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Urban African American adolescents' transitions to schools in white suburbia: a phenomenological study

Nancy Parker Seay

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A Dissertation

entitled

Urban African American Adolescents’ Transitions to Schools in White Suburbia:

A Phenomenological Study

by

Nancy Parker Seay

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Educational Psychology

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August, 2015
An Abstract of

Urban African American Adolescents’ Transitions to Schools in White Suburbia: A Phenomenological Study

by

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The University of Toledo
August 2015

An unprecedented number of African American students are transferring from poor-performing schools in racially isolated urban communities to schools in predominantly White and more affluent suburban communities to receive a “good” education. However, upon entering White suburban schools many urban African American students struggle both socially and academically. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the experiences of forty-eight African American adolescents who had transferred from schools in Detroit to schools in nearby predominantly White suburban communities. Focus groups were conducted in six different schools throughout two suburban Detroit school districts. Analyses from the six schools were combined to create a composite description of these young people’s transition experiences.

Findings suggested that relationships with teachers and both in-group and out-group peers were essential features of these adolescents’ urban to suburban transition experiences. Phenomenological analyses revealed that what the participants experienced...
was very similar across schools, but how they experienced the transition varied. Using theories of intergroup contact and acculturation as interpretive lenses, study findings suggest that participants’ acculturation experiences could be quite fluid and sensitive to the reception context in their new schools. The study concluded with a discussion of implications for schools and future research directions.
This dissertation is in memory of my big brother,

Howard Jackson Parker, Jr.
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List of Abbreviations

AfA .......................................................... African American

DPS ........................................................... Detroit Public Schools

EuA .......................................................... European American

US ............................................................ United States

Urban-suburban .............................................. Urban to suburban
Chapter One

Introduction

Once idealized as the exclusive domain of the White middle class, suburban communities have become both racially and economically diverse spaces. This demographic shift is evident in African American (AfA) residential migration patterns. During the first part of the twentieth century AfA migration was more likely to feature a rural to urban pattern (Gregory, 2005; M. Orfield & Luce, 2012). However, as African Americans moved into the middle class and with the implementation of federal fair housing laws, AfA migration began to shift towards an urban to suburban pattern during the latter half of the twentieth century (Pattillo, 2005). Between 1990 and 2010 overall African American suburban residency grew from 19% to over 50% (Frey, 2011a, 2011b, 2014). By 2000, 33% of African American children resided in the suburbs (Ferguson, 2002).

Although early urban to suburban migrations were for the most part an AfA middle class phenomenon (Cashin, 2001; Pattillo, 2005; Wiese, 2004), the recent US economic downturn and low mortgage interest rates have made affordable suburban housing more available to AfA working class families (Foley, 2014). Moreover, changing economic conditions in suburban communities and government sponsored housing relocation programs have also made suburban residency an option for urban families at the lowest rungs of the economic ladder (de Souza Briggs, 1998; Johnson, 2012; Sugrue, 2011).

African American families’ urban-suburban migrations are fueled, in part, by the desire to take advantage of purportedly “good” suburban schools (French & Wilkinson,
2011; Wiese, 2004). Indeed, a legacy of Brown v. the Board of Education is the notion that the achievement levels of Black children will increase if they are given access to the same academic atmospheres in which White children thrive (Ferguson, 2002).

Admittedly, the racial, ethnic, and economic compositions of schools are associated with academic achievement. Generally speaking, as the proportion of African American students in attendance increases, the overall achievement level of the school decreases, with academically talented students suffering the most adverse effects from attending majority Black schools (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2001). A similar negative correlation has been identified for school economic status (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). In fact, there is evidence that the effects of economic status may be stronger than race for influencing school achievement levels (Ferguson, 2002; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

African Americans have been noted for their belief that education provides the most direct route out of poverty and to sustained upward mobility (Harris, 2006). The depth of commitment to securing their children a place on the upward track has been demonstrated in the willingness of many AfA families to become ethnic pioneers in predominantly White communities, even when their presence is negligible and unwanted. Wiese (2004) shared the example of the Wheeler family who moved to the Chicago suburb of Oak Park in 1964 to access better schools to secure a good education for their children. Using subterfuge to avoid discriminatory real estate practices, the Wheelers purchased a three bedroom home within walking distance to the neighborhood elementary school. The family was “welcomed” to the neighborhood with cold stares from neighbors, threatening notes from anonymous sources, and a cross burning on their front lawn. Nevertheless, the Wheelers stood their ground and endured tremendous
hardship to give their children the kind of education that “White executive families took for granted” (p.241).

Other African American families, choosing to remain in urban spaces, take different avenues to provide their children with a good suburban education. For instance, many urban families have enrolled their children in interdistrict desegregation programs and interdistrict choice programs. Desegregation programs, designed to address race and class based academic disparities, provide urban students with free transportation to schools in suburban districts. As of 2006, up to an estimated half a million students participated in these types of programs (Kahlenberg, 2006). Nonetheless, these programs have been controversial and families are faced with multiple barriers in gaining admission to them. For instance, the Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer Program (Urban-Suburban) in metropolitan Rochester, New York, has had a 50-year successful existence, and is Yet, as recently as late December 2014 citizens in the nearby suburb of Spencerport, believing poor urban Black children to be a threat to the stability of their school system, were adamantly opposed to adopting the Urban-Suburban program in their 85% White community (Andreatta, 2014).

Interdistrict choice offers voluntary programs allowing students, regardless of race and ethnicity, to enroll in schools outside of their residential school district. These types of programs are currently available in at least 40 states (Lavery & Carlson, 2012). Lavery and Carlson (2012) demonstrated that in the state of Colorado although these types of programs are more often utilized primarily by children from more affluent families, there are some children who reside in segregated urban school districts that also
utilize these types of programs. This is likely the situation for interdistrict transfer programs in other states.

**Statement of Problem**

National studies by the Education Trust and other groups show that minority students, many of whom attend poor, urban schools, get poorer-quality instruction than their white or suburban counterparts. They take fewer Advanced Placement and honors courses, have less qualified teachers, get fewer resources, and face harsher discipline when they violate school rules (Johnston & Viadero, 2000).

The 1954 Brown decision declaring racially segregated African American schools to be inferior, as well as psychologically damaging to AfA students, was originally intended to address the racial inequalities that had become embedded in US schools. Placing AfA students in the same learning environments as more affluent European American students has since been a highly endorsed intervention for decreasing racially-based academic disparities (Hanushek et al., 2001). Early on the seminal study by Coleman et al. (1966) included the recommendation that poor Black students would benefit from attending predominantly White middle class schools because they were better resourced and allowed exposure to social advantage. Nonetheless, two early comprehensive reviews (Bradley & Bradley, 1977; St. John, 1975) found only a minimal increase in reading scores and no change in math scores among poor Black students who transferred to predominantly White schools.

More recent studies investigating the academic effects of urban-suburban relocation among participants in Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) programs have found that for the most part poor urban African American students who transition to suburban schools exhibit few lasting academic differences when compared to their counterparts who remained in the city, and in some cases students who moved to the suburbs
performed at a lower rate than their urban counterparts (DeLuca & Dayton, 2009; Johnson, 2012). This effect was particularly stark among AfA male students (Kling, Liebkind, & Katz, 2007; Ludwig et al., 2013) as well as students who transitioned to suburban schools during adolescence (Ludwig et al., 2001).

On a more hopeful note, some urban students have had positive academic experiences in suburban schools. Defining success as remaining in suburban schools and graduating, Wells and Crain (1997) described characteristics of successful students who participated in a St. Louis urban to suburban school desegregation program. These students enjoyed their schools and were involved in the schools’ various curricular and extra-curricular activities. Of the twenty participants, half began attending suburban schools during their elementary years and the other half during middle school. Although some students reported being stereotyped and discriminated against by peers and teachers; overall, both the students and their parents felt that teachers in the suburban schools were more capable and engaging than teachers in urban schools. Successful students were also more likely to have come from two-parent families with higher education levels than students who were not successful in suburban schools. Thus, Wells and Crain acknowledged that the successful students probably would have had done well in any school. Nonetheless, family support and personal qualities such as persistence in the face of hardship enabled these students to access academic and social resources that were available in suburban schools, resources that were otherwise unavailable in their previous urban schools.

Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is, that despite the widespread belief that the simple act of removing disadvantaged Black students from segregated
urban schools and placing them in predominantly White suburban schools will propel them toward academic success, evidence is sparse concerning the efficacy of this type of intervention for sustained academic improvement over urban peers and for closing the achievement gap (Ferguson, 2002; Johnson, 2012; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Sadly, many urban African American families have been disappointed to discover that while suburban schools may be good in comparison to their previous urban schools, these schools might not after all be that good for their children (Johnson, 2012). Recognizing the tremendous challenges faced by so many urban students during their transition to more affluent suburban schools, Moran (2009) posed a very poignant question in her dissertation, “could suburban schools actually be sabotaging their newcomers?” (p. 8).

**Significance of the Study**

This study explores African American (AfA) adolescents’ urban to suburban school transition experiences, including the process of meaning-making involved with this transition. This is a topic that heretofore has received little attention in the transition literature. This is a noteworthy gap, considering the vast endorsement of racial and economic integration as a means to give AfA students an academic advantage (e.g., Coleman, 1966; Palardy, 2008; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005) and the conflicting evidence displayed among disadvantaged African American students who have actually made this type of transition (Johnson, 2012; Keels, 2013).

A number of qualitative studies have investigated the experiences of AfA students in majority European American (EuA) schools (Carter, 2005; Chapman, 2014; O’Connor, Mueller, Lewis, Rivas-Drake, & Rosenberg, 2011). However, these studies included students who had attended these schools for some time. Similar studies have observed
suburban AfA students’ academic performance in comparison to their EuA suburban counterparts, but participants in these studies were mostly from more affluent and “middle class” backgrounds (Ogbu, 2003). However, little is known about the experiences of poor and working class AfA young people who transfer from racially isolated urban schools to schools that are located in predominantly EuA schools in more affluent suburban communities.

Considering the potential challenges and possibilities associated with the urban to suburban transition, the way in which AfA students transition into their new suburban schools can have serious implications for their immediate and future psychosocial well-being as well as for their academic success (Benner, 2011; Benner & Wang, 2014). Benner (2011) made clear in his work with high school students that transitions are critical because they present the possibility for divergent courses in life. The importance of understanding how adolescents from poor and working class urban backgrounds make sense of their initial experiences in suburban schools is crucial because these initial transition experiences can influence the direction of their remaining academic careers (Benner, 2011; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008; Schneider, Swanson, & Riegle-Crumb, 1997). Accordingly, ease in transition may be associated with a successful life-course through accumulation of advantage associated with academic achievement and social connections. In contrast, students who do not transition well may be set on a far less successful life-course because of the cumulative and compounded effects of disadvantage associated with low academic achievement and social exclusion.

This study expands the body of knowledge related to the psychological processes involved with the urban-suburban school transition experience. Additionally, this study
investigated how these processes inform students’ adjustment strategies and their ability to develop competency within the new suburban school setting. Lastly, this study is expedient because of the rapidly shifting ethnic demographics taking place in this nation’s suburban communities.

**Intergroup contact.** These theories explain the underlying dynamics of intergroup relationships (Dovidio, Glick, & Rudman, 2005) such as those that develop when AfA students from racially isolated urban communities encounter EuAs in racially isolated suburban communities. The tenets of intergroup contact lay a theoretical foundation for understanding the outcomes that are possible for young people who are experiencing this type of transition. The role of schools is pivotal in the urban-suburban transition process, as they provide the primary setting for initial interracial and intercultural contacts.

In his classic 1954 work, *The Nature of Prejudice*, social psychologist Gordon Allport structured what was known about the processes related to intergroup relationships into three categories: cognitive, sociocultural, and motivational. From cognitive and sociocultural perspectives Allport (1954/1979) proposed that human beings were prone to separate into discrete social groups to fulfill the need to operate efficiently and with as little effort as possible in tackling the daily routines of life (Allport, 1954/1979). Within one’s social group everyone shares the same language and culturally embedded understandings of how the world works, thus eliminating the task of explaining and negotiating how daily activities are accomplished. The group to which one belongs is the in-group, and the groups to which “others” belong are out-groups. The tendency to form stereotypes about other groups is born out of the cognitive need to place information in
categories to facilitate ease in processing new information and to aid in understanding and interpreting life events (Allport, 1954/1979).

From a motivational perspective, when there is an imbalance of perceived power between one’s in-group and out-group accompanied by pervasive societal support for the stereotyping and stigmatization of the out-group, there is a potential for conflict when the two groups come in contact with each other (Pettigrew, 1998). Urban AfAs are a stigmatized group and perceived by the wider society to be at the bottom of the power hierarchy (Loury, 2002) particularly in EuA suburban contexts. Conversely, in suburban middle class contexts EuAs represent the idealized “norm” in US society and as such are perceived to be at the top of the power hierarchy. Thus, there is a looming potential for racial-ethnic conflict to negatively influence the urban-suburban school transition experience.

Nonetheless, intergroup conflict is not the inevitable outcome when urban and suburban students make first contact. Allport (1954/1979) proposed the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis delineating four optimal conditions to reduce the potential for conflict between groups:

1. Groups must have equal status in the contact situation.
2. Groups must share common goals.
3. There must be cooperation between the groups in attaining their common goals.
4. Support at the institutional or authority level must be present.

Pettigrew (1998) extended Allport’s work by identifying four underlying processes supporting intergroup harmony:
1. Learning about out-group members to aid in both disconfirming prior stereotype-based knowledge and replacing prior knowledge with more accurate information about out-group members.

2. Frequent and consistent contact complemented by inclination to adapt to out-group expectations results in modified behavior and attitudes.

3. Intercultural friendships increase positive emotions towards out-group members.

4. Reappraisal of in-group membership takes place upon spending more time with out-group members and less time with in-group members. This process leads to decreased bias towards the in-group. The effects of the application of Allport’s optimal intergroup contact conditions have been consistent in their ability to reduce conflict and promote intergroup harmony in a variety of settings (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

**Racial and ethnic identity development.** Development takes place alongside the urban-suburban transition experience among African American adolescents. In his well-known theory of psychosocial development Erik Erikson (1963) recognized identity development as the primary task of adolescence. During this period young people strive to achieve a coherent self-identity across a number of domains through the combined processes of identity exploration and subsequent identity commitment.

Identity development in the race-ethnic domain is a little different. Race and ethnicity are rarely malleable or negotiable through exploration because they are usually determined when one is born or imposed upon individuals by others (Phinney, 1990). The search for identity can be a more complex process for African American adolescents than
for their suburban mainstream counterparts because European American young people often take race and ethnicity for granted within their racially isolated enclaves (Ispa-Landa, 2013). However, entrance to White suburban environments can bring race and ethnicity to the forefront of how African American youth define and think about themselves (Kurt-Costes & Rowley, 2012). In suburban contexts where their group may be stigmatized and have low status, achieving a healthy race-ethnic identity is an area of concern in African American adolescent development (Kurt-Costes & Rowley, 2012).

The relationship between race-ethnic identity development and African American academic achievement has been approached from multiple perspectives. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) explained that gaps in academic achievement were related to African American race-ethnic identity conceptions. They advanced the idea that anticipating discrimination, African American students take an oppositional stance toward academic achievement. The opposition is based on the belief that academic endeavors are artifacts of European American culture and as such should be avoided to retain a positive race-ethnic identity. In contrast, Eccles, Wong, and Peck (2006) proposed that academic decline is less severe for students who maintain a strong race-ethnic identity, even when they experience discrimination on a daily basis.

**Acculturation.** Herskovits (2009) advises that “many specific problems in cultural dynamics can be best investigated advantageously through studies of acculturation” (p. 262). Acculturation theory offers a useful framework for observing the cultural transitions of any ethno-cultural group (Sam, 2006) including urban African American newcomers in White suburban spaces. This study draws from theories of
acculturation to frame the urban to suburban school transition experience of African American adolescents, paying close attention to their adaptive strategies.

The adjustment strategies young people employ when traversing cultural landscapes are influenced by an interaction between the young person’s personal attitudes toward the receiving culture and the attitudes exhibited toward the young person by those within the receiving culture (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). The process of sociocultural and psychological changes that follow intercultural contact is referred to as “acculturation” (Berry, 2003). Sociocultural acculturation addresses the ability to develop social competencies to operate in intercultural situations, and psychological acculturation refers to the maintenance of good mental health and a sense of well-being within the new cultural context (Ward, 1996). Cultural changes may be seen in the acculturating group’s customs, economics, and politics; while psychological changes address individual (within the group) attitudes, identities and social behaviors toward the receiving culture (Phinney, 2003).

**Bi-dimensional model of acculturation.** The bi-dimensional model of acculturation (Berry, 1980, 1990) presents two important factors relevant to newcomers’ adaptation to the receiving context: (a) the salience of traditional culture and their desire for cultural maintenance (traditional culture orientation), and at the same time (b) the amount of exposure to and participation in activities of the receiving context (receiving culture orientation). Newcomer youth, similar to newcomer adults, lean toward one of four acculturation profiles depending on the strength of their orientation towards the traditional and receiving culture (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006).
**Assimilation:** High orientation toward receiving culture, low orientation towards traditional culture.

**Separation:** Low orientation towards receiving culture, high orientation towards traditional culture.

**Integration:** High orientation towards both receiving and traditional culture.

**Marginalization:** Low orientation towards both the receiving and traditional cultures.

Berry et al. (2006) suggested that acculturation orientations may vary in how well they align with newcomer youths’ academic success and psychological well-being. For instance, their study found that young people with the integrative profile also displayed the highest level of sociocultural acculturation. The sociocultural measure included items related to school adjustment. Literature has remained consistent in the endorsement of integration as the optimal acculturation orientation and marginalization as the least successful orientation (Berry, 1997; Berry et al., 2006).

**Alternative approaches for understanding acculturation.** The bi-dimensional model of acculturation has been criticized for presenting adaptive strategies as primarily emanating from the newcomer, while giving less attention to the influence of context upon the availability of adaptive choices and processes (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Schwartz et al. (2010) proposed “a more nuanced approach—based on Berry’s (1980, 1990) model but adjusting for the many variations among migrants and their circumstances” (p. 240). This multidimensional approach suggests that adaptive orientations are a product of bi-directional interactions within the reception context, with
communities offering contexts of reception that impact the availability of acculturation orientations.

Upon arrival to their new communities newcomers are greeted by community members that have already formed attitudes and expectations related to the newcomers (Sam, 2006). These attitudes and expectations can vary depending on the race, ethnicity, and social class of the newcomer (Schwartz, et al. 2010). Schwartz and colleagues (2010) explained that a favorable context of reception may be reserved for newcomers from groups that are well liked or present little threat to the community. A favorable reception context can feature a welcoming attitude and the presence of agencies that support acculturation. Conversely, an unfavorable context of reception may include negative stereotypic beliefs and discriminatory behavior by members of the new community and limited access to the resources needed to function well in the new community. An unfavorable context of reception has been associated with acculturative stress leading to poor psychological outcomes (Berry, 1997).

**African American acculturation.** In describing African American acculturation Landrine and Klonoff (1996) advanced a bi-dimensional model similar to Berry’s. Rejecting race as a non-scientifically based category, the authors instead view African Americans as an ethnic group with a unique cultural orientation. As such, they proposed that like other ethnic groups “African Americans must be understood in terms of their culture, that differences between African Americans and other ethnic groups are cultural and that differences among African Americans similarly reflect varying degrees of immersion in the culture” (p. 35).
Landrine and Klonoff (1996) conceptualized acculturation as points on a continuum with adherence to traditional (home) culture at one extreme and adherence to the receiving culture at the other extreme. Unique to their line of research is the proposition that African American acculturation is not a linear process, but a one that can fluctuate and occupy different points at different times in either direction along the continuum. In application to this dissertation, a young person may exhibit high levels of acculturation during the early school transition period. However, upon experiencing a negative reception context over time may later resort to a more traditional level of acculturation. Finally, the authors give attention to African American enclaves as contexts influencing adaptation to mainstream culture outside of the enclave.

This phenomenological study acknowledges that there may not be a direct path linking suburban school attendance with academic success for urban African American students, because students may not be prepared or allowed to access academic resources available in suburban schools. However, interaction between these students’ conceptions of racial-ethnic identity and initial intergroup/intercultural experiences within the new school setting may be associated with these students’ patterns of adaptation. This study explores whether and how the process of adaptation can be linked to students’ ability to access the academic resources available in suburban schools and obtain higher academic achievement in the new school setting.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study proposes that academic trajectories can become either set or reset during students’ initial time in their new schools. This is a dire proposition during adolescence as schools take on greater importance in shaping future prospects (Benner,
2011). Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore and describe the lived transition experiences of urban African American adolescents who transferred to predominantly White schools in more affluent suburban communities.

Specifically, this study aimed to bring to light the how these young people thought about their lived transition experiences. In so doing, this study provided a deeper understanding of the issues - positive and negative – that these young people encounter during their transition into suburban schools.

**Research Question**

To this end the primary research question of this study was: What is the nature of the transition experience for a sample of African American adolescent students as they transferred from schools in Detroit to schools in nearby and more affluent White suburban communities? In answering this question the present study will reveal how these young think about their experiences and the mental structures involved in their adaptive processes.

**Research Design**

This study employed phenomenological research methodology (Moustakas, 1994), a preferred method to capture the meanings that urban African American students attach to their shared transition experience. Phenomenology is concerned with comprehending the phenomenon from the angle of those who are experiencing it. This perspective is unique among qualitative approaches because it: (a) involves an intentional effort to suspend existing mental frameworks in relation to the phenomenon under investigation, (b) engages intuition and imagination to understand the dynamic of the phenomenon, and (c) has unique procedures for data analysis (Moustakas, 1994).
This study utilized focus group and field note data collected from a subset of African American participants who were part of a larger multi-ethnic study. For this study I conducted all but one of seven focus group interviews, with 48 eighth-grade students attending six middle schools in two suburban Detroit school districts. Open-ended and in-depth interviews lasting approximately one-hour were guided by a protocol designed to elicit students’ perceptions of social identity, school atmosphere, academic motivation, and future aspirations.

Transcribed interviews were analyzed using phenomenological methods. A feature of phenomenology is its aim to explore and make explicit the core or “essence” of an experience by viewing the data as fresh and new (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). A more detailed description of phenomenological data analytic procedures is included in chapter three.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to data collected during focus group interviews. Thus, observations of behavior, other than those observed during the interview process, will not be included in the data set. As this study investigates an emergent topic from a phenomenological point of view, in-depth interviews are the optimal method for obtaining participants’ descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2007). As is often the case with qualitative research, results generated from this study may not have transferability beyond the specific population from which the sample was obtained.

1 Spencer Foundation Project: Creating Culturally Diverse Learning Environments, Revathy Kumar, PhD, PI.
Definitions of Key Terms

Acculturation: The cultural and psychological processes and outcomes resulting from intercultural contact (Berry, 1997).

African American: For the purposes of this study the terms “African American” and “Black” will both be used in reference to the ethnic group that shares African ancestry, US citizenship, and multigenerational national presence.

Culture: The concept of culture is not easily defined or captured because of its wide-range of applications and malleability within social contexts. In this study culture will reflect Wallace Shweder’s (2003) simple definition: “…community-specific ideas about what is good, beautiful, and efficient…that are socially inherited and customary…and embodied or enacted meanings; they must be constitutive of (and thereby revealed in) a way of life” (p.11).

Ethnic Group: Phinney (1996) describes ethnic groups as groups with members from non-dominant groups, sharing cultural characteristics. Race, although used interchangeably with ethnicity at times, is an essential characteristic of African American ethnicity. However, because the identity literature focuses on African Americans as both ethnic and racial groups, the term “race-ethnic” is used to in reference to group identity. Additionally, race-ethnic identity is used to describe the meanings that are attached to membership in one’s racial and/or ethnic group (Byrd & Chavous, 2009).

European American: For the purposes of this study the terms “European American” and “White” will both be used in reference to the dominant, non-Hispanic ethnic group that has ancestry based in Europe.
School Transition: The process of movement of students from one school setting to another (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013).

Suburban Enclave: This term is rather ambiguous and difficult, in part because suburbs are neither recognized, nor utilized by the US Census Bureau for describing geographic populations (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012). Five defining qualities will be considered in identifying suburban spaces: 1) location - periphery of urban center; 2) typically residential; 3) lower population concentration; 4) distinctive culture, or way of living; and 5) unique community identities, often represented in local governments (McManus & Ethington, 2007). To be classified as a White middle-class suburban enclave, borrowing from Landrine and Klonoff (1996), the community will also tend towards geographic and cultural isolation, feature a high amount of homogeneous interaction, and dominant culture is maintained.

Urban Enclave: This term is also rather ambiguous if using the definition provided by the Census Bureau because it is only loosely related to city boundaries. A further complication is in the wake of the mass urbanization of African Americans generated by the Great Migrations of the 20th Century, urban has become a euphemism for Black. Although an urban designation is linked to population and central cities, for the purposes of this study African American urban enclaves are isolated areas (both geographically and culturally) where the majority of interpersonal interaction is homogeneous and limited to friends and family (however construed) and traditional culture is retained and practiced (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996).

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2 An urban area will comprise a densely settled core of census tracts and/or census blocks that meet minimum population density requirements… To qualify as an urban area, the territory identified according to criteria must encompass at least 2,500 people, at least 1,500 of which reside outside institutional group quarters.
Summary

This chapter provided a synopsis of the phenomenological study of African American students’ transition from segregated urban schools, to predominantly European American public schools in adjacent suburbs. Beginning with a brief overview of African American suburban migrations, the problem of continued underachievement in spite of improved school contexts was discussed. Furthermore, the difficulties arising from cultural differences between segregated urban minority schools and White middle-class suburban schools were explored to suggest that underachievement may be connected to students’ adjustment to new school’s evident, but unspoken cultural context. The purpose of this study is presented from a phenomenological perspective, leading to the research question undergirding the study. The conceptual literature focuses on intergroup contact, adolescent development, and acculturation theories to frame these students’ transition and adaptation to the suburban school culture. A brief description of study limitations and terminology concludes this chapter.

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter one provides an introduction to the study. Chapter two presents an outline of the literature that is germane to this study. Chapter three presents and explains the research methodology used in this study. Because African American Detroiters’ suburban transitions can only be adequately understood within the city’s unique historical context, a brief history of African Americans’ urban and suburban presence in this metropolitan region is provided in Chapter Four. This chapter also presents the current context of the study and well as the researcher’s context related to the study. Chapter five includes results from analyses of focus groups conducted at the six schools. Chapter six concludes this dissertation with a composite
description of the urban to suburban school transition, study implications, limitations, and future directions.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Literature reviews frame the research problem and lay the groundwork for the investigation in phenomenological studies (Moustakas, 1994). The research problem for the present study is, despite the widespread belief that the simple act of removing poor Black students from segregated urban schools and placing them in predominantly White suburban schools will propel them toward academic success, evidence is sparse concerning the efficacy of this type of intervention for sustained academic improvement over urban peers and for closing the Black-White achievement gap (Ferguson, 2002; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). To frame this question, urban African American students’ underachievement in high achieving suburban schools is addressed in the Urban to Suburban School Transitions section of this chapter. The following two sections, Intergroup Contact Theory and Acculturation in the Urban to Suburban School Transition, lay a detailed groundwork for understanding the psychosocial and cultural adaptive processes that are possible during the urban to suburban school transition.

