arts-oriented high school with a caring administrative and instructional staff created a positive school climate for African American male students.

Participants reported experiencing a sense of safety at the school, enjoying beneficial and productive relationships with key instructional staff members, and developing positive collaborative relationships with their peers. Additionally, participants expressed that the combination of challenging performing arts learning experiences, coupled with a college preparatory academic curriculum, bolstered academic skill development, enhanced achievement motivation, and increased the likelihood of college attendance. Furthermore, respondents noted that receiving instruction from caring and highly qualified Black male teachers motivated them to strive for academic and artistic excellence. Moreover, the participants reported experiencing an enhanced sense of cultural awareness and pride by performing in African American themed performance projects.

In addition to the information gathered during interviews, data gleaned from other artifacts support these findings. Follow up research on the participants demonstrates the positive impact performing arts engagement continues to have on their post-high school development. Three of the five participants who were attending arts-based universities have graduated from their institutions and are working in their areas of specialization. Social media posts have revealed that Jason will serve as an artist-in-residence with the North Carolina Dance Festival and will pursue a Master's degree in Arts Management from a major regional university. Through an examination of theater industry websites and social media posts the researcher discovered that, upon graduation, Paris has earned a major role in the national touring production of the groundbreaking musical *Hamilton*. Additionally, a survey of online newspaper articles indicates Marcus is performing in a professional touring production of *The Color Purple*, the same show that helped him and his African American classmates heighten their level of engagement and gain confidence in their performing abilities. Findings gleaned from the various sources of data utilized in this study suggest that structured and intensive performing arts learning experiences received within an academic setting may strengthen engagement, boost performance, improve school experiences and produce positive post school outcomes for African American males

While the existing

body of literature is replete with studies that demonstrate that performing arts participation can enhance school outcomes for the general population of students in U.S. schools, few studies have explored the relationship between arts engagement and academic identity development among African American males. The evidence derived from this study should lead researchers, policy makers and educators to seriously explore school-based performing arts as a model for improving outcomes for African American males. Future research should include both quantitative and qualitative studies that capture the potential correlations between performing arts engagement, cognitive development and academic achievement for African American males across K-12 school settings. Results from such studies would provide valuable information on the influence school-based instruction in dance, music, and theater have on academic skill development, content-specific school performance, and achievement on standardized tests. Additionally, future research may help increase knowledge in the potential benefits of long term performing arts engagement on college attendance and degree attainment among African American males.

This research project has implications for education policymakers as well. The results obtained from this study should encourage individuals and organizations that set education policy to familiarize themselves with the literature on performing arts education and academic achievement. In addition, policy makers should examine whether African American males have equitable access to school-based performing arts learning opportunities and develop pilot programs incorporating arts-based learning opportunities into the curricula at schools serving significant percentages of African American males. Similarly, the data from this study should lead educators to steep themselves in literature that links performing arts education to improved academic performance among African American males in K-12 settings. Teachers and administrators could use this information to create meaningful and effective ways to build standards-driven performing arts programs into the curriculum and develop reliable methods for incorporating arts-based learning opportunities across the curriculum for African American males and students from other underserved populations.

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