Urban African American adolescents’ transition to schools in predominantly White and more affluent suburbs has been an underexplored topic in the fields of education and psychology. Therefore, another goal of this chapter is to situate the present study within the scholarly research and literature to contribute to the body of knowledge related to this understudied but very significant topic.

Urban to Suburban School Transitions

In retrospect I realize I can’t begin to count the ways the decision my parents made to enroll me in a suburban school has impacted my life. While there I could only count the negative ways, however as I’ve gotten older I’ve been able to better reconcile the positive impacts it’s had on my life (Q. Anderson, 2013).
Research points to how community context has a major influence on young people’s educational experiences (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). African American students who attend schools in densely-populated, racially-isolated, and high-poverty urban enclaves are less likely to have as many positive academic outcomes as their more affluent European American suburban peers. The American Psychological Association’s 2005 Report of the Task Force on Urban Psychology found that compared to young people in suburban areas, students living in urban enclaves are more likely to come from economically disadvantaged families to attend high poverty schools, to drop out of school, to transfer schools, and to be exposed to multiple health and safety risks (e.g., behavior problems, absenteeism, classroom discipline, weapons possession, and student pregnancy). At the same time they are less likely to live in two-parent homes and twice as likely to receive special education services.

Research suggests that public schools are organized and structured differently by the economic status of students in attendance (Palardy, 2008; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005) with the implicit and antiquated objective of replicating family socioeconomic structure and status (Anyon, 1980, 1981). Consequently, urban families are often caught up in the proverbial “catch 22” situation. While educational achievement is the most widely endorsed means to escape the intergenerational effects of poverty (Duncan, Magnuson, Kahil, & Ziol-Guest, 2012), urban schools do not offer the full range of academic resources needed to place their students on the path toward upward mobility. Indeed, instead of supporting the upward boost for the most needy students, policies and
practices in failing urban schools may be more likely to plunge students into the downward spiral ending with incarceration (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005).

Racial and economic school desegregation programs have been looked to as a means to increase the academic prospects for African American students since the Brown decision of 1954 shed light on the inherent inequality of racially segregated schools in the United States. Inspired by that historic decision and in response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the *Equality of Educational Opportunity Study* was authorized by the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare the following decade. This study was commissioned to gauge the accessibility of equal educational opportunities for children from the ethnic and racial groups in the US. The resulting *Coleman Report* (Coleman et al., 1966) presented a scathing overview of the dismal state of education among poor and Black children. Coleman and colleagues’ (1966) report was controversial because it identified family features associated with economic status, rather than the race-ethnic make-up of schools, as the primary cause of Black underachievement. To decrease the disadvantage associated with poverty, the Coleman Report recommended placing poor urban Black students in more affluent predominantly-White and classrooms (Mahan & Mahan, 1971). This recommendation has been reiterated in one form or another during the nearly six decades since the Coleman Report was first issued.

For example, since Coleman et al. (1966) multiple desegregation programs have been implemented to give poor and working class Black children the same academic opportunities accorded to more affluent White children. As the literature on urban-suburban school transitions is sparse, the following subsections draw from studies related to urban African American students in grades K-12 who attend public schools in more
affluent White suburban communities through court-ordered, legislative, and voluntary school desegregation programs. Literature related to urban-suburban school busing programs and urban-suburban Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) type programs will be examined to understand the experiences of African American young people who make this type of school transition. As these types of programs are often federally funded, ongoing research and evaluation studies are required and readily available. These kinds of programs were also chosen for this review because they have been in existence long enough to produce longitudinal results.

**Urban-suburban school busing programs.** These inter-district desegregation programs address academic disparities by providing urban students with free transportation to schools in suburban districts (Palardy, 2013). Currently there are a number of these types of programs, with the largest and most well-known located in suburban areas near to Boston; Hartford, CT; Indianapolis; Milwaukee; Rochester, NY and St. Louis. Nonetheless, using racial criteria as a sole indicator for participation in these programs has contributed to suburban resistance against these types of programs (Andreatta, 2014; Palardy, 2013).

**Early successes.** Results and recommendations from the Coleman Report inspired two early studies of academic outcomes in the urban to suburban school transition. The first, Zdep (1971) evaluated a year-long experimental program that transported poor urban African American students to schools in nearby European American middle class suburbs. Specifically, the academic achievement of twenty-six 1st and 2nd grade students in the experimental program was compared with that of counterparts who remained in urban schools. At the completion of the school year the first grade students from the
experimental group displayed significantly higher gains in reading, math, and listening skills than their urban counterparts. However, there were no significant differences in achievement gains between the experimental second grade students and their counterparts who remained in the city. Zdep (1971) suggested that the differences between the results of the first and second grade experimental groups pointed to the need for very early participation in this type of intervention. Nonetheless, this early study had a number of limitations including sample size and the study’s duration. A longitudinal investigation may have yielded a more complete picture, but alas, Zdep (1971) reported that the study was not allowed to continue beyond the first year amid substantial opposition from suburban residents.

In the second study, Mahan and Mahan (1971) complained that deficit-based academic intervention programs (i.e., poor facilities, lack of cultural and language stimulation, personal and family problems) were not effective with urban minority students. In response the authors hypothesized that classroom contexts that include high academic achievement and/or White peer acceptance in suburban schools, were more likely to boost urban minority students’ academic achievement. Important for this present research study, the authors made a distinction between minority students who were already attending high achieving predominantly White schools and urban minority students who had transitioned into such schools. The experimental study utilized 196 minority (African American and Latino) students in grades 1, 3, and 5 from urban schools in Hartford, Connecticut. Ninety-one students were bussed to White suburban schools, and the remaining students were dispersed to schools in the city of Hartford. Students were followed for two years to gain an accurate measure of change. The study concluded
that minority students’ academic achievement was bolstered when they were placed in high achieving classrooms, but the effect was more pronounced among minority students attending suburban schools. In suburban schools, urban minority students who were well liked by their classroom peers displayed greater growth in verbal abilities than minority students who were not as well liked. Both of these studies provide striking evidence supporting the urban to suburban school transition among minority elementary school children. However, the strength of this intervention for adolescent minority students is not clearly evident.

Nonetheless, early studies endorsing school integration as a means to boost academic achievement were quite clear in stating the psychological downsides resulting from the intervention (e.g. Coleman, 1966). Studies conducted by Rosenberg and Simmons (1972) found that African American adolescents attending segregated schools had higher levels of self-esteem than their counterparts who attended schools with European American students. Self-esteem levels were negatively correlated with age, but positively correlated with racial homogeneity. Consequently, adolescent development and racial context were seen as contributors to African American students’ self-evaluations.

**Contrasting evidence for the efficacy of busing programs.** Recent studies have not provided strong evidence for the academic efficacy of urban-suburban busing programs for urban African American students. For example, Angrist and Lang (2004) described the academic outcomes amongst African American students who participated in one of the nation’s largest and longest running urban to suburban school desegregation efforts. The Boston area Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunities (Metco) program transports mostly African American students out of Boston schools to
predominantly European American schools in nearby suburbs. The authors advised that although Metco students were more likely to finish high school and attend college than students who remained in urban schools, overall, Metco students persistently performed at lower academic levels than suburban students. In the end the authors offered that there was really no way of knowing whether attending suburban schools had any impact upon the academic outcomes of urban African American students, because some outcomes were bound to emerge, regardless of racial context, when other factors are considered (e.g., family background). Thus, Angrist and Lang (2004) concluded that selection bias may have clouded results obtained from these types of studies, stating,

“Despite strong public interest in Metco, there is little evidence on the effect of Metco participation on the students commuting daily from Boston. This largely reflects the difficulty of finding an appropriate comparison group for Metco students” (pp. 1615-1616).

Metco has also received criticism because of its unidirectional focus of city to suburbs, which places the burden of busing on urban students (Goldstein, 2012).

Although extant studies related to urban to suburban transfer programs have provided general and conflicting information about the academic efficacy of this type of transition, little has been said about related contextual issues that influence the reported outcomes. Two exceptions are Ispa-Landa’s (2013) qualitative study of the “Diversify” urban-suburban desegregation program and Wells and Crain’s (1997) case study of St. Louis’s urban-suburban school desegregation plan.

Ispa-Landa (2013) explored the gendered experiences of urban African American Diversify students who were bussed to affluent European American suburban schools.
Comparing the daily school experiences of male and female Diversify students, Ispa-Landa exposed gender differences in levels of acceptance by White suburban students. Every Diversify student encountered acts of racism and discrimination in the suburban schools. The suburban students’ self-beliefs of superior intelligence and willingness to “work hard” were well known among Diversify students. Nonetheless, Diversify boys believed that they were popular in their suburban schools because of their “tough” urban characteristics. Indeed, Diversify boys dated White suburban girls and readily visited their suburban friends’ homes. However, Diversify boys’ acceptance by their White schoolmates was contingent upon their remaining in a narrowly defined and hyper-masculinized urban role. Ispa-Landa pointed out that despite the high achievement atmosphere in the suburban schools, academically talented Diversify boys were not awarded membership in high status groups based upon their academic prowess.

In contrast, Diversify girls felt isolated in the suburban schools. They reported being characterized as “ghetto” by suburban peers because of the way that they dressed and spoke. While urban dress and cultural characteristics seemed to enhance the reputations of male Diversify students, the same urban characteristics caused female Diversify students to become targets of derogatory stereotyping and social exclusion. Unlike male Diversify students, female Diversify students were not considered as dating prospects by White suburban or Black urban male students in school. Thus, Diversify girls, for the most part, were not integrated into the social atmosphere of the school. Ispa-Landa, however, did not discuss how students’ gendered experiences may have influenced their academic achievement.
Wells and Crain’s (1997) book presented data collected from over 300 interviews with students, parents, educators, lawyers, judges, and policy makers to present their research within its historic, political, geographic, and social contexts. One section explored the experiences and attitudes of African American families and their students who: (a) remained in urban schools, (b) attended suburban schools, but subsequently returned to urban schools, and (c) were successful in suburban schools. Interviews with families of students who remained in urban schools revealed that these families feeling powerless over the fate of their children, had not explored alternative school choices, and instead settled for the schooling option that had already been chosen for them. Urban students who were not successful in White suburban schools (i.e., those who either returned to urban schools or dropped out altogether), explained Wells and Crain, were not equipped to endure and navigate to the inevitable acts of discrimination and blatant inequality present in their suburban schools.

However, Wells and Crain (1997) also gave a compelling description of successful transfer students, that is, students who continued to attend until graduation from suburban schools. Of the twenty students interviewed, half began attending suburban schools in their elementary years, and the other half began during middle school. In spite of spending anywhere between two and three hours in round trip bus transport, they enjoyed their schools and were involved in the various curricular and extra-curricular activities offered to students. Although some had experienced stereotyping and discrimination from peers and teachers, students and parents both believed that suburban teachers were more capable and engaging than their previous urban teachers. Nevertheless, African American students also reported feeling socially
excluded at times. However, they reported that it was distance and not race-ethnicity that precluded them from participating in out-of-school parties and other social events with their suburban peers. Successful students were also more likely to have come from two-parent families with higher education levels than students who did not choose suburban schools. Thus, it is probable that sources of these students’ success were more tied to their possession of certain social and cultural capital rather than the influence of the suburban schools that they attended. It is likely that these students would have had some degree of success in any school, but the possession of valued social and cultural capital enabled these students to access the advantages available suburban schools that were otherwise unavailable in their previous urban schools. Research related to the normative school transitions experiences of successful economically-disadvantaged African American students (Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, & Smith, 2000) has yielded similar results. Newman and colleagues (2000) stressed the prominent role of families, and mothers in particular along with supportive teachers, and personal discipline as key components of successful urban to suburban school transitions.

**Government Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) programs.** Studies related to government sponsored housing urban to suburban relocation programs have also provided a sizable amount of data concerning the urban students’ experiences in suburban schools. Housing Choice Voucher programs provide opportunities for poor and ethnic minority families living in racially isolated urban neighborhoods to move into less segregated neighborhoods either within the city or in nearby suburban communities (Covington, Freeman, & Stoll, 2011). Some of the better known federally funded programs include the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program (Gautreaux), the Moving to
Opportunity for Fair Housing Demonstration Program (MTO), and the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program Two (Gautreaux II). All of these programs utilize government issued housing vouchers to relocate from Chicago housing projects in racially segregated neighborhoods to residences in less segregated neighborhoods throughout metropolitan Chicago (Holloway, 2014). The MTO program is offered in a several cities including Boston, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and New York (Sanbonmatsu, Kling, Duncan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). Similar programs are available in other cities such as Cincinnati and Minneapolis to name a couple (Johnson, 2012). As the ethnic group showing the largest percentage of suburban growth by 2008, there were 802,000 Black HCV recipients living in US suburban communities (Covington et al., 2011).

**The Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program.** Although the decision to make this type of geographic transition is born out of multiple considerations, at the top of the list are families’ desires to provide their children with safer, academically superior school environments (Keels, 2008). Such was the case with the original participants in the earliest of these programs, the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000). Sponsored by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Gautreaux was initiated in 1976 by court order to provide low-income families living in Chicago’s segregated public housing projects with housing vouchers to move into less segregated sections of the city or to nearby suburban communities. Families were randomly selected to participate in the program, with 80 percent of the participants relocating to the suburbs. Due to limited suburban housing availability, the other 20 percent found residences in less segregated neighborhoods of Chicago.
Gautreaux has consistently been referenced as the most successful of these types of programs in regards to movers’ academic achievement (Johnson, 2012). Overall, the Gautreaux program was evaluated for academic effects at years five (Rosenbaum, Kulieke, & Rubinowitz, 1988), twelve (Kaufman & Rosenbaum, 1992; Rosenbaum, 1991, 1995), and twenty (Keels, 2008). Urban relocation students had a 75 percent lower drop-out rate and were more likely to attend 4-year college when compared to their counterparts who relocated within Chicago city limits. In addition, students who transitioned to the suburbs displayed higher and more sustained academic achievement compared to the students who did not move. However, findings also indicated that students who relocated were disproportionately identified as having learning and behavioral disabilities when compared to students who relocated within the city. This may not be an altogether negative finding. Increased identification of disabilities may suggest that suburban schools are better equipped to detect and address disabilities than financially strapped urban schools.

There were challenging issues facing Gautreaux parents during their students’ early transition to suburban schools that were reported by Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum (2000). Local schools were uninformed about and unaware of the pending increased enrollment of economically disadvantaged urban African American students. Thus, it is likely that school personnel were not adequately prepared to address the unique academic needs of these students. Yet urban parents overwhelmingly approved (92%) of teachers’ treatment of their children. All the same, some students had problems adjusting to different educational standards and higher expectations in their new schools, having come from somewhat chaotic urban school environments. Parents also reported that the
suburban school curriculum was more advanced and demanding and that there were more homework assignments than in the urban schools their students previously attended. Therefore, students who had been academically superior in their urban schools had to adjust to being average at best and in some cases well below average in their new suburban schools. From a different perspective, parents were concerned with the possibility that teachers’ evaluations were rooted in racial biases or stereotypes.

**Housing relocation programs after Gautreaux.** Gautreaux’s success fueled the initiation of similar programs for families living in racially isolated urban housing developments. Nonetheless, subsequent programs inspired by Gautreaux failed to replicate its academic effects. Johnson’s (2012) evaluation summary incorporated twenty-seven evaluation studies of seven government housing relocation programs to explore why the promising academic gains displayed in the foundational Gautreaux program were not replicated in succeeding housing relocation programs. Two examples were chosen from the study to shed light on the urban to suburban transition phenomenon. In the first example, Johnson (2012) draws from Fischer’s (1991) unpublished descriptive report on the Cincinnati Special Mobility Program (SMP). The program was initiated in 1984 in response to a lawsuit filed by five African American citizens against the City of Cincinnati for deliberately maintaining segregated public housing. The SMP randomly selected seven hundred families to relocate from segregated public housing to nearby suburban communities and parts of Cincinnati with less than forty percent African American population. Unlike Gautreaux, only 23 percent of the participants opted for suburban relocation. Compared to city movers, suburban movers were less satisfied with their schools and a quarter of the suburban students declined in
academic achievement compared with only ten percent of the city movers. However, the source of academic decline in suburban schools is unclear. For instance, an initial decline would be expected if urban students encounter substantially increased academic rigor in the new school setting. Johnson (2012) concluded that because of the descriptive nature of Fischer’s report many questions about the academic efficacy of the SMP went unanswered.

The second example, Gautreaux II program was initiated by the Chicago Housing Authority in 2001 to address the continuing segregated conditions in the city’s public housing. Qualitative research (Boyd, Edin, Duncan, & Clampet-Lundquist, 2006; Keels, 2008; Zuberi, 2010) revealed that, while 95 percent of the participants relocated to suburban destinations, over 40 percent of the student participants’ parents reported that there were no improvements in quality or safety in the new suburban schools when compared with their former urban schools. Additionally, even after nearly three years of suburban residency parental evaluations of their students’ achievement showed little difference from the evaluations of parents who did not move. Contrasting with other studies, access to non-formal educational resources such as free breakfast programs was compared between the two groups. Urban students who relocated had significantly less access to such resources, possibly negatively impacting transitioning students’ academic achievement.

Johnson (2012) identified four factors contributing to the lower achievement outcomes among the children who participated in relocation programs subsequent to the original Gautreaux program. First, subsequent programs did not attend to the same detail in program design and implementation as the original Gautreaux. For instance, the
majority of Gautreaux students were placed in high achieving schools. This was not always the case for participants in the other studies. Second, students’ adjustment to the multiple differences between the old and new school were not supported, so they were not prepared to perform at similar levels to peers in the new school. Consequently, there were sometimes as much as a two-grade level difference reported in coursework. Additionally, the goals and policies of the housing relocation programs did not consider the variability between school districts. The drastic differences in urban and suburban schools and district policies were a factor that increased difficulty in students’ adjustment. Third, Johnson suggested that suburban schools were more apt to engage in student “sorting”, a system of stratification that disproportionately assigns African American students special education or recommends repeating a grade. Finally, Johnson pointed to methodological issues in neighborhood effects research, proposing that the precise measurement of neighborhood effects is uncertain and thus challenging prevailing claims to the relevancy of neighborhoods to academic achievement. Johnson (2012) also questioned whether neighborhoods play a role in creating selection bias, giving the following insight, “Low neighborhood rents… may attract families with children that are predisposed to a lower level of educational performance rather than cause them to underperform” (p. 167).

On a cautionary note, although an original intent of both desegregation and housing relocation programs was to provide an even playing field for all students, to date the literature’s focus has been limited to how the Black urban to White suburban school transition impacts measured academic achievement. Consequently, in light of recent educational reform measures emphasizing standardized test scores, many of these
programs have become quite controversial. Mickelson (2001) suggests that some of the controversy lies in distinguishing between the long term and short term effects of desegregation. The long term effects have been associated with more positive academic, employment, and social outcomes for African Americans when compared to peers who remained in segregated school environments. Conversely, short term academic, employment, and social outcomes are less positive. However, Mickelson’s assertion may suggest that successful outcomes are the result of a weeding process where minority students who experience early failures either drop out of White schools, or return to Black schools.

Nonetheless, how attending diverse schools is beneficial for students, regardless of race-ethnic backgrounds, has often been left out of the discussion. Research confirms that urban-suburban desegregation programs have little bearing on the academic outcomes of European American students (Mickelson, 2001). However, keeping in mind that middle class White suburbs also tend to be segregated spaces, these programs provide suburban students with opportunities to interact with the ethnically and economically diverse groups that represent complex US society, opportunities which would otherwise be unavailable.

Yet, the problem at hand is that urban African American young people are not consistently reaping the expected academic benefits of attending well-resourced suburban schools. To better understand this phenomenon, this review examines the literature related to normative school transitions, focusing specifically on the experiences of African American students.
African American Adolescent School Transitions

“Transitions are woven into the fabric of students’ school experiences.”
(Karabenick & Urdan, 2012)

In the United States school transitions are normal but highly anticipated events for adolescents. All the same, school transitions can be risky business for adolescents, especially when they are also African American. It is during the course of adolescence that young people begin to develop a sense of who they are as individuals and who they are becoming in relation to their widening circles of group affiliations. Thus, peer relationships take on greater salience and compete with family for time and influence while also offering a broadened array of identity possibilities. While race and ethnicity are often unthought-of and taken for granted by European American adolescents, race and ethnicity are at the forefront of African American adolescents’ identity negotiations (Kurt-Costes & Rowley, 2012). As schools are a primary context in which the adolescent experience unfolds (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Kurt-Costes & Rowley, 2012), adolescent development and school experiences, including school transitions, can be closely connected and profoundly intertwined.

Difficulties can arise when these expected adolescent changes take place alongside shifting school contexts (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987). Transitioning to new schools can be psychologically and academically traumatizing for young people of all ethnic backgrounds (Benner, 2011; Newman, Newman, Griffen, O’Connor, & Spas, 2007) and associated with declines in academic motivation (Anderman, Maehr, & Midgley, 1999) and achievement (Alspaugh, 1998; Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, & Trickett, 1991; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). The difficulties encountered in normative school transitions during adolescence (e.g., elementary to
middle school and middle school to high school) are commonly attributed to the number of structural, developmental, and social discontinuities that students must adjust to at each new school level (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Juvonen, 2007). School campuses and populations usually become larger at successively higher levels (Eccles et al., 1993), and at each level students are introduced to novel, larger, and more diverse social milieus. As they proceed to higher school levels, students must also adjust to academic changes. They have access to a wider range of course offerings and activities, both during school hours and during out-of-school time. Students report greater amounts of homework and increased difficulty in comprehending the expanding assortment of course offerings. Simultaneously, assessments become increasingly significant as students prepare for even higher levels of post-secondary schooling. Literature suggests that the number of perceived discontinuities between the different levels of schooling is positively correlated with the amount of stress students experience during school transitions (Simmons et al., 1987).

There are students, however, who demonstrate tremendous resiliency as they adjust to new school contexts (Weiss & Baker-Smith, 2010). Resilience implies that an individual has overcome challenges associated with adaptation (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). For instance, some students’ prospects improve upon entering new schools, as the transition experience gives them a chance to reinvent themselves both socially (Kinney, 1993) and academically (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). For these young people school transitions offer the opportunity to start over and explore new possibilities in a place where they do not have established reputations. However, these effects are not as robust for transitioning African American adolescent students (Langenkamp, 2009).
The desire to understand and address the sources of risk and to acknowledge the sources of resiliency related to school transitions has led to several very fruitful lines of research.

This section draws from literature related to normative school transitions to examine specific issues related to adolescents’ school transitions. In the United States, most adolescent students will experience at least one of these types of school transitions usually taking place at the conclusion of students’ elementary (grades 5 or 6), middle school (grades 8 or 9), and high school (grade 12) tenures. Normative school transitions have received the greatest amount of attention in school transition research (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Karabenick & Urdan, 2012), and the literature related to the middle school transition is particularly productive (Akos, Rose, & Orthner, 2014). However, the normative school transition experiences of African American students have not been as widely studied (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Kurt-Costes & Rowley, 2012). Nonetheless, Akos and colleagues (2014) concluded that, although findings from the limited extant research are mixed, race is clearly related to African American students’ overall school transition experiences.

**Race-ethnic identity.** Race and ethnicity are associated with the unique aspects of urban African American adolescents’ school transition experiences. Academic decline following school transitions is more severe for African American students than their European American peers (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; E. Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994; Simmons, Black, & Zhou, 1991) and are further exacerbated by poverty (Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998). Simmons and colleagues (1991) demonstrated that African American students liked school less after transitions and that African American males in particular were more likely to display school-related behavior.
problems. Langenkamp (2009) demonstrated that the social composition of schools impacted the direction of first year academic performance among high school students, with some students showing higher performance depending on school context. This was not the case, however, for African American students who continued a downward slide in first-year academic performance regardless of the school’s social composition.

In contrast, another study (Wampler, Munsch, & Adams, 2002) presented evidence that African American students may be more resilient than their European American counterparts during the initial elementary to middle school transition period (7th grade). Dubbed “steadies,” African American students maintained an even academic trajectory from elementary school throughout the 7th grade school year. At the same time European American students, dubbed “sliders”, demonstrated academic decline during the same period. Wampler and colleagues advised, however, that African American students’ average academic trajectories tended to launch from a lower academic level than European American students (82.9, 89.1 respectively) and remained at lower academic levels throughout the school transition period. Thus, even after a significant drop European American slider students’ achievement levels remained higher than the African American steady achievers.

Research suggests that African American adolescents face additional risks during school transitions (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Kurt-Costes & Rowley, 2012). From a structural standpoint, Holcomb-McCoy (2007) points to the dearth of positive role models and culturally competent schools during African American adolescents’ normative school transitions and how these factors can influence these students’ serious academic decline. Both Holcomb-McCoy (2007) and Kurt-Costes and Rowley (2012)
view ethnic identity development and responses to ethnic stereotyping and discrimination as major and distinctive contributors to African American students’ school transition experiences. The following two sub-sections explore how African American ethnic identity development and stigmatization, stereotyping, and discrimination can influence the school transition experiences of African American students.

**African American adolescents’ school transitions take place alongside the process of racial and ethnic identity development.** In his well-known theory of psychosocial development Erik Erikson (1963) proposed that the primary task of adolescence is to negotiate identity. This is the time when after experiencing an identity crisis young people embark upon an identity search. After experimentation with different roles and behavior options (Kettner, Buitelaar, & Bosma, 2004) an achieved identity emerges synthesizing the young person’s personal attributes and society’s expectations (Lerner, 2002). Erikson cautioned that failure to achieve a coherent identity by the end of adolescence will leave the young person in a state of identity confusion and subsequently would thwart attempts to accomplish future developmental tasks.

A student of Erikson, James Marcia (1980) extended and operationalized Erikson’s theory of adolescent development through empirical studies. Marcia posited that by late adolescence, depending on the amount of exploration and the level of commitment that has been made to an identity across a spectrum of domains (i.e., sexual orientation, vocation, ideology), that one of four identity-statuses will emerge. Identity-status is the approach the young person takes to negotiate identity issues. Individuals who have low levels of exploration and high levels of commitment are at a foreclosed status. Individuals with high levels of exploration and low levels of commitment are at
the moratorium status. Individuals who have neither attempted to explore or commit are at the diffused status. And finally, the individual who has both explored and committed is at the achieved status. Achieved status is considered to be the healthiest identity status, and moratorium is considered to be the least healthy identity status.

While Marcia focused on individual identity processes, it should be noted that identity formation also takes place within social contexts. Social identity is based in the need to maintain a positive identity through membership in social groups that have value and affective meaning for individual members (H. Tajfel, 1982). In the United States, ethnicity and race are core groups from which identity is derived. Akin to personal identity development, ethnic identity development is a major goal of adolescence, achieved through the combined processes of exploration and commitment (Phinney, 1990). However, ethnic identity development differs from adolescent identity development because ethnic identity is rarely chosen and largely determined before birth. Thus, the search for identity can be a more complex process for African American adolescents. While seldom thought about and taken for granted by European Americans, ethnicity and race is at the forefront of how many African American youth define and think about themselves.

Although the process of race-ethnic identity formation is similar to the overall process of identity development with the end-goal of an integrated and achieved racial identity (Phinney, 1990), early adolescents may lean towards the moratorium status (Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006). That is, they are more likely actively exploring what it means to be a member of their racial and ethnic group but have not committed to a specific and unified meaning. Entrance to more diverse schools can introduce fertile environments for
identity explorations as adolescents encounter wider social circles. For instance; Yip, Seaton, and Sellers (2010) found that, among African American adolescents attending racially diverse and predominantly European American schools, intergroup friendships predicted changes in racial identity status. The same study however, found that African American students who did not form friendships outside of their racial group were more likely remain stable in their identity status and less likely to embark upon identity explorations. Thus, although school transitions may be avenues for expanded identity explorations, school experiences can also lead to discrepant paths of identity development among African American students.

The acknowledgement of negative racial-ethnic stereotypes and perceptions of discrimination as African American youth transition to higher levels of schooling may impact the process of adolescent identity development. Early research suggested that perceptions of discrimination may activate the search for racial-ethnic identity (Cross, 1991) and bring it to the forefront of overall identity construction (H. Tajfel, 1979). In contrast, more recent studies (Seaton, Yip, Morgan-Lopez, & Sellers, 2012) suggest that the effects of discrimination may be more nuanced. Seaton and colleagues (2012) examined the effects of discrimination upon movement between racial identity statuses over a three year period of time among 566 Black adolescents attending racially diverse and predominantly White schools in a Midwestern school district. Students who reported a high amount of discrimination on an ongoing basis were more likely to remain at the same identity status (mostly diffused or foreclosed) over the three year period. However, students who did manage to change identity statuses over time and eventually reached an achieved racial identity were more likely to have received substantial parental racial
socialization. These results imply that it is the consistent offering of positive and uplifting messages related to race and ethnicity at home that promotes progression in African American racial-ethnic identity development in spite of opposing and limiting discriminatory messages received in school contexts.

Complementary research has found that among African American young people a high regard for ethnic group membership is associated with academic success, psychological well-being, and in many cases acts as a buffer against the effects of out-group denigration (Eccles et al., 2006). Eccles, Wong, and Peck (2006) investigated the effects of anticipated discrimination, day to day discrimination, and ethnic identity upon the academic functioning of African American middle school students. Students who reported daily experiences of discrimination at school also demonstrated lower levels of academic achievement. Nevertheless, the negative academic effects associated with daily discriminatory encounters were not as strong among students with a strong sense of ethnic identity. Additionally, students who had been socialized to anticipate and identify discrimination were more likely to respond with increased academic motivation. It is not clear, however, whether strong ethnic identity is a result of achieved identity status, born out of explorations of the meanings of ethnicity as suggested by Roberts and colleagues (1999), or more associated with the foreclosed status in which parental values have been assumed without exploration. Clarity in this matter is particularly important when considering the transition experiences of early adolescents and how different identity statuses can enhance academic achievement or place students at academic risk.

**Racial and ethnic stereotyping, stigmatization, and discrimination.** These experiences can contribute to variance in the nature of African American adolescents’
school transitions. Membership in a stereotyped and stigmatized social group heads the list of unique risk factors faced by African American students. Members of stigmatized groups are recognized and categorized by common marks or attributes (Major & O'Brien, 2005) such as skin color, phenotypes, and occupation. Stigma brands a group and its individual members as “spoiled” and therefore has an overall discrediting influence upon the way the member is viewed by others (Goffman, 1963). African Americans have been a highly stigmatized group throughout their long history in North America (Loury, 2002). Rooted in issues of power and prior conditions of enslavement, the concept of stigma may extend beyond cognitive explanations and include issues of empowerment and access (Loury, 2002; Major & O'Brien, 2005). Major and O’Brien (2005) proposed that “although both powerful and powerless groups may stereotype and negatively evaluate the other, because the former control access to resources, their beliefs are likely to prevail” (p. 395). Thus, in socially stratified societies, stigmatization of less powerful groups can aid in maintaining powerful and dominant groups’ positions at the top of social hierarchies. Accordingly, negative stereotypes related to the stigmatized group, regardless of their veracity, may still be broadly assumed within a given society.

Specific to this paper, stereotypes are defined as belief systems that affect how information about members of specific social categories is processed (Jost & Hamilton, 2005). The propensity to form evaluative group stereotypes can be explained through theories of social identity and intergroup relations. As previously stated, social identity stems from the need to preserve a positive identity by membership in social groups that have value and affective meaning for individual members (H. Tajfel, 1982). Theories of intergroup relations refer to occurrences taking place when people think of themselves as
members of a group as opposed to individuals (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). In this area of research the group to which one belongs is considered the in-group, and other groups (of which the individual does not share membership) are considered out-groups. The affective and cognitive tendencies observed in in-group and out-group categorization provide a base for stereotype formation. To maintain positive group distinction, groups compare themselves to one another, causing in-group members to display favorable internal orientation and bias while at the same time displaying various degrees of biases against out-groups as well as individual out-group members. Dovidio and Gaertner (2005) noted that social categorization includes the in-group tendency to demonstrate internal favor in attitudes, evaluations, attributions, and the division and sharing of resources. Concurrently, out-groups tend to be categorized and evaluated along monolithic terms with their individual (within group) differences underestimated and differences between groups being overstated, and in some instances, distorted.

Stereotype formation stems from the human need to place information in categories to facilitate ease in cognitive processing and to aid in understanding and interpreting events (Allport, 1954/1979). In his classic work, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gorden Allport (1954/1979) described characteristics of the categorization process relevant to forming group stereotypes on an individual level. First, large clusters or categories of information are formed to assist in daily functioning. Second, clustered events as well as explanations for events are assimilated into one category. Third, cognitive categories enable rapid identification of related objects. Fourth, everything in a given category is thought about and felt about in the same way. Yet these cognitive categories are not neither always rational nor are they static over time.
While group stereotypes, both positive and negative, can be quite explicit and openly acknowledged (i.e., Asians are smart, White men can’t jump), stereotypes can also be formed unconsciously as a result of prior and even forgotten experiences (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). These “implicit stereotypes” can become entrenched and automatically activated as they are cognitively confirmed through contact with members of a stigmatized group (Chen & Bargh, 1997; Loury, 2002). Specific stereotypical information about a given group can lie dormant only to become activated by exposure to certain contexts (Eagly & Dickman, 2005).

Stereotypes related to academic motivation and ability are more likely to be activated in educational contexts. In these situations, implicit stereotypes can influence the judgments and actions of the perceiver in ways that are unbeknown to them (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014). For example, Kumar, Karabenick, and Burgoon (2014) investigated explicit and implicit racial and ethnic attitudes among White middle school teachers in two ethnically diverse Midwestern school districts to understand how teacher attitudes are related to their instructional practices. The explicit measures were used to determine teachers’ stereotype beliefs and implicit measures were used to determine teachers’ ethnic preferences. The schools ranged from majority Arab or Chaldean and minority European American to majority European American and minority Arab or Chaldean. African American students attended all schools but averaged around seven percent of the combined school population. Results suggested that overall teachers neither had strong explicit stereotypic preferences towards White students nor against minority students. However, regardless of school ethnic composition, teachers’ implicit preferences were significantly directed towards White students over all minority students.
Most telling is that among all ethnic groups, African Americans were ranked at the bottom for teachers’ implicit preferences.

The explicit and implicit attitudes expressed by the teachers implied a solid relationship between teachers’ attitudes and beliefs, and their preferred instructional practices. Teachers who did express explicit stereotypes about poor and minority students were significantly more likely to engage in classroom practices endorsing social comparison and ability grouping. Teachers who expressed least bias towards the minority students were more likely to use classroom practices that emphasized “learning, effort, understanding, individual progress, and enjoyment of learning” (p. 7). Teachers who expressed greater preferences towards White students, however, were more likely to encourage classroom practices featuring social comparison and competition. In this study, there was not a clear path between teachers’ instructional practices and their attitudes, but the two were mediated by teachers’ convictions of personal responsibility for promoting respect, resolving interethnic conflicts, and culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms.

Complementary research in Europe (Van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010) found that while Dutch teachers’ self-reports displayed no prejudiced attitudes towards ethnic minority students, teachers’ implicit attitudes of prejudice were negatively associated with student achievement. This effect was mediated by teacher expectations. In both of these studies teachers neither acknowledged race-ethnic prejudice and partiality nor endorsed related stereotypes. However, at a subconscious level they did display in-group preference which was associated with how they interacted with their students and their choice of instructional practices.
African American males may be particularly vulnerable when they are the object of negative biases. Explicit and implicit biases against Black male adolescents have been linked to judgments of culpability and harshness of penalty upon perceptions of their having committed legal offences. Goff and colleagues (2014) found that White university students and police routinely overestimated adolescent Black males’ age by over four years. However, their age estimates of adolescent White males were generally accurate. The authors argued that the tendency to overestimate the ages of these Black youth robbed them of the protections generally accorded to childhood such as presumptions of responsibility and innocence. More disturbing, however, was the finding that police were more likely to react aggressively and violently when age overestimates were coupled with implicit attitudes of African American males being less than human (i.e., African American males associated with apes). This line of research may have grave implications for African American adolescents’ school transitions because the tendency towards age overestimation is likely to increase as these students enter more diverse and higher levels of schooling. In addition, this study may help explain the overwhelming racial differences in the selection of who is administered discipline, and the nature of the administration of discipline in school contexts.

While the effects of stereotypes and stigma may operate unconsciously in the minds of teachers, students are often acutely aware of differential treatment by both teachers and peers. As students confront greater social diversity and more rigorous courses, race-ethnicity can become more a salient factor African American students’ academic experience. Consequently, the school transition experience may intensify students’ perceptions of being stigmatized, stereotyped, or discriminated against. These
perceptions, whether explicit or implicit on the part of teachers and school personnel, can be harmful to students’ academic achievement (Kumar et al., 2014; Van den Bergh et al., 2010) and psychological well-being (Eccles et al., 2006; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Wong and colleagues (2003) found several academic and psychological areas affected by students’ perceptions of being discriminated against in school, including academic motivation and achievement, academic and social behavior, group-esteem, mental distress, and friendship selection.

Students from stigmatized groups can also be more sensitive to teacher expectations especially in the domain of academic competence (Jussim & Harber, 2005) and has been associated with academic achievement levels (Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996). Keeping in mind that young people structure their school experiences through their subjective perceptions of the many factors comprising the school context (Eccles & Roeser, 2011), African American students’ perceptions of their teachers’ ability expectations can have a particularly profound effect upon their transition into the new school context that influences their achievement trajectories.

Moreover, even high achieving African American students can be negatively affected by the very perception of being stereotyped. These students may be susceptible to stereotype threat (Steele, 1997) in spite of their strong ethnic identity. Stereotype threat is both a motivational and cognitive process (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008) that occurs when members of a stigmatized group’s task performance is compromised because the individual is concerned with confirming negative in-group stereotypes (Steele, 1997).
Research suggests that the mechanism triggered in lowered task performance is
cognitive load (Schmader & Johns, 2003), a condition in which the limited working
memory is overwhelmed with the amount of information presented for processing.
Specific to stereotype threat, the already limited working memory capacity is further
reduced by the individual’s preoccupation with not fulfilling a negative group stereotype.
As a result, less working memory space is available for task completion. In their review,
Schmader, Johns and Forbes (2008) developed a model displaying three distinct
processes by which stereotype threat depletes working memory and leads to cognitive
load: (a) heightened physiological stress, (b) heightened consciousness of self-
performance, and (c) effort involved in suppressing negative thoughts associated with
performance ability. These observations led Schmader and colleagues (2008) to caution
about the far-reaching consequences of these processes:

…for those who contend with negative stereotypes about their abilities, the
chronic experience of stress, heightened vigilance, self-doubt, and emotional
suppression not only can impair performance directly but also can lead them to
avoid situations where these aversive phenomena reside… (p. 352).

Keeping this in mind, ethnic identity and stereotype threat can have an interactive effect
such that in conditions of low threat ethnic identity has a positive effect on achievement,
but in high threat conditions ethnic identity may have a negative effect (Davis, Aronson,
& Salinas, 2006).

An example of how stereotype threat influences school performance can stem
from the well-known stereotype of African Americans being intellectually inferior to
European Americans. In their now classic paper, Steele and Aronson (1995) found that
African American university students performed more poorly on portions of the GRE when racial prompts were given before taking the exam when compared to students who did not receive the racial prompts. Similar results have been found among another stigmatized group that is stereotyped as less intelligent than the mainstream. Low income students in Europe (Croizet & Claire, 1998) and in the US (Good, Aaronson, & Inzlicht, 2003; B. Spencer & Castano, 2007) scored lower on standardized tests when given prompts related to family economic status prior to taking the test. These results were not seen among students who were not reminded of family economic status immediately before taking the exams. Good and colleagues (2003) demonstrated that the effects of stereotype threat can exist without a proximal comparison group and are thus not entirely dependent upon the economic composition of schools. This suggests that stereotype threat may influence African Americans students in the same way without regard to the racial composition of the school they attend.

Responses to perceptions of discrimination can vary. Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) ethnography of high school students, for instance, found that Black students took an oppositional stance to cope with perceived discrimination. These students viewed achievement efforts as artifacts of European American culture that were to be avoided to retain a positive African American ethnic identity. In contrast, Eccles et al. (2006) found in their work with middle-school adolescents in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., that it was the day-to-day experiences of discrimination that had the most profound association with academic decline. However, academic decline was less severe for students who maintained a strong ethnic identity. Eccles and colleagues offered that the age and school level differences may account for some of the differences between their
findings and those of Fordham and Ogbu (1986). In addition, social class may be related to variation in student responses to perceptions of discrimination (Eccles et al., 2006) as well as parental mediation approaches with schools and teachers (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

The unique aspects and challenges related to African American adolescents’ school transitions (ethnic-racial identity development and perceptions of being stigmatized, stereotyped and discriminated against) may be exacerbated by attending predominantly European American schools. In this current work, I propose that, especially for adolescents, it is the initial experiences in the new schools that set aim academic trajectories. School is a primary location in which adolescence unfolds along with its goal to develop a coherent identity. Much of this development takes place within or alongside social groups, with race and ethnicity being very important group designations in the United States. As previously discussed, among African Americans race-ethnic identity is associated with academic achievement in certain contexts.

For most urban African American students and suburban European American students, schools are the setting where their first interracial contact takes place. However, first contacts between members of diverse groups are tricky business because they are usually influenced by ill-informed prejudgments about members of the other group. The following section reviews the works of Gordon Allport, Thomas F. Pettigrew, and others related to intergroup contact theory to shed light on social processes that occur when members of different groups meet and how these processes can be modified in ways that also enhance learning environments.
**Intergroup Contact Theory**

*History will surely record the year 1943 as the year in which American social science was awakened to the challenge of ethnic conflict and prejudice (Allport, 1962).*

Deeply moved by the violent race riots of 1943, the renowned social psychologist, Gordon Allport, embarked upon the monumental task of understanding the nature of intergroup conflict and the steps to be taken to minimize intergroup conflict. Allport’s seminal work, *The Nature of Prejudice*, was first published in 1954, the same year as the historic Brown Supreme Court ruling against school segregation. Although not originally formulated to address prejudice specifically at the school level, Allport’s (1954/1979) work has been widely associated with efforts to desegregate schools (Cushner, 2004). Nonetheless, Allport’s work is remarkably prescient (Dovidio et al., 2005) and provides a framework for understanding the dynamics and structure of intergroup relations in initial contact situations such as when urban African American youth make first contact with suburban European American youth.

**Social cognitive processes influencing intergroup relationships.** Allport (1954/1979) supported the idea that the formation of discrete social groups is natural, noting that all humans tend to separate into groups based on perceived similarities to make life easier. After all, the sharing of culture precludes the need to acquire new languages, tastes, or ways of thinking. However, Allport warned, “Once this separation exists…the ground is laid for all sorts of psychological elaboration” (p. 19). People who remain in separate groups have little firsthand knowledge about other groups, so they tend to exaggerate differences and generalize knowledge of individuals to the whole group. Perceptions of differences and overgeneralizations are the basis for stereotyping and prejudgments directed at out-groups.
As discussed earlier, the tendency to stereotype and form prejudgments is a function of the cognitive need to categorize information. Categories are, “an accessible cluster of associated ideas which as a whole has the property of guiding daily adjustments” (Allport, 1954/1979, p. 171). Allport posited that categories are constructed by people to help them understand and interpret their world. Categories are more likely to be constructed if contributing events are similar or if events are presented in chorus. Humans prefer to assimilate as much information as possible into an existing category rather than develop new categories for new information. Thus, in the case of first contact with a novel out-group, behavioral expectations for that group are already generalized within a preexisting cognitive category.

Allport proposed that ethnic prejudice is formed when a group of people are categorized by “noisy attributes” (pp. 171-172), that is, outliers or qualities that are not aligned with the defining attributes of a particular group. For instance, defining attributes of African Americans include a shared history grounded in slavery, segregation, subordination, and exclusion, as well as resiliency in the face of hardship. However, these defining attributes may go unnoticed or become buried under “noisy” attributes such as hyper-sexuality, athletic ability, and income-status. Once out-group categories are formed, bipolar values of good or bad are then ascribed to the group.

A complementary but somewhat broader explanation of adolescents’ cognitive, social, and developmental processes influencing the acquisition of prejudice was presented in Tajfel (1969). Adding a socialization component to Allport’s theory, Tajfel (1969) proposed that young people also assimilate social values and norms into their cognitive repertoires for both in-group and out-groups. From a developmental standpoint,
Tajfel suggested that the adolescent search for a coherent identity involves the need to build cognitive frameworks to comprehend change, such as greater school diversity. This component is affirmed by Allport’s (1954/1979) proposition that cognitive categories aid in understanding and interpreting life events.

It is not intergroup differences alone that engender intergroup conflict. Yzerbyt and Corneille (2005) describe how perceivers select and interpret information to support their stereotypes. When given evidence of a stereotype about a group, people are more likely to select evidence to confirm rather than disconfirm their hypothesis. Additionally, the authors pointed out that, although categories are formed for ease in cognition, perceivers are willing to spend considerable cognitive resources to defend their categories.

The intergroup contact hypothesis. Allport (1954/1979) stressed that frequent contact between groups alone was not sufficient to reduce intergroup conflicts. In fact, frequent casual intergroup contact increases hostilities between groups. Using available military, employment, and public housing research concerning the relationship between integration and levels of prejudice (Dovidio et al., 2005), Allport summarized conditions under which intergroup contact would more likely reduce conflict between groups:

Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups (p. 281).

In this paragraph known as the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis, Allport proposed that the application of four optimal contact conditions would result in reduced attitudes of prejudice and perceptions of social distance between diverse groups. First, the groups
must have equal status in the contact situation. Second, the groups must share common
goals. Third, there must be cooperation between the groups in attaining their common
goals. Finally, there should be support at the institutional or authority level of the contact
situation.

Allport’s research is extended in Pettigrew (1998) which investigates the specific
processes involved in reducing prejudice in contact situations. Four change strategies
were found to support meaningful intergroup relations. First, learning about out-group
members can aid in the cognitive processes of both disconfirming prior stereotype-based
knowledge and replacing prior knowledge with more accurate information about out-
group members. Second, frequent and consistent contact accompanied by willingness to
conform to the expectations of accommodating out-group members can lead to a
modification in behavior which then facilitates a change in attitudes. Third, contact can
result in increased and positive affect for out-group members through the formation of
cross cultural/ethnic friendships. Finally, in-group reappraisal takes place by spending
more time with out-group members and less time with in-group members, leading to
decreased bias towards the in-group.

**Intergroup relationships in school contexts.** Over the years application of the
intergroup contact has yielded mixed results related to reducing intergroup conflict and is
thus not without critics. Past reviews of intergroup contact studies found the effects of
contact to be conflicting, marginal, or in some cases contributing to increased intergroup
contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Hence, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) undertook a
meta-analysis of 713 independent samples from 515 relevant studies to address the
theories criticisms. Claiming past reviews lacked rigor in sample selection and inclusion
rules, studies chosen for this meta-analysis had to be either experimental or correlational among other inclusion criteria. Results confirmed that the typical effect of intergroup contact was to lower conflict between groups. The effect was particularly high in experimental studies indicating causal relationship between intergroup contact and reduced prejudice. In some cases prejudice was reduced without the application of Allport’s four contact conditions. However, there was a higher mean effect for the 19 percent of the samples specifically including all four conditions, thus confirming that application of the four contact conditions reduces intergroup conflict. Of particular interest to this study, institutional support was the condition found to be most significant.

Nonetheless, there have been questions concerning the relevancy of intergroup contact for improving intergroup relations in school contexts. Reviewing literature related to school desegregation Schofield and Eurich-Fulcer (2001) advised that, while in some cases desegregation does improve intergroup relations, it is not always the case. Additionally, as discussed earlier, desegregation programs have not produced the expected level of academic improvement. However, the most surprising challenge to the effectiveness of intergroup contact in school contexts did not originate in academia but in a Newsweek magazine article (Bronson & Merryman, 2009). The authors noted that 553 noted scholars had signed an amicus brief to the Supreme Court in support of the positive effects of school desegregation during the Meredith vs. Jefferson County Board of Education trial. Deciding to investigate the benefits of school desegregation themselves, the reporters turned to Pettigrew and Tropp’s (2006) meta-analysis. Bronson and Merryman found that, of the 515 studies analyzed, over 300 were related to adults only. In addition, they noted that only 20 of the studies included in the meta-analysis looked
specifically at race relations among children or adolescents. By the time they had whittled their way down to only recently published studies, the reporters claimed of one-third of twelve applicable studies showed that intergroup conflict worsened after school desegregation. These findings led them to state that little research exists as evidence to the effectiveness of intergroup contact in reducing intergroup conflict in elementary and secondary schools.

The challenges brought forth by Bronson and Merrman (2009) point to the need for meta-analytic studies specific to elementary and secondary school contexts. Unfortunately, few such studies exist, and current studies are particularly scarce (Schofield, 2001). Furthermore, in their desire for rigor, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) included only experimental and correlational studies in their meta-analysis. However, it should be noted that these experimental studies utilized a minimal group paradigm. Thus, in these studies group differences did not carry the personal significance observed naturally in real life groups. The descriptive and qualitative studies that were excluded may have shed more light on the usefulness of intergroup contact in school settings and provided developmentally appropriate descriptions of processes leading to both intergroup conflict and intergroup harmony.

It is worthy of note that, in spite of the lack of empirical grounding, Bronson and Merryman (2009) did not cast doubt on the capability of Allport’s four contact conditions to reduce intergroup conflict. Instead they claimed that the contact conditions have not been implemented in schools to the degree that their effectiveness can be measured. This gap in research may be due to the perceived difficulty associated with implementation of the contact conditions in school contexts. In the following section, a closer look at each
of the conditions proposed by Allport (1954/1979) is provided along with research related to the condition’s application in school contexts.

Implementing intergroup contact conditions in school contexts. One explanation for achievement gaps among urban African American students attending suburban schools focuses on the degree to which these students are supported as they adjust to these new settings (Keels, 2013). While affluent neighborhoods and schools may offer features consistent with academic achievement, they generally do not offer bridges to help African American students facilitate these features in the same way as it does for European American students (e.g., Allen, 1992). Even though the tools for achievement are readily available, students moving from urban to suburban environments need help identifying and accessing them. The four optimal contact conditions proposed in the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954/1979) can be viewed as a bridges providing African American students’ access to academic and social features in suburban schools supporting academic success.

Equal status between groups. Equal status is the expectation and perception of equal standing by all groups within a situation (Pettigrew, 1998). Equal status also implies equal access to the rewards of education (Cushner, 2004). Insuring equal status in school situations may be challenging because students of the same age and in the same grade can vary by cognitive ability, social skill, creativity and talent, and maturity. Students also differ by family income levels and ethnic or cultural values. All of these variables influence whether one is viewed as equal by peers and teachers and how individuals evaluate their own status of equality in the school or classroom context.
Common goals between groups and cooperation between both groups to attain common goals. Allport (1954/1979) emphasized that to be effective in reducing intergroup conflict, intergroup contact needed to exceed casual acquaintance. Genuine cooperative intergroup experiences decrease the tendency to reenact competitions that have historically favored dominant groups and led to ethnic stereotyping (Schofield, 2001). Cooperative interaction works best when paired with common goals (Dovidio, et al., 2003). This is reflective of Allport’s insistence on cooperative activities being authentic to produce meaningful results. Allport warned that tasks such as modifying seating arrangements to encourage intergroup interaction were superficial and not adequate to reduce intergroup conflict.

The value of intergroup cooperation in pursuing common goals transcends the satisfaction from a job well done. Within this process intergroup biases are reduced as young people gain personal knowledge of one another, become comfortable with one another, and develop greater cultural sensitivity towards each other (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). When combined with the other contact conditions, it is expected that young people will develop empathy towards members of the other group.

Support at the institutional or authority level of the contact situation. Authority support sets the standards for intergroup interaction (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Authority support can be best observed in school policy and procedure statements along with the way in which policy and procedures are enacted (Cushner, 2004). Allport (1954/1979) approached support of authority on a grand scale. In one chapter of his book, Ought There be a Law, Allport referenced national legislation and court rulings for their association with reduction of prejudice at a societal level.
In summary, human beings are prone to separate into groups taking measures to protect their in-group and distance themselves from out-groups. The separation is bound to be profound if negative stereotypic beliefs are held toward an out-group. This is important knowledge in relationship to urban African American students’ transitions to predominantly European American suburban schools. The tenets of intergroup contact theory lay out the optimal conditions for positive intergroup relations to flourish in these situations.

**Culture and Acculturation in the Urban to Suburban School Transition**

Urban African American students face a world of differences upon entering suburban schools and as they begin to interact with the middle class White students who have always attended these schools. These two sets of students, urban African American and suburban European American, have for the most part spent their lives in relative isolation (from the other) and have consequently developed entirely different sets of norms and behaviors in regards to life and to schooling in particular. These are the cultural differences that are expected between groups that have had little meaningful contact with one another. This final review section turns to theories of acculturation to understand the different ways in which urban African American students adjust and adapt to the cultural differences encountered in their new schools.

This section discusses the role of culture and acculturation in the urban to suburban transition. Little notice has been given to the cultural nature of African American students’ urban to suburban transition experiences. Theories of culture and acculturation typically bring to mind the experiences of those who have migrated from other countries; however, these theories can provide a valuable lens for to observe
transition experiences of other ethno-cultural groups as well (Sam, 2006). Although people of African descent were among the first non-natives to settle in what is now the United States, their cultural development is believed to have taken different paths than those of dominant groups given their history rooted in slavery, segregation, and structural racism (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996).

**Cultural considerations in the urban to suburban transition.** Among those who study culture, its definition is a matter of debate (Shweder, 2003). Culture has been defined in a number of ways (Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010); however, Shweder (2003) summarized the most commonly held notions of culture as:

Community-specific ideas about what is true, good, beautiful, and efficient. To be cultural, those ideas about truth, goodness, beauty, and efficiency must be socially inherited and customary. To be cultural, those socially inherited and customary ideas must be embodied or enacted meanings; the must be constitutive of (and thereby revealed in) a way of life (p. 11).

Shweder’ definition reveals several important elements of culture that are germane to this dissertation study.

**Culture is community specific.** This study focuses on two types of geographic and cultural communities, African American in or from urban enclaves and middle-class European American in suburban enclaves. Landrine and Klonoff (1996) describe African American urban enclaves as geographically and culturally isolated spaces where there is a high amount of homogeneous interaction, friendships and kinship relations, and where traditional African American culture is more likely to be maintained. In comparison, suburban communities are commonly identified by key features such as location on the
periphery of an urban center, mostly residential, lower population concentration, distinctive culture or way of living, and unique community identities often represented in local governments (McManus & Ethington, 2007). Like the enclaves described by Landrine and Klonoff (1996), White middle-class suburbs also tend to be geographically and culturally isolated spaces where there is a high amount of homogeneous interaction and cultural maintenance.

In the United States both types of communities developed simultaneously and synergistically. Excerpts from Kruse and Sugrue (2006) detail how benefits afforded World War II veterans spawned a burgeoning White middle-class but at the same time spurred a second mass migration of southern Blacks to northern urban centers. As suburban homes became available and affordable, the expanding White middle-class often abandoned the cities and then sanctioned legislative and social measures to insure that African Americans would not follow. Nonetheless, with the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, middle class and working class Black families also began to flee large cities to resettle mostly in nearby White and Black suburban communities, leaving many urban centers void of a tax base and other various types of capital needed to support the growing needs of its inhabitants. Thus, as the Black urban enclaves became increasingly economically disadvantaged, advantages in White suburban enclaves increased.

The wide rift in the economic resources of families from these two types of communities suggests that there are also social class issues feeding into community specific cultural variance (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2011). Social class membership is tied to levels of status, access, and power in a given society. Significant for this study, Lott
(2012) noted that social class “mediates and influences what a person is likely to learn, believe, anticipate, and seek after” (p. 650).

Consequently, poor and working class urban African American enclaves and middle class suburban European American enclaves, although sometimes separated only by arbitrary boundaries, can seem to be worlds apart culturally because both communities have distinct cultural underpinnings that may result in discrepant systems of norms, values, and beliefs, and related attitudes and behaviors.

**Culture is developed within cultural communities.** The customary and socially inherited characteristics of culture imply a developmental facet of cultural acquisition. Rogoff (1994) advised that, “Learning and development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community” (p. 209). To this end, culture is “caught” rather than “taught” very early on through interaction first with family and then with the wider community including school.

Landrine and Klonoff (1996) listed several characteristics of traditional African American culture: (a) traditional family structures and practices, such as informal adoptions and access to extended family; (b) preference for all things African American, including periodicals, music, games, dance, etc.; (c) preparation and consumption of traditional foods; (d) mistrust of cultural outsiders; (e) traditional leanings toward health practices and beliefs, religious practices and beliefs, and childhood socialization; and (f) superstitions.

Missing from Landrine & Klonoff (1996) description of African American cultural characteristics are “noisy attributes” (Allport, 1954/1979) often imposed upon them, attributes such as poverty, crime, and intelligence that are often confounded with
race and ethnicity. There is no denying that the poverty, crime, and underachievement within some areas of urban Black enclaves affect daily life outcomes. However, there is evidence that ethnic enclaves can also contribute to resiliency in the face of challenges encountered both within and without the enclave (Kumar, Seay, & Karabenick, 2015; Kumar, Seay, & Warnke, 2012). Lacy’s (2004) qualitative study of middle-class Black families living in affluent suburbs demonstrated that the utility of African American enclaves extend beyond its immediate borders:

Among native-born blacks, black spaces and places provide a place to reconnect with other blacks after spending the bulk of the day in the white world, isolate middle-class blacks from ongoing discrimination, and constitute an important site for the construction of black racial identities (pp. 925-926).

Although Lacy (2004) suggested that maintaining connections with the enclave can support strong African American ethnic identity for Blacks who have left, continued residence within the ethnic enclave predicts the highest degree of cultural maintenance (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996).

While income level is associated with social class, income alone does not determine social class. Anyon (1981) noted that social class also includes access to and ownership of physical and valued cultural capital, social structures of power at work and within society, and the nature of activities related to work. Krause and colleagues (2012) argue that the amount of power and wealth consolidated within a social class context influences the development of cognitive processes related to identity, interpersonal relationships, and how the world is viewed. For example, Lott (2012) points to under-employment and employment uncertainties, food scarcity and nutritional inadequacy, and
educational inadequacies as forces shaping everyday life among lower-class families. Literature suggests that the lower class’s lack of both status and economic resources are related to the development of a worldview based on interdependence with others (Kraus et al., 2011; Kraus et al., 2012). From an interdependent worldview it is normative to see one’s actions as interdependent with and amenable to those of others (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012). Hence, Kraus and colleagues (2011, 2012) identified sensitivity to others, empathy, and prosocial behavior as more common to individuals from less advantaged backgrounds.

Even so, an interdependent worldview may be associated with risk in contexts where the more dominant individualistic worldview is the norm (Stephens et al., 2012). The motives and behaviors of interdependent actors can be easily misunderstood by those from an individualistic worldview. Giving a compelling example from their earlier research (Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009) with Hurricane Katrina survivors, the authors found that those who left New Orleans as Hurricane Katrina approached were more likely to be White and middle class. They tended to have an individualistic worldview that held a high value for personal control exhibited in the ability to make choices. Accordingly, when the evacuation was implemented they took control of their situation and made choices concerning when, how, and where to flee. Their ability to make these choices was undergirded by their access to wealth and information.

However, the middle class evacuees also interpreted the actions of the poor and working class African Americans who did not evacuate through an individualistic lens. The ability to choose was taken for granted, thus the “laziness” and “incompetence” of
those who stayed in the face of certain danger was beyond their comprehension. In contrast, those who stayed explained their actions through an interdependent analysis. An analysis where race and economics set boundaries upon the ability to express agency (Sugrue, 2005). Those who remained explained that had no control over their situation because they lacked the resources needed to evacuate. Without the needed resources there was no choice, they had to stay (Stephens et al., 2009). In the wake of Katrina, they were left to rely upon others who were in the same position and the hope that intervening forces outside of themselves would come into play.

Wiese (2004) succinctly described the idealized suburbs as “a cultural landscape, a set of ideas including an idealization of family life, leisure, feminine domesticity, and union with nature that are deeply rooted in Anglo-American culture” (p 4). Although “suburbia” has been idealized as a White middle-class utopian retreat, in reality suburban communities vary greatly by ethnicity and economic conditions. For instance, suburbs can consist of economically disadvantaged and segregated Black populations (Patillo, 2005), solid White working class populations, and intentionally racially mixed populations (Ogbu, 2003). Nonetheless, the present study does focus on predominantly White middle-class suburban enclaves.

Granted, middle class is contextual and rather difficult to define. For example, while visiting Kenya I questioned a young national about her social class membership. The young woman replied, “I am middle class, I don’t sleep on the street.” Thus, the informant’s definition of social class was informed by notions of residential stability. In the United States middle class status is associated with having attained a four-year college degree (Stephens et al., 2012), home and automobile ownership, employment at
mid-level managerial and professional levels (Lareau & Horvat, 1999), adequate health insurance and retirement savings, and the ability to take a yearly family vacation.

Middle class membership, nonetheless, goes deeper than what one possesses or does. Indeed, Stephens, et al. (2012) suggest that, in contrast to the interdependent world perspective prominent among the lower classes, the middle class is more likely to take on an individualistic worldview. The authors explain that from the individualistic worldview one’s actions are independent of other people and social surroundings; because actions are a result of free will, they are controllable and dependent upon personal motivation. For example, the middle class are more likely to choose employment in fields for which they have proclivity, whereas for the working class employment is hardly by choice but a matter of survival (Lott, 2012). Given the economic and racial isolation of White middle-class suburban enclaves, it is expected that middle values and norms, grounded in an individualistic worldview, will be concentrated and constantly reinforced.

**Cultural beliefs are enacted in cultural behavior.** Although culture is socially constructed, it is cognitively maintained and expressed through a system of commonly held ideas, ideas that then are transformed into similar and often taken-for-granted within-group routines and behavior. For instance, children from middle class families were found to be involved in more than twice as many out-of-school time activities than children from working class families and three times as many than children from poor families (Horvat et al., 2003). This comparison not only reflects middle class access to wealth and value for self-improvement but also points to an avenue used by middle class families to develop diverse and multiple social networks. However, the utility of social
networks can vary by social class. Horvat, et al. (2003) suggested that, while the lower classes form social networks for basic survival, middle/professional classes form social networks to access opportunity and wealth.

Cultural differences between families living in working class/poor and middle class communities can also be seen in their contrasting parenting techniques. Annette Lareau’s (2002) ethnography revealed differences in these two group’s daily organization of life, language use, social connections, and school interventions. Most striking was the suggestion that middle-class parenting techniques produced an “emerging sense of entitlement on the part of the child” while poor and working class parenting techniques resulted in an “emerging sense of constraint on the part of the child” (p. 753).

The cultural nature of schools.

“I’ll respect you, when you respect me.” (Working class Black student to White teacher)

I’ll let my mother handle this; I don’t want to make trouble. I am going to have to deal with her for three more years. (Middle class Black student about rude school secretary)

Culture shapes the way that individuals think about themselves, as well as how they see themselves situated across various social contexts (Markus & Kitayama, 2010) including schools. Schools have been referred to as cultural institutions (Eccles & Roeser, 2011) and as such mirror the values, norms, beliefs, and customs of the surrounding community. Urban and suburban schools may be organized and structured differently reflecting variance in cultural features related to the surrounding community’s social class (Palardy, 2008; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Thus, underlying individualistic assumptions of hard work, meritocracy, and free choice may be the unspoken but well understood cultural foundation in middle-class and affluent suburban schools (MacLeod, 1987). In these schools students are likely to exhibit attitudes related to their affluence,
privilege and sense of entitlement. Contrariwise, lower-class urban school culture is more likely based in and sustained by interdependent notions of honor, respect, and avoidance of conflict. These students are likely to exhibit attitudes related to their subordinate lower class station such as compliance, resignation, and among some students, an attitude of opposition (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Furthermore, schools not only reflect community norms, values, and beliefs but may also be complicit in advancing them by offering instructional practices and curriculum designed to prepare children to replicate their parents’ social and occupational status (Anyon, 1980, 1981; Brantlinger, 2003). Anyon’s (1980, 1981) seminal qualitative studies focus on the relationship between social class and schooling highlighted that instructional strategies used by teachers differed by social class. Making a distinction between middle class and affluent schools, Anyon (1981) put forth that the end-goal of middle class schools is to prepare students to obtain correct answers. In these schools students are given a degree of autonomy and choice in formulating answers to their questions, but they are not given many opportunities for creativity in exacting answers. All learning is textbook-based so that students are conditioned to recognize written rules and regulations as favored sources of knowledge. In contrast, affluent schools emphasize creativity in learning with the end-goal of developing independent learners. In these classrooms there are limited rules to follow, and textbooks are seen as but one of many sources of knowledge. Indeed, students are encouraged to question and, in some cases, revise textbook knowledge.

Anyon (1981) proposes that the implicit educational end-goals of schools in lower class communities is to teach students to be practical and to follow explicit directions.
These goals are reflected in teachers’ authoritarian instructional techniques and use of curriculum featuring rote learning and repetitious worksheets. In these schools teachers hold low expectations for their students and are satisfied that their students have minimal content knowledge.

For students who transfer from poor and working class Black urban schools to more affluent White suburban schools, the rules change. For instance, in a recent study (Chapman, Tatiana, Hartlep, Vang, & Lipsey, 2014), curriculum was identified as a “double-edge sword” for African American students attending suburban White schools because of its ability to both support and hinder Black achievement. This can be seen in how well-resourced suburban schools commonly offer a plethora of advanced placement classes with low African American student enrollment. This suggests that even in schools with curriculum that can potentially boost African American students’ achievement; there are barriers in accessing the curricular benefits. While some barriers may be structural, others are more subtle. Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, and Guskin (1996) demonstrate that European American middle class mothers, although claiming to be quite liberal, support stratified and segregated schooling for their own children. These mothers carefully consolidate capital leading to advantage within their class structure while deliberately excluding “lower” classes.

Schools also offer a stage where community endorsed behavior can be enacted. Ispa-Landa (2013) noted the ways that community values differentially impacted students’ thinking and behaviors. White suburban students and their teachers were “intensely achievement focused” (p. 224) and placed great value on grades, test scores, hard work, and professional accomplishment. Many of these students had the goal of
acceptance into selective Ivy League colleges. The suburban students lived in neighborhoods where some homes cost more than a million dollars. Their parents were highly educated and held professional positions commanding hefty incomes. The suburban neighborhoods were overwhelmingly White and Asian (97%). Community characteristics provided a common base for the students’ attitudes, values, and expectations toward schooling. These students were invested in the mainstream ideology that their hard work and effort alone caused them to excel in school. The White suburban students felt entitled to their well-resourced schools because of their parents’ hard work. However, they failed to acknowledge the tremendous amount of privilege they had inherited by being born into White middle class families and the structural and psychological barriers faced the students who participated in the Diversify Program. For the White suburban students, ethnicity and social class were taken for granted.

In contrast, urban students in Ispa-Landa’s (2013) study were products of urban African American enclaves. Not wealthy by any means, these young people came from both poor and working class families. While some students came from traditional homes in safer neighborhoods, others came from overcrowded high-poverty neighborhoods. Yet in terms of types of residences, incomes, and parental educational levels, there was a stark difference between the urban and suburban students. Landrine and Klonoff (1996) acknowledged the major role that urban ethnic enclaves play in reinforcing traditional African American culture. Thus, Ispa-Landa’s (2013) urban students enacted valued cultural behavior such as displaying great deference towards both parents and (urban to suburban) program administrators. They also placed a great deal of value on the idea of showing and receiving “respect” among peers, authenticity in relationships, and the
appearance of “toughness.” The meanings for these cultural qualities were well understood and rewarded in the enclave. However, in suburban schools the same cultural qualities were often misunderstood, and interpreted through lenses that were tinted with prejudice and stereotypes among their suburban peers.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) proposed that differences in cultural “orientations” were at the heart of the Black/White achievement gap in their suggestion that African American students maintained an oppositional cultural norm in regards to schooling. The authors offered that behaviors associated with academic achievement such as speaking in Standard English, completing homework assignments, and engaging in classroom activities were seen as culturally inauthentic and therefore rejected as “acting White.” While this thesis may have application for a select group of African American students (Wong et al., 2003), its explanatory value for the overall achievement gap has been largely rejected (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalni, 2001). Spencer and colleagues (2001) argued that Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) approach privileged White middle class culture while pathologizing Black urban culture. Instead, Spencer et al. (2001) proposed that, in spite of the challenges associated with living in African American urban enclaves, these environs have also given rise to cultural features that are protective for many young people and contribute to resiliency in the face of challenges. Contrary to Fordham and Ogbu’s oppositional theory, Spencer and colleagues found that high achieving African American students actually had strong ethnic identities and tended to display few values associated with being “White.”

Nonetheless, there are questions as to whether factors leading to resilience in African American ethnic enclaves have the same effect in suburban contexts. Although
research has shown a positive and consistent relationship between strong race-ethnic identity and academic achievement, there is evidence that the academic benefit of strong race-ethnic identity may vary by community context. Byrd and Chavous (2009) found that, in poor urban neighborhoods for African American male high school students, strong race-ethnic identities were linked to higher GPAs. However, in more affluent suburban neighborhoods for the same group, race-ethnic pride was associated with lower GPA. Based in social disorganization theory, the authors posited that in the more affluent suburban neighborhoods African American race-ethnic identity and its attached meanings had different applications and relevancy for academic success.

**Acculturation and the urban to suburban school transition.**

“The two percent of our graduates who do not attend college are enrolled in military academies.” Counselor in a professional class high school

“Most of these kids won’t go to college, and that’s alright because college isn’t for everyone.” Teacher in a working class elementary school

Already considered at academic risk even during normative school transitions, African American students are more likely to have difficulty adjusting to new schools and experience academic decline (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1996; Simmons et al., 1991). These difficulties may be exacerbated when students must also cross ethnic-racial, social class, and tightly drawn residential boundaries in their pursuit of a good education, because this transition also involves negotiating between the values and norms of vastly different cultural communities (Kumar, 2006; Kumar et al., 2012; A. M. Padilla & Perez, 2003). Given the striking contrasts between urban and suburban community norms, values, and expectations upon attending suburban schools, it is likely that urban African American students will find that there are cultural differences between the way that they and suburban students think about what constitutes schooling, why
schooling is necessary, exactly who has the right to administer learning, and the ways in which schooling should be approached.

Stephens, Markus, and Phillips (2014) were quite succinct in their observation that “participation in different social class contexts also gives rise to culture-specific selves and patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting” (p. 611). Accordingly, when considering the social class differences influencing school culture, suburban schools may serve as sites of enculturation for the dominant suburban school population (Stephens et al., 2014) but as sites of acculturation for newer urban African American students. This study draws from theories of acculturation to identify African American students’ adaptive strategies and to explore whether and how different adaptive approaches can influence academic, social, and psychological outcomes within the new suburban school contexts.

Acculturation is the process of cultural and psychological changes that follow intercultural contact (Berry, 1997). Cultural changes can take place in the acculturating group’s customs, economics, and politics, while psychological changes include individual attitudes, identities and social behaviors toward the receiving culture (Phinney, 2003). While the process of acculturation is believed to be similar across cultural groups, the outcomes of acculturation can vary depending on the difficulty of the experience (Berry, 1997). Nonetheless, in general acculturation is a stressful experience for young people (Berry et al., 2006). Very limited research in the field of psychology has attended to the acculturation experiences of African Americans (Landrine & Klonoff, 1994, 1996). Landrine and Klonoff (1994) argue that psychology, unlike other disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, typically classify African Americans as a racial group
instead of an ethnic or cultural group. Since race is generally recognized as a biological construct loosely determined by physical appearance and phenotype (Helms, 1994), the distinct and shared cultural features of African Americans as an ethnic group have gone largely unnoticed. It is this tendency to misclassify African Americans, contend Landrine and Klonoff (1994), that has caused this ethnic group to be overlooked in the psychological literature on acculturation.

The benefit of recognizing African Americans as an ethnic group, argue Landrine and Klonoff (1996), is that group differences can be understood in models of acculturation rather than models of deficit. Deficit models contend that values and behaviors of minority groups are inappropriate or wrong but privilege the values and behaviors that are held by the dominant group. Conversely, viewing the transition experiences of urban African American students through an acculturation lens merely assesses the degree to which these young people retain their traditional culture or embrace cultural features of the dominant White suburban culture. In exploring cultural transitions, acculturation models recognize that culturally determined norms and values are rarely correct or incorrect but rather explain why certain norm/value-based behaviors may be associated with divergent outcomes across cultural contexts.

*The bi-dimensional theory of acculturation.* In the bi-dimensional model of acculturation (Berry, 1980, 1990) two important factors are relevant to the acculturation experience, the salience held for the traditional society (TS) and desire for cultural maintenance and at the same time, and the amount of exposure to and participation in activities of the receiving society (RS). Newcomers lean toward one of four acculturation profiles depending on the strength of their orientation towards the traditional and
receiving societies (Berry et al., 2006). The assimilation profile features high orientation toward RS and low orientation towards TS. The separatist profile features low orientation towards RS and high orientation towards TS. The integrationist profile feature high orientation towards both the TS and RS, while the marginalization profile features low orientation towards both the RS and TS.

Figure 1. Acculturation from a bi-dimensional approach considers the strength of newcomers’ orientation toward the receiving society (RS) and the traditional society (TS).

To understand how young people acculturate to new cultural contexts, Berry and colleagues (2006) drew data from an international study of young people in thirteen immigrant-receiving countries. Altogether 7,997 adolescents (5,366 immigrants and 2,631 nationals) ages 13 – 18 completed a structured questionnaire assessing acculturation attitudes, cultural identity, language proficiency and language use, ethnic and national peer contacts, family relationship values, perceived discrimination,
psychological adaption, and sociocultural adaptation. Findings indicated that young people, like adults, displayed attitudes and behaviors along the four acculturation profiles (Assimilationist, Separatist, Marginalized, Integrationist) contingent upon the intensity of their orientation towards the traditional and/or receiving cultures. Each profile had ramifications for the young person’s psychological health and ability to interact successfully in the new cultural setting.

Youth holding the Assimilationist profile were more oriented towards the receiving culture. They spoke the language of the receiving culture, and the majority of their friends came from the receiving culture. Family relationships were not of prime importance, and these young people had lower perceptions of discrimination. Nevertheless, youth assuming this profile did not score very high for psychological or sociocultural adaptation. This profile was the least displayed among youth and was associated with longer residence (< 6 years) in the host culture and residing in areas with higher proportion of people who were not from their ethnic group.

Conversely, youth displaying the Separatist profile were more oriented towards their traditional culture. Their language and friendships were rooted firmly in their heritage culture. They tended to report close family relationships but were also more likely to have higher perceptions of discrimination. This group scored highest (of all groups) in psychological adjustment to the new culture but considerably lower in social adjustment. This profile was more common among immigrant youth residing in ethnic enclaves.

Young people displaying the Marginalized profile reported little preference for any of the other three profiles. Although they were more likely to speak in their
traditional language, they were not inclined towards friends from their heritage culture or from their receiving culture. They were also more likely to report higher perceptions of discrimination. This group scored lowest of all for both psychological and social adaptation. Berry et al. (2006) referred to this group as diffuse, in reference to the term used by Marcia (1980) describing adolescents who lacked commitment to a direction and purpose in life. In short, young people who display this profile do not know where they “fit-in” and as such may be at greater risk for personal and social problems. In adult studies this strategy has been associated with the greatest amount of acculturative stress (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987).

Finally, youth holding to the Integrationist profile displayed a shared preference for traditional and receiving culture. They tended to be proficient in heritage and host language, had friends from traditional and receiving cultures, but scored at median for family relationships. They had lower perceptions of discrimination and scored highest of all for social adaptation. Literature has remained consistent in the endorsement of the integration approach as the optimal acculturation orientation and marginalization as the least successful approach (Berry, 1997; Berry et al., 2006).

Berry and colleagues (2006) advanced that acculturation profiles may vary in how well they align with newcomer youths’ academic success and psychological well-being. This may be particularly applicable in the urban to suburban school transition. In their research with urban students attending suburban schools, Wells and Crain (2009) suggested that students adapted along similar profiles. Urban youth who took an oppositional stance in suburban schools were referred to as “separatists” (p. 16), while the group identified as “beat down” resembled youth with the marginalized profile. These
young people maintained attitude of resignation to their lowly position of powerlessness in suburban schools (p 17). A third group was labeled “White is right” for their strict assimilationist attitudes (p 17). Wells and Crain called those students and parents who attempted to maintain a bicultural attitude in the face of the challenges “the heroes” of their book. For these students, responses to the challenges associated with acculturation differed by the degree to which they identified with other Black urban students and participated in traditional cultural activities and the degree of comfort they felt within the new school culture and interacting with the cultural life of the dominant groups within the school.

Phinney and colleagues (2001) advised that the beauty of the bi-dimensional model of acculturation is its ability to accommodate multiculturalism which sets it apart from earlier assimilation models. Nonetheless, the bi-dimensional model of acculturation is not without its critics. Researchers have argued that the model is weak in suggesting that the full load of adaptation emanates from the newcomer without giving attention to uncontrollable contextual features in the receiving culture (Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010).

Schwartz and colleagues (2010) proposed a more nuanced approach—based on Berry’s (1980, 1990) model but adjusting for migrants’ many differences and circumstances. This multidimensional perspective suggests that acculturation has several components and entails bi-directional interactions within the new setting. Therefore, acculturation can have behavioral, value, and identity-based components, each adding to the total adaptive experience. The behavioral component includes language use and other cultural activities. Yet, Schwartz, and colleagues (2010) point out that, although
commonly used to assess levels of acculturation, behavior alone does not provide for a complete analysis of how or how well one has acculturated to his new context. Cultural values, such as the ways that cultural groups think about themselves and the world around them, are also expected to change during the process of acculturation. For instance, newcomers may arrive with a high regard for interdependence and honor in their repertoire of values, but as they maintain contact with a highly individualistic mainstream culture their orientation may change. The identity-based component, advised Schwartz, et al. (2010), goes beyond ethnic identity to encompass an identity associated with subjective notions of place as well. While the authors examined the meanings newcomers attach to national identity, it is possible that their research has applicability for understanding the meanings attached to place on a much smaller scale.

Schwartz et al. (2010) also advanced that communities offer contexts of reception that influence which adaptive strategies are available to newcomers. The authors define context of reception as the bearing that the receiving society has upon acculturation strategies available to the newcomers. Research suggests that long-standing community members have attitudes and expectations of newcomers, even before their arrival (Berry, 2006). These attitudes and expectations can vary depending on the race, ethnicity, and social class of the newcomer (Schwartz, et al. 2010) as well as conditions within the heritage context. A favorable context of reception may be reserved for newcomers from groups that are well liked or present little threat to the community. A favorable context can feature a welcoming attitude and the presence of agencies that support cultural adaptation. Conversely, an unfavorable context of reception may include negative stereotypic beliefs and discriminatory behavior by members of the new community and
limited access to the resources needed to function well in the new community. An unfavorable context of reception has been associated with acculturative stress leading to poor psychological outcomes (Berry, 1997).

Schwartz and colleagues’ (2010) advised that the issues addressed in this research may not apply to the acculturation experiences of involuntary migrant groups such as African Americans. However, their level of analysis was national. As African American urban enclaves and European American suburban enclaves are both well demarcated, it is expected that place will have a strong impact on acculturation strategies available for young people who embark upon urban to suburban school transition.

**African American acculturation.** The unique acculturation experiences of urban African American adolescents include two critical mechanisms: their response to culturally-based differences in the schooling process and their response to various reception contexts. School success strategies are at best, taken for granted by established suburban students (Stephen, Markus, & Phillips, 2014), and at worst, intentionally withheld from new urban students (Brantlinger et al., 1996). Newcomers can have difficulty navigating couched structural elements related to race and ethnicity such as tracking practices, in their new school settings (O’Connor et al., 2011). In addition, urban newcomers may not understand that suburban schools operate under a different set of unspoken values and expectations. For instance, urban students may not comprehend the major role middle class parents play in managing their students’ education (Baker & Stevenson, 1986) and securing available academic benefits (Brantlinger, 2003; Brantlinger et al., 1996). Moreover, middle class families engage in school and extracurricular activities to form social networks for sharing information and building
alliances’ to support their students’ educational endeavors (Horvat et al., 2003). New urban families may neither be party to, nor counted in established suburban parental social networks. Not understanding the “new” but unspoken rules of suburban schooling forces urban students to develop academic strategies and discover academic opportunities on their own, without the support of suburban insiders’ knowledge and experience.

Students do not disengage from their home and community cultures upon entering the school doors (Slaughter & Johnson, 1988). Yet, heightened feelings of dissonance between the home and community culture, and the culture of the school can intensify the stress associated with acculturation. Students who perceive dissonance between home and school may exhibit behaviors and motivational goal orientations associated with poor academic and psychological outcomes (Kumar, 2006; Tyler, et al. 2010). For example, Kumar, Midgley, and Urdan (1999) found that students who perceived substantial differences between their home and schools felt angrier, less hopeful about the future, had lower levels of academic-efficacy and self-esteem, and at the same time engaged in higher levels of self-deprecation than their counterparts who did not experience the same type or level of dissonance. As sites of enculturation White middle class schools prepare students to professional and leadership positions. Consequently, implicit messages of “whiteness” and privilege provide the base and framework for correct behavior and proper values. These messages empower White middle class students because they reinforce messages received at home. However, the same messages can have a disconcerting effect upon urban newcomers as it relates conflicting views about the value and behavior of people from their community (Arrington, Hall, & Stevenson, 2003).
Secondly, urban students’ acculturation experiences are influenced by the context of reception in the suburban school. Urban African-American students may be confronted with ambiguous reception contexts in their new suburban schools. Reception contexts may be informed by suburban dwellers’ stereotypes related to newcomers’ race or ethnicity, social class, and previous place of residence. These tightly woven systems of belief result in the stigmatization, or by Goffman’s (1963) definition, “spoiled” view of the newcomers. Sampson and Raudenbush’s (2004) study on neighborhood stigma revealed that a neighborhood’s racial, ethnic, and social class composition influenced perceptions of neighborhood disorder; suggesting that “because people act on their perceptions of disorder, the contributions of racial composition and concentrated poverty are tied reciprocally to the actions of the observers” (p. 337).

For example, Keene and Padilla’s (2010) qualitative study explored the effects of spatial stigma (stigma associated with place) among twenty-five African Americans who relocated from Chicago’s Black ethnic enclaves to a small predominantly White college town in Iowa as part of a housing relocation program. Interviews and observations revealed the urban transplants’ acculturative struggles in the midst of a hostile context of reception. Townspeople freely vocalized their fears that the Chicago transplants would overburden the state’s welfare system and lower the academic standing of their local public schools. Newcomers were cognizant that townspeople’s opinions related to race, place, and class were already formed before their arrival. They felt that these opinions hampered their access to many of the resources that drew them to Iowa in the first place. They believed that they were denied housing in certain parts of town, and were looked over for employment opportunities. Respondents claimed this was not the case African
Americans from places other than Chicago. Some urban transplants tried to resist the stereotypes by distancing themselves from other Chicago transplants, but as a result reported feeling isolated and unsupported in their new location.

Mark Padilla’s (2012) research with young people in Detroit also exposes the effects of spatial stigma on those who inhabit the stigmatized spaces. When referencing Detroit young people expressed a profound sense of shame, often using descriptive terms such as “decay” and “decline;” terms that have been foisted upon them by outsiders. Padilla cautions that the influence of spatial stigma exceeds its ability to alter political-economic contexts, in that it also as a symbolic force, it has the psychological effect of assigning blame for the stigmatizing features associated with place, unto the individuals and groups that hold occupancy. Padilla (2012/2013) noted how conceptions of spatial stigma can be critical for young people:

These symbolic processes shape the experiences of those who reside in or relocate from vilified and degraded locales, who may be marked by a stigma of place that influences their identity formation, their access to resources, and their social or geographic mobility.

Hostile reception contexts can also include acts of discrimination towards newcomers. Drawing from Williams, Neighbors, and Jackson (2003), Seaton and colleagues (2012) define discrimination as, “dominant group members’ actions that have a differential and negative effect on subordinate racial/ethnic groups” (p. 449). Thus, discrimination can encompass actions toward a stigmatized group, while stigma describes the underlying beliefs (Loury, 2002). Newcomers’ perceptions of discrimination influence how successfully they adapt to new environments (Berry, Phinney, Sam, &
Vedder, 2006; Rumbaut, 2005) as well as their level of academic achievement in their new environment (Eccles, Wong, & Peck, 2006; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003).

A theoretical base for African American’s unique acculturation experiences has been promoted by Landrine and Klonoff (1996). In describing African American acculturation Landrine and Klonoff (1996) advanced a bi-dimensional model similar to Berry’s. However, acculturation was theorized as points on a continuum with adherence to traditional (home) culture at one extreme and adherence to the receiving culture at the other extreme. In this model acculturation can take at any point within three planes on the continuum, with each plane being associated with certain behaviors.

Table 1

*Model of Black Acculturation (adapted from Landrine and Klonoff, 1996)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acculturation Level</th>
<th>Traditional (Separate)</th>
<th>Bi-Cultural (Integration)</th>
<th>Acculturated (Assimilation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example behavior</td>
<td>Speaks little Standard English</td>
<td>Bi-lingual, <em>Code-switches</em></td>
<td>Speaks <em>Standard English mostly</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immersed in traditional culture</td>
<td>Immersed in both traditional and receiving culture</td>
<td>Immersed in receiving culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the standpoint of Landrine and Klonoff (1996) African American acculturation is not a linear process. They posit that acculturation orientations can fluctuate and occupy different points at different times, in either direction along the continuum. For example, a person exhibiting high levels of acculturation during the early school transition period, after experiencing a negative reception context, may later resort to a more traditional level of acculturation. Finally, the authors give attention to African American enclaves as contexts influencing adaptation to mainstream culture outside of the enclave.
Portes and Zhou (1993) offer another model incorporating social class to understand how immigrants of color acculturate to mainstream America. Segmented acculturation proposes that newcomers acculturate along three tracts. Along the first tract, newcomers aspire to assimilate to the dominant and mainstream European-American culture. Taking the first track can be a liability when newcomers possess strong ethnic identity, in light of the racism they are likely to encounter. Newcomers taking the second tract aspire to assimilate (down) to the Black “underclass.” In this case Black ethnic identity is also a liability. Along the final pathway, newcomers choose cultural maintenance to retain the support of their ethnic community, while at the same time “picking and choosing” which aspects of the receiving society they will incorporate into their lives to gain access to the quality of life enjoyed by the mainstream culture. Strong ethnic identity is invaluable newcomers on this tract.

Portes and Zhou’s (1993) model has received criticism for conflating race and social class, and for the suggestion that strong African American ethnic identity is a liability (Lacy, 2004). Lacy (2004) suggested a variant of the model’s third tract to understand the acculturation experiences of middle-class African Americans in culturally mainstream White suburbs. This model assumes that these newcomers maintain a strong ethnic identity through their cultural ties to the larger African American ethnic community. Simultaneously, they interact with mainstream society to acculturate structurally and gain or retain access to the tools of upward mobility. While their children live in White worlds and attend White schools, Black parents actively supported their children’s ethnic identity development through frank conversations and affording them opportunities to interact with other Black children. Nonetheless, Black middle class
parents were careful in the type exposure their children were given to the Black world. For instance, they met other Black children at church or through exclusive social organizations such as the local Jack and Jill club.3

Careful inspection of Lacy’s (2004) model however, suggests that Black identity may have different meanings for middle class and poor/working class African Americans. Furthermore, Lacy’s model implies that these class-based differences may influence young people’s adaptive experiences. For instance, Lacy points out that youth from urban enclaves have little contact with the larger European American community, and are therefore less prone to see themselves as targets of discrimination. With this in mind, it is possible that as newcomers in White suburban contexts, poor and working class African American students may not be as psychologically well prepared to adapt strategically, as their middle class African American counterparts. Consequently, urban newcomers’ acculturation experiences are not only limited by the context of reception, but also by how well prepared they are to recognize and respond to the context of reception.

Summary

This chapter reviewed literature related to the urban to suburban transition experiences of African American adolescents; asserting that this type of transition is novel because of its cultural nature. As such, it adds a layer of stress to an experience that is already challenging for young people who are consumed with the search for ethnic identity in an atmosphere that gives little significance to their ethnic group membership and its associated cultural values. Thus, literature associated with acculturation, and

3 Jack and Jill Clubs of America is a national organization with local chapters. Membership is invitation only. Middle class parents’ careful structuring of role models and friendship choices are geared toward maintaining Black middle class status.
specifically Black acculturation was reviewed to frame the experiences of urban African American students as they traverse cultural boundaries in their quest for a good education.
Chapter Three

Study Contexts

Researcher Context

I am a middle-aged African American woman. I come from a solid working class background; however my mother earned her Juris Doctor degree after I became an adult. My parents were divorced when I was four-years-old, so was reared, for the most part, in a single-parent home. I grew up in Los Angeles and attended predominantly African American (AfA) public schools there through the ninth-grade.

I moved to Ohio when I was 15, and began attending a predominantly White all-girls parochial school. Upon graduation I attended a one-year program to become a practical nurse. Directly after graduating from the nursing program I enrolled in a three-year Bible School program in Northern Minnesota, where I was (that I know of) the only AfA within a 50-mile radius. Combining my nursing and theological training, I served a year in the Gambia, West Africa, as a missionary nurse.

I was married year after returning to the US, and moved to Alabama to be with my husband. We have four children, whom I home-schooled for several years. After my children were in high school my mother, who was retired by now, cajoled me into working with her in a few of the literacy programs that she supervised. I served two years as an Americorps/VISTA worker in her programs. At the end of two years, having amassed several thousand dollars in educational incentives, I began my undergraduate career because I could not let the money go to waste. I continued until I was nearly finished with my Master’s degree. I was seeking employment outside of academia, when I came across an email inviting graduate students to apply for positions in grant funded
research study investigating the social, cultural, and academic experiences of diverse middle school students. It seemed like the opportunity of a lifetime. There was however one glitch, I would need to take doctoral level classes. Thus began my PhD journey.

As a research assistant, I was a member of a team of researchers who conducted 64 focus group interviews with students in twelve middle schools in two suburban in the spring of 2008. Specifically, the study focused on the school experiences of first and second generation immigrant adolescents, to compare and contrast their experiences with the experiences of students from families that had been established in the United States for several generations. Each focus group was comprised of students who shared ethnic and/or national backgrounds (i.e., Arab American, African American [AfA], European American [EuA], Chaldean American, and other groups). As much as possible, focus group moderators were ethnically matched to the focus group participants. The silent note-taker was not always ethnically matched. Consequently, all members of the research team had opportunities to sit in on focus groups with students from different ethnic/national backgrounds.

I conducted all but one of the seven focus group interviews with AfA students. I also transcribed most of the AfA interviews. All of these students represented distinct numerical minorities in their schools. Most, of these students in both school districts had recently transferred from other school districts within the previous few years. Most were from Detroit and had at one point attended Detroit Public Schools or one of the many charter schools within the district. The remaining students transferred from other large urban school districts including Atlanta and Washington, DC. The transition to suburban schools was not always direct for these students. A few students reported having moved
to other suburban Detroit communities prior to moving to the present communities. Several students had explored other school options in Detroit such as private or home schooling before transferring to suburban schools.

I noticed however, that even though the AfA students had multigenerational presence within the United States, their responses to the questions posed during the focus group interviews were surprisingly similar to those given by immigrant students. Although the larger study focused the experiences of immigrant students, I wanted to know more about the experiences of these African American students. I have lived with their stories, on and off for eight years. My passion to share these students’ stories has not abated.

**Historical Context of the Study**

*The doom and gloom tale of Detroit abounds. But don’t declare the city dead just yet. There’s another story about Detroit waiting to be told, one of resiliency and possibility amid the trouble. This story is vital to the Motor City’s future and how the rest of us think about the potential of communities.*

Wallace C. Harwood, President of the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

Historian, Thomas Sugrue (2005) argued that the historical perspective is a missing component in most frameworks for understanding issues associated with low-income and racially isolated urban communities. This section injects a historical element into the context framing the experiences of urban African American (AfA) students who attend schools in Detroit’s suburban periphery. Within this perspective is the supposition that the cultural and economic disparities between urban and suburban schools are rooted in a long, deeply entrenched, and intentional system of apartheid designed to privilege groups that are classified as “White” (Diamond, 2006). In this regard Farley, Danziger,
and Holzer (2000) advised, “the thoroughness with which long-term social, economic, and racial trends produced an African American central city in Detroit surrounded by an overwhelmingly white suburban ring makes Detroit unique” (pp. 9-10). Therefore, to gain a deep understanding of AfA adolescents urban-suburban school transition experiences, one must first comprehend the area’s rich and unique history of interethnic and interracial relations.

This history however, also presents a contrasting picture of AfA Detroiter’s resistance to the imposition of the system of apartheid, despite the multiple institutional and social barriers created to sustain the system. With this in mind, Detroit’s AfA families’ treks into culturally dissimilar communities and schools can also be viewed as a continuation of Black Detroiter’s legacy of resistance to systems of injustice and intolerance.

The first Black Detroiters.

You took our country from it’s infancy, into industry
And your name still carries with it the idea of a nation built on steel, muscle and sweat
You became the city that carried the country.  Eminem – Letter to Detroit

The Detroit African-American Project website5, sponsored by Wayne State University provides a chronicle of African American life in Detroit. The first known person of African descent to gaze upon the place we now call Detroit, was probably the celebrated explorer, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, who would later found the city of Chicago. Detroit celebrated its 300th birthday in July 2001. Officially established in 1701 by a peculiar mix of French soldiers, fur traders, and American Indians, Detroit was named for the river on whose banks it is situated. African American presence was noted

5 Detroit African American History Project (DAAHP) http://www.daahp.wayne.edu/index.html

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as early as 1736 by a priest who had given the sacrament of “last rites” to an “unknown neggess.” By 1750, French enumerators listed 33 enslaved persons among the outpost’s 488 inhabitants. Early records however, did not distinguish between enslaved persons of African and native descent. Thus, although it is likely that at least some of the enslaved persons were Black, exact number could not be determined. Detroit came under British control in 1760, only to be officially ceded to the newly formed United States in 1796 (Farley et al., 2000).

With the 1787 enactment of the Northwest Ordinance, slavery was outlawed in what would become the Michigan Territory. However the practice was officially ended when Michigan was awarded statehood in 1837 (Martelle, 2012). Positioned less than a mile from Canada where slavery had been abolished in 1837, Detroit became a major stop on the Underground Railroad. Two organizations played key roles in resettling escaped slaves in Canada, where they could no longer be pursued under the mandates of the Fugitive slave laws. In 1837, unwilling to continue to endure further discriminatory treatment, thirteen formerly enslaved persons withdrew membership from the predominantly White First Baptist Church to begin what came to be known as the Second Baptist Church. A year later the Detroit Anti-Slavery Society was created. In a 30-year period more than 45,000 enslaved persons were conducted through Detroit in route to Canadian freedom.7

Indeed, there were several instances where Michigan residents, both Black and White, opposed federal legislation, such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, to protect

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their formerly enslaved neighbors from slave catchers. In 1847 a racially mixed group of townspeople in Marshall, Michigan came to the aid of the Crosswhite family as the town’s sheriff and Mr. Crosswhite’s former master attempted to forcibly return all six members of the family to enslavement. After seeing the crowd that had turned out to defend the Crosswhites, the same sheriff switched sides and instead of arresting the Crosswhite family, he arrested the family’s former master for attempted kidnapping. The charges against the Crosswhite’s former master were not upheld, but by the time the decision was made, the Crosswhites had been safely spirited to freedom in Canada. During the same year Detroiter, Robert Cromwell was captured by his former owner, only to be released through interventions within the legal system, and the less legal intervention of a crowd of sympathizers, including unruly abolitionists and indignant Irishmen (Calarco et al., 2011).

The most daring rescue however, came to be known as the “Blackburn Incident.” The story, fit for the Hollywood screen was chronicled in Karolyn Frost’s (2007) account of the lives of Thorton and Lucie (aka Ruth) Blackburn. The Blackburms were married although enslaved by different masters in Kentucky. Lucie was due to be sold “downriver” in 1829, to pay off her deceased master’s debts. So, the couple implemented an escape plan to avoid being separated. First blending in with free Blacks in Louisville, two years later they made their way north to Detroit. Nonetheless, in 1833 acting on a tip from a friend, Blackburn’s former master dispatched his son and a lawyer to lay claim to the Blackburms. The couple were arrested and placed in separate jail facilities to await the steamship that would initiate their return to enslavement in Kentucky. Within days of their planned departure two African American women came to visit Lucie Blackburn in
jail, to bid her farewell. Unknown by the jailers, one of the visitors daringly exchanged
clothes with Lucie Blackburn. Pretending to in deep anguish and weeping, with their
lowered faces covered, two women slipped past the jailers unharmed. One of the women
was Lucie Blackburn. By the time the ruse was discovered the next morning, Lucie had
made her way to freedom in Canada. Shortly afterwards, as Thorton was escorted to the
ship that was to return him to enslavement, an angry Black mob of men from Detroit and
Ontario formed in opposition. As sides were drawn a melee ensued, lasting several days.
In the midst of the commotion, Thorton Blackburn quietly slipped away to join his wife
safely in Canada.

Michigan may have been more tolerant than the Free states to her south. Despite
the establishment of Michigan’s “Black Codes” to regulate the activities of African
Americans in 1827, there is only one record of these codes being strictly enforced. A
Black man was expelled from Washtenaw County for not complying with the terms of
Michigan’s Black Code. This contrasts to the experience of African Americans in
Cincinnati, where half of the Black population were forced to flee to Canada in response
to the enforcement of the severe Ohio Black Codes (Litwack, 1961). Although the
Michigan’s Black Codes were largely ignored or were not enforced, the reality that they
could be enforced likely loomed large in the minds of Detroit’s African American
population. A case in point; after Black Detroiters heroically freed the Blackburns in
1833, the Black population was threatened with the demand to register their presence, in
accordance with Michigan’s Black Codes. The threat alone sparked a mini exodus to

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8 Black Codes in Michigan were separate and discriminatory laws enacted to control the in-
migration and movement of African Americans, and denied them privileges associated with citizenship (R.
Farley, Danziger, & Holzer, 2000)
Canada (Frost, 2007). The Black Codes also denied free African Americans rights of citizenship. African Americans had no voting rights and were not allowed to serve in the state’s militia. All the same, these rights were extended to other groups, including “civilized Indians,” expressing the desire for state citizenship (Farley et al., 2000).

**Demographic shifts in Metropolitan Detroit.**

*I’m goin’ to Detroit, get myself a good job.  
Tried to stay around here with the starvation mob.  
I’m going to get me a job up there in Mr. Ford’s place,  
Stop these eatless days from starin’ me in the face.* William Weldon

In 1820, the first federal census to include the Michigan Territory listed 67 African Americans among Detroit’s total population of 1,442. By 1850, African Americans accounted for two percent of Detroit’s population of a little over 21,000. While the Black population tripled in the ensuing decade, it accounted for only three percent of the city’s residents. Throughout the nineteenth century African Americans had failed to reach six percent of the overall population of Detroit. In truth, after the Civil War, as European immigration fueled Detroit’s overall population growth, the African American proportion of the city’s population actually plummeted. Table 2 presents a description of Detroit’s African American population across the 19th century.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1820</th>
<th>1840</th>
<th>1860</th>
<th>1870</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Population</strong></td>
<td>1,422</td>
<td>9,102</td>
<td>45,619</td>
<td>79,577</td>
<td>116,340</td>
<td>205,876</td>
<td>285,704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AfA %</strong></td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9 Blues lyrics from “I’m Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town,” words and music by William Weldon, special lyrics by Andy Razaf, quoted in Barry Singer, Black and Blue: The Life and Lyrics of Andy Razaf (New York, 1992), 305 (In Wiese, 2004).
Nevertheless, the dawn of the twentieth century was marked by a tremendous internal shift in US demographics, and Detroit was one of the most obvious examples. The “Great Migrations” of the twentieth century describe the mass northward and westward movement of Black and White Southerners. Sugrue (2005) described the African American northern migration as actually taking place in series of three waves. The first, occurring between 1840 and 1890, was to escape the constraints of race and Jim Crow legislation. The second major migration, taking place between 1916 and 1930, was to take advantage of the need for cheap labor triggered by World War I, as cotton production declined in the South. The third wave, taking place between 1940 and 1970, was triggered by lucrative employment opportunities available in Northern and Western manufacturing plants. In all, throughout the twentieth century some eight million African Americans and twenty million European Americans left the South in search of better lives for themselves and their families (Gregory, 2005). The table below demonstrates the Great Migrations contributed to Detroit’s phenomenal twentieth century demographic reversal.

Table 3

*Detroit’s African American population across the 20th century*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>285,704</td>
<td>993,678</td>
<td>1,623,452</td>
<td>1,670,144</td>
<td>1,511,482</td>
<td>1,203,339</td>
<td>1,027,974</td>
<td>951,270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AfA %</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>81.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rise of the automobile industry converged with, and some would argue inspired, northern migrations to Detroit from the early to the mid-twentieth century (Farley et al., 2000). Henry Ford’s 1914 promise of $5.00 a day to work in his Detroit factories, more than twice the wages earned at other automotive plant as well as in other manufacturing industries, was a substantial lure for many Black southerners (Gallagher,
Between the years 1910 and 1920 Detroit’s African American population skyrocketed from 5,741 to 40,838. By 1920 nearly nine out of ten Black Detroiters were born elsewhere.

Rapid population growth combined with inadequate residential options to lay the foundation for troubles that would plague Detroit for the remainder of the century. The deplorable accommodations available to the burgeoning African American community were limited to crowded segregated slums east of the downtown area, eventually spilling over into formerly Jewish neighborhoods such as “Black Bottom” and “Paradise Valley” (Martelle, 2012). The color line was strictly upheld by custom and restrictive housing deeds. Testing the strength of the color line, in 1925 Ossian Sweet, a Black physician, purchased a home in a White community. Bringing several friends and family members along for protection, Sweet along with his wife and daughter attempted to move in. The house was surrounded by an angry rock-throwing White mob. Tragically, a shot was fired from an upstairs window killing one of the White mob members. The Sweets were charged with murder and defended by none other than the famous Clarence Darrow. No charges were upheld. Shortly thereafter Dr. Sweet’s wife and daughter passed away. Eventually, Sweet committed suicide, having never lived in the house which he had purchased at such a high price.

European immigration continued to contribute to Detroit’s population boom in the early twentieth century. In 1920 over fifty percent of Detroit’s residents were either foreign born or first-generation immigrants (Martelle, 2012). These immigrants settled into neighborhoods that were often named for the national origin of the residents such as Poletown, Corktown, and Germantown. Martelle (2012) revealed that, while immigrants
provided a labor base for Detroit’s growing auto industry, they also presented the automakers with a number of challenges. First and foremost was the need for an English speaking workforce, and secondly was the need for a workforce that was not deterred by tensions between workers of diverse national backgrounds. To address these needs Detroit took on a massive effort to assimilate the European immigrants. Public schools offered English language classes and classes on US culture to prepare immigrants for citizenship. In addition, factories initiated policies rewarding workers for speaking English. For instance, the Packard automotive company instituted the “American First” policy placing citizenship requirements upon eligibility for promotions. Packard’s new president, Alvan Macauley, gave a glowing report of the Americans First program, stating, “German workmen would object to working with Russians, or vice versa. Men of one race could hardly tolerate a foreman of another race. But since we launched our policy of ‘Americans First,’ all that has disappeared” (Martelle, 2012, p. 87).

America First type policies and programs pressured immigrant workers to deemphasize their ethnic and national heritage in order to access job advancement and security. African American migrants however were neither targeted in these policies, nor included in such programs. The administration of these programs and policies encouraged these European newcomers to develop an American identity. However, as the administration of these programs took place alongside Detroit’s AfA population boom, White also became a salient part of European immigrants’ American identity. From this perspective, large corporations’ policies and programs designed to increase production in Detroit’s unique demographic context, actually socialized European immigrants into a
heightened sense of “Whiteness” and the expectation of reaping the obvious privileges attached to that designation.

In the automotive industry African American (AfA) workers were usually relegated to menial tasks such as sweeping the floors in the plants. A few AfA workers however were advanced to perform higher level tasks. Changes in the status of AfA workers constituted a status threat to White workers and gave rise to discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. It was not unusual for White workers to call strikes and walk off the job when AfA workers earned promotions (Russ, 2012). Thus, northern racial prejudice became institutionalized as AfA migrants attempted to move into roles that were traditionally held by European Americans (Eagly & Dickman, 2005), regardless of whether these roles were played out in the workplace or in residential choice.

African American migration to Detroit decelerated in the wake of the Great Depression commencing in 1929, but the slowdown was short lived. As World War II began, Detroit was dubbed the “Arsenal of Democracy” for its ability to use its manufacturing base to supply war machinery (Metzger & Booza, 2002). Again, Southern African Americans flooded north to Detroit to take advantage of the mammoth wartime job market but not without conflict.

Black-White relationships have been contentious throughout the history of Detroit and its suburbs, particularly during war time. In all, the National Guard was called upon four times within a period of nearly one hundred fifty years to quell racially charged rioting. The first time was triggered by the 1833 Blackburn Incident after which several days of race riots ensued. Federal troops dispatched from Ft. Wayne remained in Detroit for two weeks to end the violence between Black and White residents. The second major
riot described in Farley and colleagues (2000) was the 1863 event fueled by anti-war sentiments pitting poor immigrants who could not afford to pay their way out of serving in the Civil War against African Americans whom they blamed for the war. When Black restauranteur, William Faulkner was accused of raping two girls (one of them was White) and arrested, a crowd of (mostly) newly immigrated dock workers surrounded the jail in an attempt to lynch Faulkner. Their lynching attempt was thwarted by the arrival of National Guard troops. White vigilantes then began to burn AfA businesses and residences. Troops remained in Detroit for several weeks afterwards.

The third riot took place in the midst of the third major migration. No longer able to contain the expanding African American population in Detroit’s segregate slums, Black government-sponsored housing projects were proposed to be built across the street from the White government housing project. White residents, with the aid of the Ku Klux Klan, protested violently. On February 28, 1942, a mob of some 1,200 Whites, many armed, formed to repel Black families endeavoring to move into the housing project. Archivist Johanna Russ (2012) suggested that White resentment over the government decision to provide integrated housing projects created tensions between African American and European American communities had contributed to the atmosphere surrounding Detroit’s third major race riot. She gave a compelling account of the event in her blog.

On June 20, 1943, a fight broke out between African American and White Detroiters spending their Sunday on Belle Isle, the city’s large park in the middle of the Detroit River. Fighting spread to the mainland, and rumors crisscrossed the city, stoking racial tensions that had been running high and threatening to boil over into violence for months. Rioting spread, with little attempt from the police to stop it (in fact, much evidence points to many White police facilitating and

even participating in violence against African Americans), and by the time President Franklin Roosevelt sent in federal troops on the evening of June 21, hundreds had been injured, and 34 people had died: 25 African American (17 of whom were shot by police), and 9 White. Of the arrests made later, 85% were African American.

Race was central to and intentional in Detroit’s segregated residential housing patterns. Population growth resulting from earlier northern migrations and immigration left no space for new residential development within Detroit’s central city (Wiese, 2004). African Americans endeavored to escape the crowded and deplorable conditions in their racially isolated enclaves by moving to nearby neighborhoods outside of the central city, but they usually encountered stiff resistance. NPR’s Sarah Hulett (2012) shared one stark example of the literal lengths that were taken to maintain apartheid system in Detroit. Shortly following the First World War a few African Americans ventured into the undeveloped Hastings Streets neighborhoods where they built small homes. As the Second World War approached, the adjacent neighborhood was identified as a suitable place to build homes for middle class European Americans. The developers’ plans were thwarted, however, because the Federal Housing Administration had a policy of not backing mortgage loans for homes in neighborhoods coded as African American. This policy was guided by the belief that the presence of undesirable minorities would automatically cause home values to decrease. Undeterred, in 1940 the developers built a six-foot high concrete wall spanning a half mile in length to deliberately and symbolically separate Black and White communities. Federally backed mortgages were then approved for home buyers on the “White” side of the wall. What came to be known as the “8 Mile Wall” still stands as a reminder of Detroit’s deeply rooted history of racial segregation.
When African Americans tried to move into White neighborhoods, they were usually deterred by the implementation of deed restricted housing agreements barring AfA residency. The majority of new homes built after the First World War included restrictive covenants barring residence to African Americans, Jews, and other ethnic minorities (Farley et al., 2000). When the deed restrictions were circumvented, African Americans were often met by violent and angry mobs as they attempted to move into White neighborhoods. As early as 1917 a group of African Americans had secured housing in a European American section of Detroit only to be forced to leave by a White mob supported by the local police (Martelle, 2012). Sugrue (2005) noted that between the years 1945 and 1965 at least 250 African American families were attacked as they struggled to pioneer moves into White neighborhoods.

After World War II, legislation was enacted to outlaw restrictive deeds. No longer able to employ violent tactics to maintain segregated residential spaces, European American Detroiteres retreated to the suburbs (Sugrue, 2005). Thus, as third major northern migration wound down, there was a mass outmigration of White Detroiteres to neighboring suburbs. Sugrue (2011) noted that during the second half of the twentieth century Detroit’s population plummeted by nearly 50 percent, mostly due to White suburbanization.

Suburban Detroit has maintained a reputation for being unwelcoming to African Americans. For instance, Wiese (2004) reported how two cities in particular, Dearborn and Wyandotte were branded “no Negro” towns:

Home to tens of thousands of European immigrants and white migrants from the upper South, these suburbs became crucibles for the formation of a militant white working-class identity. Despite employment of 10,000 African Americans at Ford by the mid-1920s, Dearborn police prevented blacks from venturing about
Wiese (2004) recounted that, even in the western suburbs where African Americans had begun to settle, the railroad tracks maintained a line of demarcation between the Black and the White parts of the town. As evidence, in 1940 the suburban city of Ecorse boasted of a Black population totaling 1,800, all of whom resided on the east side of the railroad tracks.

Black Detroiters perception of White suburbs as unwelcoming places, even in recent times, may be well founded. Bates and Fasenfest (2005) analyzed arrest records produced during 27 months (commencing in 1996) by police in Eastpointe, a predominantly White suburb bordering Detroit. It was determined that African Americans were not only disproportionately arrested but were also disproportionately arrested for minor offenses when compared to arrest records of White drivers. Most interesting was that fewer AfA arrests took place on 8-Mile-Road, the border shared by Detroit and Eastpointe. However, AfA arrests increased significantly one or two miles into the suburban area. Bates and Fasenfest (2005) concluded that the disproportionate arrests serve to remind African Americans that they were not wanted and did not belong in that suburban space.

Black Detroiter’s apprehension towards predominantly White nearby suburbs was underscored by the recent death of Renisha McBride. A report from the Detroit Free Press (Anderson, 2014) stated that on November 2, 2013, the unarmed 19-year-old AfA

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11 Eastpointe was formerly named “East Detroit” but changed its name in 1992 to avoid being associated with neighboring city of Detroit. City of Eastpointe web page - http://cityofeastpointe.net/index.asp?SEC=76FAE239-491A-4807-AA9E-514BA0F5CB10&Type=B_BASIC
woman knocked on the door of a home in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn Heights late at night after being involved in an automobile accident. The White homeowner answered the door with a shotgun in hand which he aimed and fired through the locked screen door, killing the young woman.

Even as many African American Detroiters have been made to feel unwelcomed in nearby suburban communities, the inequalities between urban and suburban Detroit are blatant. The following table adapted from Farley and colleagues (2000) paints a picture contrasting the suburban “haves” with the urban “have-nots.”

Table 4

*Urban-suburban disparities in 1990, adapted from Farley et al. (2000)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban-Suburban Disparities in 1990</th>
<th>Detroit</th>
<th>Suburbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American Population</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Rate</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Poverty</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even greater disparities were reported between Detroit, and its neighbor, Gross Pointe Park, where the median household income is $101,094 compared to $26,955 in Detroit (Semuels, 2014). Semuels (2014) article in the Los Angeles Times described the visible differences between the two communities that are separated by a single street.

On one side of the road — the Detroit side — there's block after block of dilapidated houses and vacant lots overflowing with weeds. On the Grosse Pointe Park side, a main street leads to yoga studios, beer gardens, antiques stores and even feel-good music being piped from the quaint lampposts.
The remarkability of the demographic transformation of the Detroit area is matched only by the remarkability of the measures that were taken to maintain a Black-White divide in the midst of the population changes.

**The stigmatization of Detroit and Detroiders.**

*It should be no surprise Detroit tops the Forbes list of the Most Dangerous Cities this year for the fifth year in a row.*

During the 1950’s and 1960’s automotive factories began to move out of Detroit’s central city to the surrounding suburbs. European American families followed, but as related earlier, African Americans could not follow because of discriminatory housing practices and the violent racist resistance of some White suburbanites (Hulett, 2012). Thus, Detroit became more densely Black and more impoverished. By 1960 nearly one in three Detroiters was African American, and for the first time in recorded history, Detroit had negative population growth. The 1960s also marked a declining in-migration from the South as the need for unskilled workers in automotive factories decreased (Sugrue, 2005).

Interracial relations remained strained at best throughout the 1960s. Tensions provoked by the treatment of African Americans by overzealous police during the long hot summer of 1967 provided the backdrop for Detroit’s fourth and most deadly race riot. Rioting started early Sunday morning on July 23rd and by Wednesday 33 African Americans and 20 European Americans were dead. Of those who lost their lives, 22 were at the hands of Detroit police, 9 were killed by the Michigan National Guard, and one was killed by federal troops (Farley, et al., 2000). By the end of the 1960s, Detroit had

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12 Detroit Again Tops List Of Most Dangerous Cities, As Crime Rate Dips, Forbes Magazine Online, 10/22/2013
surpassed the racial “tipping point” (Schelling, 1971), that is when the proportion of the African American population reaches a point that the European Americans are no longer willing to remain in the community. An article in the Detroit News ("Population change in Metro Detroit," 2007) advanced the idea that the Detroit riots of 1967 propelled the city towards the tipping point, using three suburban communities as examples of the skyrocketing rate of suburbanization in Metropolitan Detroit between 1960 and 1970. During this same period of time the population in adjacent suburban communities increased: Warren from 88,766 to 179,260; Southfield from 31,062 to 66,186; and Livonia from 66,539 to 110,108.

Farley et al. (2000) came to the conclusion that events taking place in Detroit during the 1960s prompted European Americans to view Black Detroiter as “well-armed, black militants who were ready to kill whites” (p. 44). This viewpoint is ironic given White Detroit’s long history of armed and mob violence against African Americans. The stereotypical perceptions of African Americans held by European Americans in the greater Detroit area intensified White preference for racial segregation (Farley, Steeh, Krysan, & Reeves, 1994).

The racial isolation of European Americans and African Americans in metropolitan Detroit has played well into the stigmatization of Detroit and her residents. Farley and colleagues (2000) recorded common racial beliefs held by European Americans in the metropolitan Detroit area. Compared to African Americans, 41 percent of European Americans believed themselves to be easier to get along with, 52 percent believed themselves to be smarter, 72 percent believed that they had a better command of the English language, and 73 percent believed that they were more self-sufficient in their
work ethic. In contrast, when the same questions were posed to African Americans in metropolitan Detroit and when compared with European Americans, 46 percent believed that they were easier to get along with, 25 percent believed that they were smarter, 9 percent believed that they had a better command of the English language, and 13 percent believed that they were more self-sufficient in their work ethic. These finding suggest that the sword of stigmatization cuts in two directions. In this case stigma serves to justify White preference for segregation while at the same time convincing the stigmatized that others’ perceptions about them are valid.

**Segregated schools in metropolitan Detroit.**

*Thirteen years ago, Detroit’s school system had 200,000 students. Today, it has less than 50,000. It’s saddled with a $127 million deficit and its students perform well below the rest of the state.* (Butrymowicz, 2014)

More than any other ethnic group, the plight of African Americans has been inexplicitly tied to types and levels of schooling. Consequently, attempts to deny or compromise educational opportunities have been met with fierce opposition throughout African Americans’ long history in the United States. In spite of the segregationist Black Codes instituted during the early nineteenth century, Detroit’s African Americans fought for and won the right to attend integrated schools in 1869. Paradoxically, a little over a century later with the Milken v. Bradley ruling, the nation’s highest court put Detroit on the path to becoming the nation’s most segregated school system (G. Orfield, 2001).

By 1970 Detroit’s school age population was 52 percent African American. Having exceeded the racial tipping point, Detroit’s schools were bound to become increasingly racially and economically segregated, conditions associated with lower

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academic performance. Farley and colleagues (2000) recounted the efforts to curtail the academic decline and other problems associated with racially segregated urban schools. The NAACP gathered and presented evidence that housing and schooling in metropolitan Detroit were intentionally designed to be segregated and thus deliberately place White students at an academic advantage over Black students. The evidence convinced Federal District Judge Stephen Roth to rule that Detroit and its schools were profoundly segregated. As remedies were considered, Roth acknowledged that in-city busing programs would only encourage more rapid White flight. Besides, reasoning that White segregationist policies and practices created the problem, Roth determined that the same group should be involved in providing a solution. Thus, Judge Roth recommended creating a metropolitan school system, including nearby suburban communities, as the best way to maintain a fair and integrated school system.

Roth’s recommendation were met with harsh resistance by suburban residents, and Roth was vilified to the point that he had to receive round the clock police protection (Sharlow, 2012). Roth’s ruling was contested and in 1974 was struck down by the nation’s highest court. A Detroit only busing system was then instituted, and the expected effect of exacerbating White suburban flight was realized. Detroit schools continued to decline. By 1990 metropolitan Detroit led the nation with the widest Black-White achievement and attainment gap (Farley et al., 2000).

Despite its shrinking population, in 2008 (the year this study took place) Detroit was still listed among the 100 largest school districts, ranking at the 30th largest school district in the United States. Yet the demographic characteristics tell the real story. The
National Center for Education Statistics annual report (Sable, Plotts, & Mitchell, 2010) described Detroit schools in 2008:

- 98% Title 1 eligible.
- 97% ethnic minority.
- 88.4% Black.

In addition, the average freshman graduation rate of 45.2% was the lowest among the nation’s 100 largest school districts for that year.

**Study Context**

It is against this unique historical backdrop and, partially because of it, that this study takes place. The social disparities between schools in Detroit and schools in the suburbs are apparent. The National Center for Education Statistics uses eligibility to participate in the Federal Free or Reduced Lunch Program (FRPL) as a proxy measure for economic status. Family income at 130% of the national poverty level or below qualifies students for free school lunches. Family income from above 130% to 185% of the national poverty level qualifies students for reduced price school lunches. During the time that the data for this study was collected (2007-2008), 77.2 percent of students in Detroit’s public schools were eligible for FRPL (Tang, Sable, & Hoffman, 2009). Conversely, the mean percentage of students eligible for FRLP in the two suburban school districts included in this study was 44.7. While the mean of the two suburban school districts were substantially lower than Detroit, it was still well above the state average of 37.5 percent. At the time both suburban school districts, as was common in many districts surrounding Detroit, were experiencing high rates of immigration from

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refugee groups classified as White for demographic purposes. These groups may have been reflected in the higher rates of students listed as eligible for FRDL, along with the growing number of student transfers from poorer school districts attending through the Michigan Inter-district Choice programs. Since the US economic crisis starting in 2008, the percentage of eligible students in the state of Michigan, as well as in most Michigan counties, has steadily increased.
Chapter Four

Methodology

It is safe to assume that all families want their children to be socially and academically prepared to be successful adults. This assumption has particular applicability for African American (AfA) families who live in densely populated urban areas where schools can be more likely to prepare children to enter the penal system than to enter the university system (Christle et al., 2005). Therefore, urban AfA families in mounting numbers are either taking advantage of programs enabling them to send their children to schools in nearby suburbs or packing up their families and moving to the suburbs to access the type of education that has well prepared suburban European American children to be successful adults (French & Wilkinson, 2011; Kruse & Sugrue, 2006; Wiese, 2004). However, upon transferring to their new schools AfA students do not consistently reap the anticipated academic benefits associated with attending well-resourced White suburban schools (Johnson, 2012). Some of these students have shown modest academic improvement compared to their urban peers (Keels, 2008; Rosenbaum, 1995), but the majority of them have displayed little academic difference from their urban counterparts (Boyd et al., 2006; Zuberi, 2010) and some have experienced academic decline (DeLuca & Dayton, 2009). To date, even in the best of circumstances, no evidence has been presented to suggest that placing urban AfA students in well-resourced and high-achieving suburban schools will consistently result in academic gains or will breach the Black-White achievement gap.

This study proposes that it is during students’ initial time in their new schools that academic trajectories can become either set or refocused. Therefore, students’ initial
experiences in new schools are very important. However, for urban AfA students who are traversing social class, racial, cultural, and geographic boundaries to attend schools that are not only culturally different but also more academically challenging than their previous schools, the first experiences in the new school are absolutely crucial. To understand this phenomenon, this study proposes to explore and describe the lived transition experiences of urban AfA middle school students who transfer from schools in Detroit to schools in adjacent predominantly White and more-affluent suburbs. As this phenomenological study seeks to uncover the essence of the experience from these students’ standpoint, the primary research question guiding the study is, “what is the nature of the transition experience of a sample of African American adolescent students as they move from schools in Detroit to schools in nearby predominantly White suburban communities?”

This chapter presents the research methods and procedures utilized to carry out this phenomenological study. This chapter is divided into eight sections to discuss the study’s setting, researcher context, research design, participants, data collection, data analysis, confidentiality measures, and trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

**Study Setting**

The study setting was six suburban predominantly European American middle schools in two school districts bordering Detroit. During this time, the demographic compositions of schools in both districts were in a position of flux. Once nearly exclusively European American, these districts had begun to attract students from Middle Eastern immigrant and refugee populations, and AfA students from nearby Detroit. In
one suburban location the AfA population leaped from less than three percent in year 2000 to nearly fourteen percent in year 2010. During the same time period Detroit lost 25% of its population, mostly African Americans. In addition, between the years 2005 and 2011 the suburban county bordering Detroit saw a 110% increase in Schools of Choice participation, much from the inter-district transfer program.

Historically, this study took place during the first presidential campaign of Barack Obama before he received his party’s nomination. During the same time, Detroit’s mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, a married man, had been caught up in a high-profile text-messaging scandal with his chief of staff and mistress. Both events are referred to from time to time during the focus group interviews.

**Role of the Researcher**

Creswell (2007) emphasized that qualitative methodology utilizes the researcher as the instrument. Accordingly, uncovering participants’ meanings and meaning-making processes becomes a collaborative process between the researcher and participants. However, in phenomenological research the role of the researcher can be a double-edge sword. One side of the sword allows the researcher to use personal knowledge and lived experiences of the phenomenon to recognize important details which might have otherwise gone unnoticed (L. Hamer, personal communication, March 27, 2015). Indeed, it is often the researcher’s experiences with the phenomena that prompt deeper investigations. However, the other side of the sword presents the danger that the researcher will inadvertently impose his or her understanding of the phenomenon into the analysis and representation while leaving the authentic voices of the participants unheard. Unrestrained native interpretations of the phenomenon can cause the credibility and
accuracy of the research to be questioned (N. Haughton, personal communication, March 27, 2015). Transcendental phenomenology addresses the potential to impose native understandings into the research procedures by accentuating epoché, the process of putting aside prior knowledge of, and experience with the phenomenon, in order to view it from a fresh or naïve perspective (Moustakas, 1994).

Epoché was established in the present study by applying the procedures described in Moustakas (1994). First, I needed to determine the nature of my own school transition experiences. I started by writing an exhaustive account of my school transition experiences from kindergarten through the present time and those of my now adult children as well. While taking this trip down memory lane I considered what I believed about cross cultural school transitions and how I had come to develop those beliefs. This provided a background for my perspectives related to the phenomenon of interest. Then next I extracted the section that described my middle school transition experience for analysis. Afterwards, I summarized my experience by using phenomenological reduction from which themes were drawn and a summary of my experience was written.

Researchers’ experience of the phenomenon. To understand my middle school transition experience, something must first be said about the elementary school that I attended. I entered Sixth Avenue elementary school in Los Angeles, as a kindergartner in February of 1960. The school was predominantly AfA with a sprinkling of Japanese students, remnants of the neighborhood’s former occupants. I was an unremarkable student. I was assigned to the middle reading group, I struggled with math, and I loved to read. I have little recall of my teachers except my A-6 teacher, an African American who lived in the affluent and predominantly-Black Baldwin Hills neighborhood.
In Los Angeles junior high schools (similar to middle schools) were grades 7-9. At first I attended my assigned neighborhood school, James Foshay Junior High (Foshay). Foshay had a bad reputation, and many of the students were poor African Americans. I had the usual apprehensions about attending higher level of school. I was concerned about things like lockers and changing for gym. I was also self-conscious because at 12-years-old I was 5’8”, taller than most of the boys I knew. I can remember two remarkable teachers at Foshay, both were African American like me. The first was my Home Economics teacher. She was so much fun, and I learned how to fry eggs, make tuna casserole, spaghetti, and tossed salad in her class. The other was my history teacher. She didn’t sugar coat history. My introduction to the horrors of slavery and the Holocaust were in her 7th-grade class.

The next semester I transferred out of district to Audubon Junior High. Audubon had a better reputation than Foshay, and there were a few White students attending there at first. More affluent AfA kids from nearby Baldwin Hills and Leimert Park also attended Audubon. My mother employed by one of these students’ father at his Savings and Loan business. I discovered this when she accused me of stealing her pen with the Family Savings and Loan insignia. Another one of the girls from this group was the daughter of the pastor of a prominent Baptist church. Even so, I was happy to be at Audubon because my best friend, Cynthia was there. We had been friends since elementary school and we were inseparable.

Early on I wanted to leave my mark, so I became the first girl to be on the audio-visual crew. The audio-visual crew members were sent with film projectors to show requested movies in classrooms. I also refused to rise and say the pledge of allegiance. At
age 13, I no longer believed that America had my best interests at heart. I was angry. My homeroom teacher Mr. Hipsley, a WWII veteran, couldn’t understand how I could not love a country that so many had given their lives to defend. He would not allow me to disrespect the flag in his classroom; so, I had to stand alone outside the classroom during the pledge.

I don’t remember any of the White students in my classes, but they were always featured prominently in Audubon’s well known theater program. I was so impressed with the musical “How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying.” Yet all of the leads and maybe the whole cast were White. By 1968 most of the White students had left Audubon. However, Cynthia and I were able to participate in a busing program for one semester. We attended an affluent White school across town. The students there were so rich, and they displayed it so casually with their beautiful expensive clothes and lovely stacked heel shoes. Cynthia and I wore our cheap moccasins even when holes had worn through the bottoms. Those rich students’ affluence served as a reminder that we were only visitors. That’s all I remember about that affluent White school across town.

The day after Martin Luther King’s assassination the tension at school so thick it could almost be cut with a knife. Sensing it, my one White friend at school clung to me before the first class began. But, I was angry. There was talk of walking out of school at a certain time. However, school was dismissed early. Angry, I overturned a trash can while streaming out with the other upset students. When I returned to school, I was reprimanded for, “inciting a riot” and had to write something, I can’t remember what, one hundred times.
The following summer I went to visit family in Ohio. When I returned so much had changed. Cynthia had a boyfriend and had experimented with marijuana. My world was changing. I had lost interest in school. I began acting out and ditching school, preferring to spend unsupervised time with my friends. Everyone’s parents worked, so we could go over to each other’s houses and hang out. One time we took the bus across town to “hang out” outside the school where Tito Jackson (of the Jackson 5 musical group) attended. When he walked out, we couldn’t believe our good fortune. He talked to us and even kissed my hand. This was so much cooler than attending my boring junior high school.

My reputation at Audubon, however, began to falter. The new, no nonsense Black principal asked some of the “good” students to identify drug dealers from pictures in the school yearbook. They pointed to my picture. It wasn’t true, but it provided a reason to ask me to leave the school since I was attending on an out of district transfer. Instead of returning to Foshay, I was sent to live with my father in Detroit. I was midway through my 9th grade year in Los Angeles but was enrolled in the 10th grade in Detroit due to discrepancies in enrollment procedures between the two school systems. Henry Ford High was a brand new predominantly White school in 1970. That’s all I remember, because within a month’s time, I returned to Los Angeles.

I lost half a year of school in the transition process. I enrolled in a high school in a nearby suburb of Los Angeles where I quickly found friends whose only interest, like mine, was not attending school. A couple months later I moved in with my aunt and was enrolled at yet another Los Angeles high school. This school had a bad reputation, and I was scared of the students. So, I didn’t attend much, thinking I would go unnoticed.
because of the extended teachers’ strike that spring. By the ripe old age of fifteen I had entered a downward academic spiral and would likely have become a casualty, except for an unexpected life changing experience that set me on a different path.

Themes from researcher’s early adolescent school transitions. Phenomenological reduction procedures resulted in the identification of four themes that were present in my junior high (middle school) school transition experience: experiences, emotions, values, and behaviors.

Experiences. Coming from a small, predominantly African American elementary school, my first junior high was even less racially diverse. However, I did have two (that I can remember) African American teachers. It’s funny that my African American 6th grade teacher and these two junior high teachers managed to leave lasting imprints in my memory. I actually remember what they taught and my interactions with them. The only other from this period in my life was Mr. Hipsley, the White teacher who headed up the audio visual team at Audubon, the one who barred me from the class during the pledge of allegiance.

As I entered Audubon, I encountered greater racial and class diversity. I also noticed that certain privileges were associated with race. White kids got lead roles in the school’s theater productions. Black kids got to watch. I became more aware of racial disparities when I participated in the busing program intended to address the racial segregation at Audubon. Rich kids at the White school across town dressed well and had lots of shoes. The affluent Black kids at Audubon, however, also seemed distant. I knew nothing about their worlds and could not benefit from their knowledge of navigating the fluid education system in Los Angeles. Encountering racial and social class differences,
as well as the developmental changes that come to prominence during puberty, led to moments of feeling alone, excluded, and inferior in school contexts.

**Emotion.** For me, the transition to junior high school was charged with emotion. The most prominent emotion was anger. My anger in part was associated with a very volatile period (mid 1960s) and location (Los Angeles) in which my transition took place. I was angry because I felt disenfranchised by my country, I was angry at the death of Martin Luther King, and I was angry because my fearful White friend turned to me for protection. My early transition experiences also evoked feelings of apprehension. This apprehension concerned the structural differences between elementary and junior high school such as memorizing locker combinations and appropriate attire for gym class.

**Values.** During my early transition experience I seemed to enjoy and attach value to my educational experience. My home economics class was fun and taught me skills that I could use immediately in the home. The history class introduced me to real world events, some of the events that were related to me and people like me.

Upon entering Audubon my distinctiveness was also highly valued. I wanted to leave my mark or maybe just be noticed. So, I broke the gender barrier by asking to join the previously all-male audio-visual crew. I asserted my ethnic identity by refusing to stand and say the pledge of allegiance, even if I had to stand alone in my belief.

Friendships were also very highly valued. Cynthia and I shared many adventures. We attended the school across town together, very few others volunteered for that integration program. We also volunteered at summer camp together. And we got our first paying job together. We were both 13, but we lied and said that we were 14 to participate
in the summer jobs program. We also got in trouble together. When Cynthia started acting out (secretly), I followed but not so secretly.

**Behaviors.** Although I enjoyed some of my classes and made choices asserting a level of independence within the junior high school context, over time I began to dislike being in school. At first I would ditch school to visit Cynthia when she was home sick. I began to make friends with other kids who shared my disinterest in school, preferring the company of one another. At times I would blatantly walk out of school just because I did not feel like being there. The new no-nonsense Black principal, Dr. (Somebody), wanted to leave her mark, too. My behavior, both real and perceived, made me a liability to the school, a liability that could easily be removed.

**Summary of the researchers’ experiences.** Analyzing recollections of my own junior high school transition helped me to understand factors related to the process of my becoming academically disengaged. Included in disengaging contexts were historical and social, developmental and psychological, structural, and (probably) familial factors. What is missing from my story is important. There was no mention of clubs, extra-curricular activities, or areas of excellence. Although Audubon was reputedly a good school, nothing connected me to the school, so I could not access the benefits associated with attending a good school.

This type of self-reflection continued throughout the research process to maintain a level epoché. By acknowledging my own experiences, I was better able to my explore research participants’ experiences without filtering them through my own experience.
Research Design

Qualitative research. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006) qualitative research is, “…a broad approach to the study of social phenomena” (p. 2). Although often presented defensively in contrast to quantitative research, qualitative and quantitative strategies might be more accurately conceived as two extremes on a methodological continuum (Ragin, Nagel, & White, 2004). At one end quantitative methods are commonly used for creating generalizations, making predictions, and explaining the phenomenon’s causality; while at the other end qualitative methods are used to understand phenomena from the perspective of those who are experiencing it, and within the context in which the phenomena takes place (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006).

Qualitative research also draws attention to details that cannot be captured at the quantitative end of the continuum; details that can offer a contrasting depiction of the phenomenon of interest (Ragin et al., 2004). For example, Ragin and colleagues (2004) referenced how poverty can be described differently depending on approach:

…the understanding of poverty that commonly emerges from much quantitative research is one of “deficits”- people in poverty often lack the resources needed to move out of poverty. The understanding of poverty that emerges from many qualitative studies of poverty is usually not one of deficits, however, but one of resourcefulness in the navigation of fluid and difficult settings (p.11).

In this way, qualitative research has the potential to put a human face on statistical evidence. Understanding contrasting perspectives is necessary in research with urban African American students because quantitative statistical evidence has consistently presented academic achievement and attainment among this group from a deficit model (e.g. Coleman, et al., 1966). In light of the quantitative evidence underlining the multiple and compounding deficits associated with educating African American students, this dissertation utilizes the qualitative approach to explore and uncover detailed and layered
mechanisms related to both challenges and resilience in these students’ urban to suburban school transitions.

**Phenomenological research.** Qualitative methodology is an overarching approach that applies to many different research approaches (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This study employed phenomenological methodology. Creswell (2007) proposed that phenomenological methodology can, “describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (p. 57). German mathematician, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is generally recognized for laying the foundation for phenomenological methods (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1970/1936) offered that human behavior is guided by how the actor perceives reality in relation to the phenomenon of interest. Thus Husserl advanced that the observer must first intentionally set aside all personal conceptions of truth concerning the phenomena of interest in order to understand a phenomenon in its purest and most essential form. Indeed, the hallmark of phenomenological methodology is acknowledging and suspending, or bracketing, learned knowledge and personal biases when investigating a given phenomenon.

Phenomenological research can be approached from differing schools of thought (Creswell, 2007). This study leans heavily on transcendental phenomenological research methods which feature Husserl’s concept of bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). American psychologist Clark Moustakas provided a foundation for transcendental phenomenological research in his seminal text *Phenomenological Research Methods* (1994) which outlined where and how phenomenology was nestled within the genre of qualitative methodologies. Moustakas listed phenomenology’s common elements with
all qualitative research methods, including its focus on comprehensive and detailed experiences through first person accounts. Moustakas however, also calls attention to how transcendental phenomenology contrasts with other qualitative methods. First, phenomenological research establishes epoché (bracketing) as a central exercise in the research process that is. Epoché is an intentional effort by the researcher to suspend existing mental frameworks in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. Second, this type of research uses intuition and imagination to observe the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, to understand the phenomenon’s dynamic and structure.

Phenomenology has unique procedures for data analysis to capture the “what” and “how” descriptions of the phenomena, as experienced by participants. Phenomenological data analysis procedures will be discussed later in this chapter.

Several considerations informed the choice of transcendental phenomenological methods for this study. First, the use of bracketing is particularly useful with research related to stigmatized groups, such as urban African Americans, who are often the object of stereotypical beliefs (Lott, 2002). Second, being a stigmatized and marginalized group urban AfA students’ voices are rarely heard among those who decide when, where, and how they will be educated (Howard, 2001). Mousakas (1994) noted that phenomenology seeks to uncover what reality is from the participants’ viewpoint, as well as to understand the phenomenon broadly and deeply. A phenomenological approach is preferred to capture reality from this group’s perspective concerning their transition experiences, making it an optimal vehicle for these students’ voices to be heard and for their experiences to be accurately represented. Along the same line, AfA students’ transition from urban to suburban schools is an emergent topic and references an understudied sub-
population. Phenomenology offers a broad approach for exploring unusual topics and understudied groups. Furthermore, aspects of the phenomenological approach were utilized in the focus group research design of the original larger study to capture and describe lived common experiences of groups of people while at the same time taking steps to minimize researcher experience in the analysis and representation (Creswell, 2007).

**Participants**

Participants in this study were a sub-group of participants enrolled in the larger study: *Social Identity, InterGroup Contact, and Achievement Goals: Toward an Integrated Approach to Creating Adaptive, Culturally Diverse Learning Environments.*

In the larger study, sixty-four focus group interviews were conducted in twelve suburban middle schools in two school districts bordering Detroit between February and May of 2008. Participants were identified through a system of stratified random selection. First, student attendance lists were stratified by the major ethnic and nationality groups represented at the school, further stratified by gender if warranted by the group size. Random assignment was then produced from the groups formed through stratification. Out of the twelve middle schools in the two districts, only six schools had enough African American students for stratified random selection. Only one school had sufficient African American students to form gender specific groups. Once assigned, students were asked to return signed parental consent forms allowing them to participate in the focus group interviews. Participating students were also asked to sign student assent forms at the beginning of the interview.

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15 The larger study was funded by a grant from the Spencer Foundation (# 200800069).
Participants for the present dissertation study included forty-eight African American eighth-grade students \( (\text{female} = 23) \). Central to phenomenological research, all participants must have experienced the phenomena being explored and possess the ability to articulate it (Polkinghorne, 1989). In regards to the experience requirement, although currently attending predominantly European American suburban schools, focus group data, census data, and school administrators confirmed most of these students’ previous residency in Detroit. Early adolescence also marks a point that young people become more adept at communication through classroom, recreational and leisurely interactions with their peers (Horner, 2000) thus fulfilling the articulation requirement for phenomenological research.

Table 5

Study participants and school composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Composition</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>School Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>District 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>Mixed Gender</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13% AfA, 78% EuA (&lt;1% school choice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>Mixed Gender</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>AfA 10%, EuA 80% (School Choice 3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>Male Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>AfA 9%, EuA 85% (3% School Choice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>Mixed Gender</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>AfA 8%, EuA 85% (&gt;1% School Choice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>District 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td>Mixed Gender</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.7% AfA 80.6% EuA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School F</td>
<td>Mixed Gender</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.3% AfA 86.3 EuA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative studies tend to have small participant pools because they are purposed to draw out and understand the depth and richness of experiences, as opposed to quantitative research which is purposed to create generalizable results about a given population (Creswell, 2007). With qualitative studies sample size should neither be so large that extracting data becomes cumbersome, nor so small that it precludes a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena of interest (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The participant pool was limited to 48, nearly twice the recommended number in Polkinghorn (1989) but keeping in mind that the data was collected within focus group settings as opposed to repeated personal interviews.

**Data Collection**

Data collection took place during the spring of 2008. The principal method of data collection was focus groups. The second source of data was field notes provided by the moderator and by a second data collector who jotted notes of contextual elements in the community and schools, and during the interviews.

**Focus groups.** The object of phenomenological research is to capture and describe the meanings attached to the lived experiences of a group of people who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). To obtain rich and thick descriptions of urban AfA students’ experiences in suburban schools focus groups were employed as the primary method for data collection. Focus groups compliment the phenomenological approach by offering an atmosphere that encourages participants to explore and describe lived common experiences, while at the same time minimizing researcher experience in the subsequent analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2007). Veteran focus group researcher, David L. Morgan, defined focus groups as, “a research
technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (Morgan, 1996, p. 130). Similarly, Sim and Snell (1996) defined focus groups as “a group interview centered on a specific topic (focus) and facilitated and coordinated by a moderator or facilitator which seeks to facilitate primarily qualitative data, by capitalizing on the interaction that occurs within the group setting” (p. 189). Thus, interactions between group participants distinguish focus group methodology from other qualitative research methods (Botherson, 1994; Wibeck, 2007; Sim, 1998).

Focus groups have been identified as an essential qualitative data collection tool for educational research (Breen, 2006; Morgan, 1996). Focus groups can be combined with other qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, to lend depth, breadth, and clarity to the study findings, as well as triangulate findings from other data collection methods. However, focus groups are also a time honored primary data collection method, with the capability of producing meaningful results on its own merit (Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Morgan, 1996).

Focus groups are particularly advantageous in phenomenological research because the method allows for access to multiple points of view (Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Sim, 1998), and the ability to observe the dynamics of both group interaction and group processes for constructing meaningful knowledge about a phenomenon (Wibeck, Dahlgren, & Gunilla, 2007). Morgan (1996) advised that focus groups have the potential to offer unique insights beyond exploration of narratives, but to also uncover complex behaviors and underlying motivations. Thus, focus groups methodology is most beneficial for observing group and dialogical interaction that is not assessable by other data collection methods (Morgan, 1996; Winslow, Honein, & Elzubeir, 2002).
Focus group methods are also an effective tool for eliciting data from older children and adolescents because of the comfort afforded them in group settings (Horner, 2000; Horowitz et al., 2000; Kitzinger, 1995). Horner (2000) proposed that focus groups are particularly suited to the cognitive and developmental features common to adolescents. First, she pointed out that early adolescents have attained formal operations in their cognitive development, thus enabling them to think more abstractly and solve hypothetical problems. Second, by this age young people have become more adept at communication through classroom, recreational and leisurely interactions with their peers. Third, the significance of peer support at this age may bear upon young people’s willingness to reveal more in the group context than during individual interviews, especially when approaching sensitive topics. Focus group methodology can give insight into the words and patterns of speech that are meaningful to adolescents (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) and members of non-dominant social groups. With this in mind, focus groups can provide opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to tell their stories in ways that are culturally comfortable (Banks-Wallace, 1998). For example Banks-Wallace (1998) noted that the focus group format provided her female African American participants a forum to relate their experiences through their stories; stories are a cultural feature of African American discourse.

To maintain an ethnic match between moderator and group, I moderated six of the seven interviews. The remaining interview was moderated by a European American male. The interviews took place in private spaces provided by the school, during the regular school day. The interviews were audio recorded with a digital device and usually lasted between 45 and 75 minutes to minimize time students were away from their
classrooms. The number of participants in most groups ranged between four and seven, although one group had twelve participants. The group size, in general, was consistent with Morgan’s (1996) recommendation that focus groups should average between 5 to 7 participants to facilitate the high level of involvement necessary to engage the group in discussions about emotionally charged questions.

(*Focus group interview protocol.*) A feature that sets semi-structured interviews apart from other types of qualitative interviews is the use of an interview guide (Roulston, 2010). The interview guide, also called interview protocol is a tool providing the interviewer with procedural prompts, questions, and probes to guide and add detail to the interview (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Roulston, 2010). The protocol also provides a common starting point for each interview, yet is flexible enough to accommodate variation in participant responses (Roulston, 2010).

The interview protocol (Appendix A) was prepared to reflect the theoretical framework of the study and the distinctive nature of adolescent development. Before administering the questions the focus group facilitator and note-taker introduced themselves, a brief introduction to the study was given, and signed assents were collected. Then the recording device was turned on and participants were posed with a series of open-ended questions related to social identity and intergroup relationships within their school and community, and school context issues such as teachers’ cultural responsiveness and cultural sensitivity. When used in focus groups open-ended questions encourages group discussions of salient issues in their own language, and can even take the interview in unanticipated, but significant directions (Kitzinger, 1995). The focus group interview concluded with the note-taker interjecting questions that may have been
overlooked, and to ask if the participants had questions needing clarification about any part of the interview or research study. Small nonmonetary incentives were distributed to thank the students for participating.

**Field notes.** Field notes were collected during and as soon as possible after each interview first to provide descriptions of the participant and interview context, and secondly to record the researcher’s personal reflections. For instance, field notes documented descriptive non-verbal communication expressed by the participants. Non-verbal communication can be indicated by distance between participant and researcher, body movement, as well as modulations in speech characteristics (Gorden, 1980, cited in Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins, 2010). In phenomenological research field notes can assist the researcher in maintaining the bracketing process. These type of field notes can also be referred to as memos, which Groenewald (2004) described as, “field notes recording what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the process” (p. 13).

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis has been described as a two-part process involving reducing the phenomena of interest into essential components and then synthesizing the components in a way that makes sense (Ragin, 1994). Qualitative data analysis has often been referred to as overwhelming (Denardo & Levers, 2002) cumbersome (Kitzinger, 1995) and messy (Breen, 2006) because of the effort required to make sense of enormous amounts of data often generated from multiple sources. An additional challenge specific to the current study was to analyze and synthesize the data in a way that produced valid and respectful
representations of the participants and their experiences, given urban African Americans are a stigmatized group that has historically been represented in a negative light.

A major question posed in qualitative research is, when should analysis commence? Ideally, data analysis should begin as soon as the first focus group interview is completed, to help accommodate the volume of data generated in this type of research (Horner, 2000; Jarrell, 2000; Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). In fact, Horner (2000) encouraged researchers to begin data analysis during the focus group interview, when the moderator probes for deeper understanding and attempts to summarize participants’ comments. Conversely, Plummer-D’Amato (2008) suggested data analysis should begin before transcribing the first interview, when deciding the conventions for transcription such as whether the participants’ words will be recorded verbatim and whether notes on pauses and laughter should be included by the transcriber.

Transcription and conventions. I transcribed most of these interviews. One of the principal purposes of this study was to present the participants’ transition experiences, in their own words. Transcriptions of the interviews are the primary way that the participants’ voices are represented in the research process (Hamer, 2007 Qualitative II course handout). Thus, it was very important that the participants be represented in an authentic, but respectful way. The participants in this study at one time had lived and attended schools in Detroit. Some of them used colloquial English with distinct vocabularies and word pronunciations that were often stigmatizing outside of Detroit. As a matter of fact, in one interview a student remarked that students from Detroit could be readily identified by their “Detroit accent.” However, language use and the change in language use over time, can add significantly to understanding adaptive processes in the
urban-suburban school transition. Therefore, unless otherwise indicated, I transcribed the words of the participants in their entirety and verbatim to capture the richness and detail required for qualitative analysis. The transcripts reflected the participants’ conversations including simple spellings of accents and pronunciations, slang, grammatical errors, non-verbal sounds (e.g., giggles, laughs, ums, clearing throat...), and background noises (McLellan, MacQueen, & Neidig, 2003).

I transcribed the interviews included in this study using the following procedures. The audio files were transcribed as soon as possible after the interview had taken place, and were saved electronically as Microsoft Word documents. Transcripts shared the same formatting features; ten-point Arial font, one-inch top, bottom, right and 1.5-inch left margins, left-justified text, and page number in the right upper corner. Transcripts also included a header with the date, time, place, participant code, and demographics (cohort, race, gender, school type).

**Phenomenological Data Analysis.** Data analysis incorporated and adapted features from the model presented in Moustakas (1994) and in Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004). This model was chosen to explore and make explicit the core or “essence” of the experience by viewing the data as fresh and new (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) advised that Moustakas’s (1994) approach to transcendental phenomenology allows for a uniformity and consistence in analyzing data related to lived experiences. To insure a systematic approach in analysis and to maintain a high level of rigor, this phenomenological analysis employed following steps outlined by Moustakas:
**Epoché (Greek: refrain from judgment).** Vital to phenomenological research is the need for the researcher to acknowledge and set aside previous notions and experiences regarding the phenomenon of interest (Mousakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007). Consequently, although informal analysis may have begun as I reflected on and summarized each interview, and transcribed audio files, I was required to set that aside entirely. To accomplish époché Mousakas (1994) advised analysts to first “obtain a full description of your own experience of the phenomenon” (p.122). I adhered to Mousakas’ (1994) framework by writing a description of my experiences and attitudes related to my AfA ethnicity in school contexts and personal school transition experiences as well as those of my children. Then I analyzed the document I prepared by first identifying all statements related to school transition. Next, I clustered these statements together to create themes and eliminate redundancies. Finally, I summarized the themes to analyze and describe my experience. The description and summary were presented earlier in this chapter in the *Researchers’ Context* section.

**Horizontalization (significant statements) and reduction.** According to Moustakas (1994) the horizon is, “the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinct character” (p. 95). Moustakas (1994) advised to first identify significant statements within the transcript and incorporate them into a table that will display the full range of perspectives concerning the phenomenon of interest. Phenomenological reduction requires that statements that are irrelevant to the research question be removed. Non-elimination criteria include statements that describe a portion of the experience that is necessary to understand the experience and statements that describe an unchanging and
essential part of these participants’ experience. The identification of significant statements and reduction were somewhat an overlapping process in the present study.

Initial coding for significant statements took place at the school level. At this step, I first listened to audio recordings of the interview while reading transcripts to validate the transcription and to get a feel for the participants’ narratives. Then, I took a line-by-line approach to identify whole statements related the participants’ lived experiences of the urban-suburban school transition. Close attention was given to statements that: compare the old and new school; describe how students feel (in general) about the new school and perceived reception contexts in the new school; descriptions of coping strategies used to adjust to the new school, interracial and intercultural relationships, social identity (who they are) in the new school context, and participants level of involvement in activities in the new school. Significant statements for each school were compiled into separate tables.

After identifying significant statements I listened to the audio recording again, to color-code each statement by the participant making the statement. At this point the table was reviewed for redundancies and irrelevant statements, which were removed until only the horizons (textural meanings) remained. This step aided in identifying whether statements represented group or individual descriptions of the transition experience. It also helped to piece together participants’ individual stories.
Table 6

Selected significant statements

- It’s mainly Detroit, that say if a teacher is giving a good and a bad example about something, Detroit is usually the bad example.
- They always say, “Let’s take Detroit for instance.”
- Like there was this one time, like remember that teacher I was talking about? Mr. _______. He was talking to me in the hallway and stuff. He was like, “Yeah, I know you rather be out here, because I know you don’t want to be in Detroit, in some dump hole.” And blah, blah, blah. And you can be more better out here.”
- He racist.

*Clustering and creating themes* (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). At this step, statements were examined to generate thematic statements of shared related topics/concerns, resulting in meaning units (themes). Another table was then created listing themes on one side and significant statements were pasted in the next column as evidence. An unnamed category was included and significant statements that were unrelated to the established themes were pasted in the column next to it. At this stage in the analysis process different perspectives, including those from existing research literature were considered in developing descriptions of the meaning units.

Using Moerer-Urdahl and Cresswell’s (2004) system of pasting significant statements as evidence next to themes had the added benefit of testing whether the statements were actually significant. Consequently, phenomenal reduction continued during this process when redundant or non-significant statements were identified. Moreover, while creating thematic evidence from significant statements provided...
Table 7

Selected thematic units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/ Meaning Units</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A world of differences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Handling conflicts</td>
<td>• It’s less fights here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Out here</em>, they just talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• When they do fight, they just push each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-More rules &amp; Regulations</td>
<td>• Yeah, it’s <strong>more rules too</strong>. (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• It (the rules) be better for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• they say we can’t wear house shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• dye their hair, they get suspended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Six to a table, three to a bench stuff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• you can’t give your food away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• no girls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• You shouldn’t have to pick what table you sit at. You should just go in and sit, wherever you want to sit at.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Singled out and unfair treatment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• They basically be yelling at our table, because our table is straight Black.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Our table last and everything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• All of us (AfA male and female) is, everybody get picked on.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

validation for the existing themes, the process also drew attention to themes that had been overlooked. For instance, when analyzing data from School-B, I had overlooked how well-integrated the students had become within the middle school “experience.” Yet, all of the statements that were pasted next to the unnamed category pointed to these adolescent participants’ typical experiences, experiences shared with majority groups in the suburban schools.

**Textural and structural descriptions.** Themes were developed to describe participants’ experiences. First I created textural description of “what” the experience was like, including verbatim examples from the transcripts (Moustakas, 1994). Although
the participants’ stories were in-part textural descriptions, I also included a section with a condensed overview of what the urban-suburban experience was like at each school.

An additional structural description of “how” participants experienced the urban-suburban transition was also provided. The structural description differs from the textural description by imaginative variation to reflect on and examine how the participants described the structure of their experiences. Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) advise it is the process of imaginative variation that leads to the creation of structural descriptions of the phenomenon. This process questions the validity of an individual theme for describing the phenomenon, or simply, imagining whether the phenomenon can exist without the presence of the theme (van Manen, 1990). It was at this point that I endeavored to capture details like participants’ responses to what they encountered in the urban-suburban experience, variations in the experience, and other insights related to acculturation.

**Synthesis.** At this final step, textural and structural descriptions were combined to create a composite description, i.e., the “essence,” of the phenomenon as experienced at each school. These descriptions were summative and exhaustive accounts, replete with verbatim examples from the transcript, and including field notes when appropriate.

Textural and structural descriptions from all schools were then merged to describe the essential experience of the urban to suburban school transition among African American adolescents by identifying themes that are common to participants in all the schools. This summative account also compared and contrasted students’ experiences across school contexts. Each step of the analysis and corresponding outcomes (with the exception of Epoché) were described in Chapter Five and Chapter Six of this dissertation.
Confidentiality

In a research context, confidentiality means (1) not discussing information provided by an individual with others, and (2) presenting findings in ways that ensure individuals cannot be identified (chiefly through anonymisation). (Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008)

Preserving participant confidentiality is paramount in qualitative research because the rich descriptive data it produces can make respondents easily identifiable (Kaiser, 2009). Participants in this study faced a greater potential of being harmed by disclosure because adolescents tend to be extremely sensitive to peer evaluations.

This study attended to the University of Toledo research protocols insisting that research participants, “…should be de-identified at point of data collection” (Removing Identifiers). In addition to providing pseudonyms to participants, secondary information enabling that had the potential make participants identifiable were also removed or assigned pseudonyms. Pseudonyms were provided for students, school and district personnel, schools, the suburban school districts, and any other locations that had the potential to make participants identifiable.

Trustworthiness

To be taken seriously research, and qualitative research in particular, must pass the test of rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Plummer-D’Amato (2008) defines rigor as trustworthiness; that is, the degree to which the research findings represent reality. In their seminal text, Lincoln and Guba (1985) presented four fundamental criteria for evaluating trustworthiness in qualitative research. First, the dependability of the research takes into account the changing contexts in which the phenomenon was explored over time. Second, credibility is measured by the truthfulness of the research results in representing the participants’ viewpoints. Credibility can be affected by the participants’
ability to express their opinions, as well as issues of censoring and conformity. Third, transferability is measured by the degree to which the research findings can be generalized or transferred to other comparable situations. Finally, confirmability can be measured by the degree to which the results reflect the characteristics of the participants, as opposed to the biases of the researcher(s).

**Dependability.** Several precautions were taken to establish dependability in this study. For instance, Seidman (2013) proposed that phenomenological interviewing can be structured to increase rigor by placing participant responses within context, allowing for an evaluation of consistency in the participants’ responses across the interview process. During the interview process consistency was maintained by following the same protocol in all of the focus group interviews. In addition, transcription conventions were followed to insure uniformity in the representation of the audio files.

**Credibility.** Creswell and Miller (2000) advised that credibility is the extent to which research is considered credible. Lincoln and Guba (1985) named three activities to increase credibility: 1) prolonged engagement, 2) persistent observation, and 3) triangulation (use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories). As a middle-aged African American, I have had prolonged engagement within the culture. Furthermore, I conducted all but one of the focus group interviews with the study participants and have spent excessive time with the data over the past seven years. Triangulation was also achieved in part in the literature review, and comparing my results with the results in similar research using contrasting methodological approaches (i.e., Smith, et al., 2008).
**Transferability.** Similar to generalizability, transferability is the degree to which findings can be applied among different groups, or in different settings. Transferability can be improved by including thick detailed descriptions of the data and participants to assist readers in evaluating whether the scenario described in the research has applicability to the readers’ situation or setting (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). The hallmark of phenomenological research is the production of thick and rich descriptions of participants’ experiences. Thus, transferability in this study was increased through the rich nature of the description of the phenomena, often in the exact words of the participants.

**Confirmability.** Plummer-D’Amato (2008) advised that confirmability can be reached by disclosing the background of the researcher and allowing the readers to draw conclusions concerning researcher bias. Confirmability was maintained throughout the course of this phenomenological study by the processes associated with epoché. I “bracketed” my knowledge and experience of the phenomena of interest. The process was continued by keeping reflective notes of concerning the data as they were explored.

**Summary**

This chapter provided an explanation and description of the methods that were used to conduct this study. An overview of the rationale for using qualitative in general and in particular phenomenological methods in this study was delivered. Procedures for participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and confidentiality were laid out for review. This section closed with measures that were taken to produce trustworthiness in this study.
Chapter Five

Participants’ Descriptions of the Transition Experience by School

This chapter presents students’ descriptions of their transition experiences at each school, following a format similar to that presented in Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004). Each section begins with a short description of the school and focus group contexts. Next, a substantial portion of each section features the participants’ stories of their urban-suburban transition. These stories were constructed from the significant statements of select participants from each interview. Students’ stories were followed by a presentation and descriptions of themes derived from significant statements. After this structural and textural descriptions of the transition experience were provided. The textural description is “what” the urban-suburban experience was like for these participants, while the structural description explained “how” participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the structural and textural descriptions were synthesized to present the essence, that is, the essential qualities of the urban-suburban transition experience for students in each school.

Students’ stories allow the reader to comprehend the range of the school transition experience, even among students attending the same school. In addition, the stories put a human face on research participants. Italicized words were added for clarity. Italicized phrases and words were presented within context of discussions taking place during the interview. Participants’ stories vary in length, depending on how much information participants shared on issues regarding their transition experience. Another inclusion criterion was whether individual student voices could be discerned while listening to the audio recording. Finally, these stories should be read like poetry, to hear participants’
voices, pauses, and inflections. Hopefully, the various degrees to which participants retained or did not retain, what one student described as the “Detroit accent” can be detected when reading these narratives.

School A

Participants’ descriptions of their transition experiences. School A stood out for its earned freedoms program. This was a school-wide intervention where students earn “freedoms” when they met the required criteria. All students began the school year with at the same level of freedom. However, from that time they could either increase levels and earn more freedoms, or decrease in levels and lose freedoms. It was believed that the success of this intervention rested upon students taking responsibility for their behavior and choices. This earned freedoms program was referred to throughout the interview.

One focus-group interview was conducted. The group included 12 students (FEMALE = 6), and the interview was conducted by a White male, accompanied by a White female note-taker. The interview lasted a little over 58 minutes and was sprinkled with liberal amounts of talking and laughter. Because there were so many students there were often simultaneous conversations taking place in response to the open-ended questions. Two male participants, Rondell and Lamont, dominated the conversation; while there were comments made by other students, mostly girls, sprinkled throughout the interview. Following up on students’ references to Detroit the interviewer asked the students if they came from Detroit. Rondell replied, “I think everybody here did.” There were sounds of agreement, without dispute. Several students volunteered that they had arrived in the suburban school within the last year. Later in the interview Lamont revealed that he had
attended the school since the sixth-grade. The significant statements section for this school features the contrasting stories of Rondell and Lamont.

Participants’ significant statements.

Lamont’s Story

My name is Lamont.

I would love to go back to Detroit.

It’s so boring out here.

Ain’t nothing to do.

It’s like super safe…

This school is boring.

I’m used to DPS schools, where you deal with anything.

You can punch somebody in the face, and teacher say, “what happened?”

And you say, “punched him in the face.”

“ok.”

But here, you punch somebody in the face and you get suspended.

You get a fine sometimes.

The teachers here,

they always wanna get up in our faces, and then when we yell back,

they’re like, “Disrespectful!”

Go to the office!”

If they say something to me, I say something back.

They always picken on me.
“What are you doing, what are you doing?”

That’s why I’m always in trouble.

Because, look, I play all sports right?

And they expect me to be a leader, or whatever.

So, if I do one thing wrong,

they get on my case.

Someone else does the exact same thing,

“Oh, don’t do it again.”

If I do it, they’ll be in my face twenty minutes,

yelling about the same stuff.

They don’t care what the other students do!

They could care less about me.

I know, they care a little too much though.

They aren’t my mama or my daddy.

In my class,

I got a whole bunch of friends in there.

So, that’s a good class;

more fun than it is normally.

So, I clown in there.

Then last year we got this different level incentive program.

It’s somewhat working,

but, not really.

Like, cuz if you get suspended,

you automatically drop down one level.

You lose some of your freedoms,
right there.

I got suspended for something stupid!

Sold my Ipod and got suspended for five days for that.

It was mine.

It wasn’t drugs and stuff.

It was an Ipod.

It’s impossible for people not to fight.

Somebody is always not going to like somebody.

It happens.

You can’t stop somebody from not liking you.

No, but I’m saying, especially if you don’t like them enough,

then you gonna try to get on their nerves.

They’ll be like,

“You got something to say to me? Whatup?”

It’s gonna escalate.

The conflict,

it’s gonna escalate,

like into a fight.

You can walk away from a fight,

but there be people that say,

“You a punk, you a punk….”

They outcast people here who look different,

or dress different,

or can’t afford stuff other people can afford.

They outcast people for stuff like that.
And that ain’t right.

***

Rondell’s Story

I’m from Detroit.

I think everybody here… in this group came from Detroit.

I went to school in Detroit.

And, I got expelled from school for hitting somebody,

in front of the teacher.

I’m out here now.

What’s it like in this school?

It ain’t as hard out here as it is in DPS

In the DPS schools,

we can get away with a lot more stuff.

Here we are learning a lot more than in DPS schools though.

They trying to teach us stuff.

We just learn about United States history in class.

We don’t observe Black History Month out here.

Cuz, it’s not a predominantly Black school.

If it was a predominantly Black school they probably would.

The only thing we got in DPS schools is all Black.

And, a couple of White people.

That’s it.

But out here we got different types of people.

In our lunchroom you would see tables with Chaldeans, Black, White.

Some are like all White,
some are all Chaldean,

it’s just mixed.

When I hang out with a lot of White kids, and other kids in the school it’s like,

“Oh, you trying to act White.”

Just cuz I’m hanging out with White kids.

If you hang out with a certain group,

then they gonna say you trying to act like them.

That’s when people call you fake,

you are fake,

I can’t touch you

*Out here there are rules.*

They got these level things.

*Your level is,*

your intelligence basically.

I don’t like that level thing.

That just adds one more thing for people to get talked about.

“Aw, you at *this* level.”

Then you got people who laugh at you because *of your level.*

And then they separate you *in the lunchroom.*

Sometimes I don’t get a chance to eat.

I’m getting tired of this.

It’s like segregated!

It’s just a different way of doing it.

It’s with the level now.

It’s not the race thing anymore,
It’s the intelligence thing.
but it’s still segregation.

You know, what they say about the Black thing?
Black people being to the stereotypes.
Just cuz you from Detroit you don’t gotta act ghetto.
I say to them, “why you act ghetto?”
They say, “I’m from Detroit, so I can.”
Like no, not really.
I’m from Detroit, but I don’t act ghetto.

They said one teacher hated us
And people used to think she was racist,
because last year it was all Black kids and Chaldean kids who got suspended.

It isn’t that the teacher hated us.

She didn’t take nothing!

Last year,

you do anything,

the slightest thing and you were gone.

See, but you all (Black) and the Chaldean kids didn’t realize
that you were doing the wrong thing.

I caught on last year.

I used to think she was racist.

Then I looked, and said to myself;

“these are the same kids that were here last time I got suspended.

The same kids in the hallways,

facing walls,
cussing out teachers and stuff.

You earned the right to get suspended.

All the times I got suspended,
it wasn’t because of the teacher…

I don’t like to fight.

I really don’t.

I’m the kind of person,
you gotta push me months and months to get me to fight.

Romel?

It took me months and months to get ready to fight him.

Because I really don’t like to fight.

It’s kind of pointless.

You got counselors,

they keep hearing the same thing bad thing about you,

they gonna think you’re a bad person.

So, sometimes you don’t want to talk to that certain counselor.

Sometimes you don’t even want to talk to a counselor that works at this school.

You wanna talk to a outside counselor.

I talk to the counselor and they’re like,

“I wish you would leave this school.”

And I’m like, “I wish we could get a different assistant principal.”

Either way it go,

if you done something bad,

you gonna get suspended by him.

I’m pretty sure, he ain’t never got suspended.
Themes. Four intertwining themes were identified in school A’s students’ descriptions of their transition experiences:

1. Teachers’ and administrators’ roles in the urban-suburban transition
2. Peers’ role during the urban-suburban transition
3. Barriers to accessing academic resources during the urban-suburban transition
4. The lingering influence of Detroit during the urban-suburban transition

Teachers’ and administrators’ role in the urban-suburban transition.

Students spent a considerable amount of time describing their teachers, and comparing them to their teachers in Detroit. Suburban teachers were strict and serious about teaching. Any misdeed in the classroom was dealt with quickly and severely. According to Lamont, their teachers in Detroit were indifferent to students’ misbehavior and responded to students’ self-reports of fighting and truancies with a simple acknowledgement, “okay.”

Rondell and Lamont both compared their suburban schools and teachers to their schools and teachers in Detroit schools. Lamont described Detroit schools as chaotic spaces where teachers were very lenient and willing to abide with or ignore students’ misbehavior. For instance, he claimed that a teacher he had in Detroit did not take action when one student hit another student in the face. However, Rondell challenged Lamont’s claim by describing his experience in Detroit schools, “I went to school in Detroit, and I got expelled from school for hitting somebody, in front of the teacher.”

Despite their favorable comparisons of suburban teachers to urban teachers, when asked what they liked least about their suburban school, several students replied, “the
teachers.” Students described their teachers as strict, judgmental, easily irritated, and unfair in administering discipline. They also felt that their teachers would not listen to them, or hear their side of the story before they were disciplined. Several felt that they were singled out for disciplinary action because they were not the highest (academically) performing students or because of their bad reputations preceding them. A female participant offered an example of how she was singled out by one teacher, “I gave my friend a hug one day and the teacher said, ‘I ought to write you up for sexual harassment.’” Another female participant conceded, “Some teachers are fair, but I can’t say all of them are.”

In contrast to his peers, Rondell consistently took the teachers’ perspective when other students made complaints. When students complained about the teacher harassing them or yelling at them, Rondell countered that it was the students who provoked the teachers’ behaviors. When students accused a teacher of being racist, Rondell answered that the teacher was not racist, but that certain African American and Chaldean students continued to make themselves targets by misbehaving. When students complained that Black History Month was not observed in the suburban school, Rondell countered that the school being predominantly White, there was likely no need to distinguish this month from any other.

Students also protested because their suburban teachers’ failed to recognize the accomplishments of African Americans, other than those associated with enslavement. One student complained, “We don’t learn about our background.” The students felt that in general, that the teachers did not care about them. However, Lamont was the exception; conceding that he was placed under extra scrutiny because his teachers did
care about him. Otherwise, students’ narratives were void of descriptions of positive or nurturing relationships with their teachers and other school personnel. Rondell’s revelation that the school counselor wanted him to just leave the school was an example of the antagonism felt by some students.

**Peers’ role during the urban-suburban transition.** As with all adolescents, relationships with peers were an important part of their school experience. Lamont confided that what he enjoyed most about his favorite class was that quite a few of his friends were in the class. Several participants claimed to be friends with students from different ethnic backgrounds, while one female participant added, “I got Black friends, all Black friends.” Lamont, who reported being involved in multiple sports at school, inadvertently gave evidence of cross race-ethnic friendships. When Rondell suggested that Lamont’s White friends laughed at him for referring to them as “nigga,” Lamont defended himself and his friends replying, “Uh-uh, because the people I say, like, ‘what up my nigga’ to, I’m cool with them enough to say that.” Rondell, in contrast, reported that when he tried to make friends with White students, he was rebuffed by other, presumably Black, students for trying to “act White.”

Students described their lunchroom as a very segregated space where students sat at tables strictly demarcated by race and ethnicity. A male participant made it clear:

Like section A,
the first table is all Chaldean.
And then there’s this table,
it’s their group.
Then section B is like all White people.
And then section C is Black people.

Then it go to a White table and a White table again.

Section D is like all White people.

In addition, Rondell believed the lunchroom was further segregated by the amount of freedoms students had “earned.” The amount of freedom students had earned was displayed by their freedom level. The highest level was accorded students who had accrued the greatest amount of freedom through high achievement and good conduct. These students were allowed to enter the lunch room first and sit in specially designated areas. Rondell was at the bottom of the freedom ranking, thus entering the lunchroom last, with little time for interaction with peers.

Students reported that people did not get along well together at school. The subject of fighting came up often during the interview. Students described the conditions that provoke fights in great detail, yet little was said about who was doing the fighting. While Lamont was very vocal about the subject of fighting, both in Detroit and in the suburban schools, there was no discussion of him actually participating in a fight. Rondell, in contrast eschewed fighting, yet he had been involved in fights both in Detroit and the suburban school. Rondell described how after months of provocation, he fought with another African American student during the previous school year. Another female student confessed that she had been suspended one hundred times for fighting when she went to school in Detroit, but had not fought since she started attending suburban schools. Several students offered that fighting was inevitable and beyond their control. One female participant described how fights develop:

When somebody put your name in they mouth.
Like, they callin you out of your name,
right in front of you?

That’s like something you gonna want to confront them about.

You be like,

“Can you stop putting my name inside your mouth?”

Then they start doing something,
something retarded,
like rolling they eyes at you.

When you just trying to make it simple,
so they stop talking about you and stuff.

They start rolling their eyes and grinning you and stuff.

Then it’s time to start scrappin.

Rondell was the one dissenting voice, insisting that students do not have to fight, but had the option walk away or take measures to make themselves less of a target.

In summary, students who were new to the school rarely formed social relationships outside of their race-ethnic group. These types of friendships were discouraged by in-group members who demanded the previous culture be maintained through friendship selection. Yet, in-group relationships were marked by “drama” between members and physical confrontations.

**Barriers to accessing academic resources during the urban-suburban transition.** Although students readily acknowledged the superior academic offerings in their suburban school, there were impediments to access. Students complained about the publically-administered Earned Freedom Program that they believed stratified them by
behavior and intelligence. Rondell criticized the program because it created divisiveness among students, “That just adds one more thing for people to get talked about.” In fact, Rondell qualified the school incentive program as the “new segregation.” Indeed, not only was Rondell excluded from forming social relationships in the lunchroom, but he was also excluded from participating in sports and attending school social events because he occupied the bottom level of the program.

Three of the participants (Rondell, Lamont, and one girl) reported having been suspended from school. The girl did not reveal the cause of her suspension. Lamont stated that he had been suspended for selling his Ipod to another student during school hours. Rondell however, had been suspended several times, at least once for fighting. Each suspension resulted in a level drop in the Earned Freedoms Program. It is evident that teachers and administrators responded differently to Lamont and Rondell. Lamont complained that his teachers were harsh with him because they saw potential in him. Rondell, on the other hand, hinted that his negative reputation often influenced the ways teachers and administrators acted towards him, even those who did not know him.

**The lingering influence of Detroit during the urban-suburban transition.**

When asked to describe what it is like to attend their school, students immediately began making comparisons to schools in Detroit. While they missed the cultural relevance displayed in Detroit schools, most students agreed that their suburban schools surpassed Detroit schools by offering educational opportunities that would prepare them for college. The students were pleased that unlike the racially segregated schools in Detroit, their suburban school allowed them to be around students from multiple cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Similarly, students often compared Detroit to the suburbs. While they
acknowledged that the suburbs were safer and offered better academic prospects, they also describe the suburbs as boring spaces with little to do. Lamont complained, “Don’t nothing happen out here! It’s like, super safe.” Some students expressed a desire to return to Detroit and others maintained weekly contact with Detroit.

Some students seemed to try to create a little Detroit within the school. There was peer pressure among Black students towards cultural maintenance and in-group friendship selection. For instance, when one young woman suggested that they needed to act differently depending on the group that they interact with, Rondell quickly reminded her that students would brand her “fake” for acting inauthentic. Another girl added, “Cuz you act different.” Any change in behavior, even behavior necessary to interact in culturally competent ways, could be construed as acting in a way that did not authentically represent African American culture. According to Rondell, some African American students embraced the stereotypes associated with Detroit, “I say, why you act ghetto? They say, I’m from Detroit, so I can.” Aspects of “acting ghetto” include talking loudly and not talking proper (White people talk proper). However, the interview participants rejected the ghetto stereotype and even broke out into applause when Rondell stated that people from Detroit don’t have to act ghetto.

Then there was discussion about the use of the word Nigga [sic]. There was a hint that the word was used by some White students as a derogative slur against African Americans. Nevertheless, several of the participants used the term, but were conflicted about whether and how they should use it in their predominantly White school. For Lamont, Nigga was a term of endearment used to greet people that he felt close to,
regardless of race and ethnicity. “What up my nigger?” For Rondell however, the word was a source of ridicule when used among their White peers:

You got some White kids, you’ll call them a nigga, like, “what up my nigga,” and they will look at you. Then they will tell their friends later, and they will be laughing at you. Not with you, laughing at you.

Others admitted to using the term, some frequently, but they were trying to stop using it.

**Textural description of the urban-suburban transition experience.** What did the students at school A experience during the urban-suburban transition (Moustakas, 1994)? One of the students’ first descriptors, when asked what it is like to attend their school, was “different.” When asked what was different, one student responded, “It’s like, so many things.” Indeed, the diverse student body was different than their segregated schools in Detroit. Some reported even having friends from different groups. Their suburban teachers and school administrators approached teaching and disciplining differently. The programs, policies, and procedures in their suburban school were different, and had different emphases. The special days and months acknowledged in the suburban school were different. For example, the accomplishments of African Americans was neither acknowledged nor celebrated in the suburban school. The way that they thought about themselves was also different. Behavior and language that was taken for granted in Detroit was embarrassing and referred to in the derogatory term “ghetto” in the suburbs. Along similar lines, life in the suburbs was different than life in Detroit. The suburbs were boring and safe, while Detroit was violent, but missed by some students.

Two words that came up often during the interview were fight and suspension. Some students believed fighting was an inevitable and unavoidable fact of life, while
others wanted nothing more than to avoid fighting. One student stated that she enjoyed her band class because it was a place where there was no fighting. Understandably, school suspensions often came up in conversations about fighting, but suspensions were also prominent in students’ discussions about teachers being fair to students. Thus, a major difference that former Detroit students encountered was schools and teachers conceptions of misbehavior, with fighting being a conspicuous issue. Differences were also encountered in how suburban teachers and schools respond to misbehavior and even what accounted for misbehavior. Some students questioned the authority of the teacher.

They always wanna to get up in our faces, and then when we yell back, they’re like, “Disrespectful. Go to the office!”

“The same kids in the hallways, facing walls, cussing out teachers and stuff.”

**Structural description of the urban-suburban transition experience.** How did participants from School A experience the urban-suburban transition (Moustakas, 1994)? While all students acknowledged the differences encountered in the suburban school, only some students acknowledged that they needed to make personal changes in response to the differences in their suburban school. For instance, one participant advocated “acting differently” to have meaningful cross group interaction. For this young woman the transition experience required some effort on her part. Her effort seemed to pay off. For one thing, she was engaged in the school band program and was able to participate in interesting related activities, like out of town trips to perform. However, little else is known about this young woman’s experience because she did not contribute frequently during the focus group interview.
Rondell also articulately advocated the need to change in response to differences encountered in their new school. Rondell claimed to eschew fighting as an unnecessary activity; he scolded his peers for their misbehavior towards teachers; and challenged students’ favorable and unfavorable depictions of Detroit. Furthermore, he was quite observant of change processes, and was eloquent in his response to students who ridiculed a female participant for advising that they should act differently, that is, change their behavior, depending on the group with whom they were interacting:

Look, if y’all go back to Detroit right now,

y’all been here a good two years now.

You go back to Detroit,

in the hood and try to blend in,

you probably couldn’t blend in.

Not one-hundred percent,

like you used to.

Cuz you have changed a little bit.

Certainly, for students who struggled behaviorally and academically in their urban schools, attending new schools offer opportunities to interact with a wider array of social groups and a chance to make drastic behavioral changes (Kinney, 1993). All the same, this may not have been the case for Rondell. In spite of his obvious intellect and his desire to change, Rondell was not experiencing the social and academic rewards associated with attending suburban schools because he occupied the lowest level of the school’s Earned Freedom Program. Rondell perceived two obstacles; his reputation with teachers and administrators, and his lack of intellect. He described encounters with
teachers, counselors, and administrators who had already formed negative opinions about him, perhaps because of his reputation for fighting. He believed that his intellectual deficits kept him at the lowest level of freedom, blocking him from the basic privileges and making him an object of ridicule among his peers. In spite of his high hopes, the suburban school was an unfavorable context of reception (Schwartz et al., 2010) for Rondell. Structural and social conditions in the new school likely limited the strategies available for him to make a successful transition into the new school setting.

An aspect of change that many students found difficult was negotiating relationships with suburban teachers and administrators. Students responded with guarded trust towards some teachers, and outright dislike and rejection of others. They saw their teachers as mainly as disciplinarians looking for excuses to suspend them, rather than sources of knowledge. Some also believed that they and their parents were powerless in addressing perceived inequities perpetrated by the teachers. This attitude may have been a carry-over from their experience in Detroit schools. There is also the possibility that the students’ responses and beliefs reflected attitudes of bias held by some of their teachers. Nonetheless, some students called for teachers to change as well.

A couple of the students displayed drastic change in the suburban school. The girl who claimed to have been suspended 100 times from Detroit schools had yet to be suspended in the suburban school. Despite his claims of violent behavior in Detroit schools, Lamont was involved in multiple sports activities and had developed friendships across ethnic groups in the suburbs. Besides, he and other students reported that teachers liked him and supported him by giving extra scrutiny to his behavior.
The essence of the urban-suburban transition experience. The essence of the urban-suburban transition experience for students attending School A was primarily a series of responses and adaptations to differences between their old schools in Detroit and their new school in the suburbs. It involved responses to multiple differences within multiple spheres, including: neighborhood, school, authority, policy, and interpersonal and psychological spheres. A prominent issue was the swift and sure response to misbehavior in suburban schools, especially in the case of fighting.

An optimal transition process may have been hindered because school policies and procedures were discrepant with those of their previous schools; by peer pressure from in-group peers towards cultural maintenance; and by perceptions of teacher bias against them. The urban suburban transition was also a highly individualized experience, with students reporting dissimilarities in processes and outcomes. In this interview Rondell and Lamont offered a striking contrast in the range of transition experiences.

School B

Participants’ descriptions of the urban-suburban transition experience.

School B had a behavior and academic incentive program. Students who earned a certain amount of points were allowed to enter what students called the “Accelerated Room.” In the Accelerated Room students were allowed to play games, use electronic devices and have privileges that other students did not have during their lunch period. The Accelerated Room was a room that was separated from the rest of the cafeteria by a large glass window, allowing regular students to look on while accelerated students had fun.

The focus group at School B consisted of three male participants: Wallace, Shane, and Kevin; and two female participants: Catrina and Arielle. Arielle self-identified as

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both African American and Puerto Rican. I conducted the focus group interview, and I
was accompanied by a White female note-taker. This was the longest of all the
interviews, lasting a little over 75 minutes. The participants were well-mannered and
polite towards one-another, allowing each student to share with few side conversations.
There were no dominant voices in this group. At the same time, there were no reluctant
participants.

All five of the students had lived in Detroit at some time. Kevin however came
from Detroit via a nearby majority Black suburban community. The discussion revealed
that at least four of the students (Wallace, Shane, Arielle and Kevin) resided in the
suburban community where the school was located. Kevin and Arielle both lived close to
teachers from their school. Shane lived in a somewhat affluent sub-division. Catrina
confided that she came from West Detroit. During the interview it became obvious that
Arielle, Shane, Kevin, and Wallace had attended the suburban middle school since the 6\textsuperscript{th}
grade, meaning they had likely resided in the suburban community at least two and a half
years. This is in spite of Wallace’s claim to have moved to the suburbs a year and a half
prior. Catrina came later, having attended a Detroit school during the sixth grade. All of
the participants had Eurocentric names, a characteristic that may be associated with
middle class status among African Americans (Cooper, 2011). I have included the stories
of Wallace, Catrina, Shane, and Arielle to demonstrate the range in transition
experiences, as well as common threads.

**Participants’ significant statements.**

**Wallace’s Story**

*My name is Wallace*

I’m laid back.
I’m a good friend, I guess.  
I get along with a lot of people.  
I like meeting new people.  
I used to live in Detroit.  
I’ve been living in out here for like,  
and a year and a half.  
When I first moved here,  
I didn’t really know people.  
But, I would ride my bike around,  
and just meet people.  
Somebody would be sitting on their porch,  
or playing basketball,  
and they were like,  
“Do you want to play basketball with us?”  
And they were mostly like, Chaldeans.  
So, that was how I got to know people.  
And they started introducing me to more people.  
Like there’s a lot of Chaldeans out here.  
A lot of them is like, intimidating sometimes.  
I live around the corner from this school.  
Going to school here, it’s fun, it’s a fun experience.  
It’s like, at our school,  
there’s a bunch of athletic people.  
It’s all athletic.  
I play football and basketball.
Our football team is undefeated.

Our basketball team is undefeated.

Our football team,

I guess you can say,

are the less cooler kids.

But the football team,

we are like a family.

Like, some of the smart people is kind of popular.

Like, a lot of people know them.

*Jewish kids* are made fun of because they always be like, laughing at them.

They be like

“why don’t you get a bar mitzvah, do a bar mitzvah,”

or something like that.

We got a lot of good teachers.

*A good teacher* is like,

somebody who keeps you interested,

and helps you understand it.

I like science because our teacher is like,

real nice.

And she can explain it good.

Or like if you fail a quiz or something,

she lets you make it up.

But if you don’t make it up, it’s your fault.

I like the experiments we do and stuff.

And projects,
Like, we get to do hands on activities and stuff.

*In the sixth grade* we read “The Watsons Go to Birmingham….

Like, that’s the only Black book we ever read.

Of course, I remember it.

*The accelerated room is for kids who make all “A”s.*

It’s kind of like a game room.

They got ping pong.

Just to play a game, basically.

I was planning on playing sports when I get older.

Uh, like an athlete.

Yeah.

***

**Catrina’s Story**

*My name* is Catrina.

I’m smart.

I’m nice.

I’m faithful,

Because, I am always going to church.

Everybody call me a church girl.

I came from the West Side of Detroit.

The White people out here, or Black people from somewhere else, they know when you are from Detroit.

They know how the Detroit accent is.

Like, some of it’s ghetto,
and some of it’s classic English.

And then some Black people, they make it known that they from Detroit.

“Seven-Mile, Seven-Mile.”

At this school,

It’s a lot of activities, they keep us busy.

I’m running track.

Our track team is good.

Our track team is going to be undefeated.

What I like about school?

Hanging out with the friends.

Eating food, eating lunch.

The teachers are very nice.

Miss Biltron, she says she understands us.

She listens.

That’s how she knows us individually.

And she tells us that she loves us,

and that she cares for us.

And if we need anything,

we can go to her.

None of my teachers have ever had something bad to say to my parents about me.

But I don’t like the long hours

And, we don’t go on fieldtrips.

And it’s a lot of groups in this school.

It’s like most people only hang with this certain group.
It’s not really that much of a racial thing, because everybody hang out with everybody. But certain people only hang out with their race. I think it’s easier to make friends with your own race, if you are just coming from, or if you are in a new school. Say, we are just coming from Detroit, and coming to this school, it would be easier for White people, to make a connection with other White people, instead of with a Black person. Because, you know how that is. I run track. And if we win a game most of the girls, they gonna talk to me because I’m winning. But if I was not winning they would like, ignore me. It’s not that important. Some of the Black people go with some of the White people, so that’s not really a racial thing. But some of prefer not to because they think they gonna get talked about. I don’t get on My Space or Crush Spot, because it cause a lot of drama. But I got on it one time in school, and I seen all of the comments that were made, and all of the bulletins that were posted,
and it is ridiculous!

My favorite classes are Math and Social Studies.

I like Social Studies because of the teacher.

He explains it.

Like, we do it ourselves.

But my class is independent, so we basically teach ourselves.

We’re advanced social studies.

To get into the accelerated room you must have,

All “A”s

In there you can have your mp3 player.

I was going to be in there this year,

but I got one “C”

I think they should give everybody an opportunity to go into that room.

Even if you got one C.

I haven’t made my decision about my future yet.

There are so many things.

Like there are three thing I wanna do.

All at the same time.

Okay, I want to be an evangelist,

and I want to do hair,

and I want to be an athlete.

***

Shane’s Story

I’m Shane

I’m smart.
I make good decisions.
Well, sometimes I make good decisions.
The majority of the time.
I came from Detroit.
It’s different here.
Like, when I lived in Detroit, my mom didn’t even want me go around the corner.
But now, I can walk around by myself basically.
But the police out here,
they harass.
One time my friend and my other friend, they were just wrestling.
A White person called the police on us.
And all of a sudden the police come.
They had us against the garage.
And they was searching us.
Saying like,
“You don’t have no weapons on you, do you?”
My dad’s a retired police officer!
At this school,
We got a good sports program.
I play football,
and I’m running track right now.
A good teacher is understanding if you don’t get it.
Yeah, and helps you get it.
Ms. Carlo is a good teacher.

She lets us use everything on a test.

During Black History Month, they don’t do nothing.

They don’t say anything on the announcements.

All they ever talk about is Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks.

Like I can get my dad.

We do Kwanza.

I can get my dad,

and he can come here and tell more stuff.

More than what my social studies teacher can tell me.

_The kids in this school_,

They think just because we’re from Detroit,

they try to make fun of our voices.

They think your whole family probably ghetto.

When I was in seventh grade,

I was in the group with all White people.

And they were trying to make it seem like I was stupid and stuff.

And I was trying to give them ideas,

and they was like,

“What do you know about stuff?”

And then they went along with my idea,

and we ended up getting an A on the project.

Yeah they were trying to take the credit for it.

I just let them.

I was like, “whatever.”
But, like I did most the work.  
And when we got an A on it,  
they was kind of surprised.  
It’s not that many of us here.  
I get along with everybody.  
I don’t be stereotypic.  
I can talk to a smart person,  
without trying to get the answers from them.  
I can be friends with them,  
and I can be friends with a Preppie.  
But they get on my nerves sometimes.  

The accelerated room is for  
the honor roll kids.  
I haven’t been in there yet this year.  
In the future I want to be involved in sports.  
But my dad told me,  
that even if I do make it to the league,  
like he said,  
“You ain’t gonna be in sports forever.”  
Like, you need to go to college to get a degree.  
For after you can’t play sports.  
Or if you don’t make it in sports,  
you have something to fall back on.  

***
Arielle’s Story

I am Arielle.

I’m Puerto Rican

I’m loud.

I’m energetic.

And, I’m really fun.

Like, I know how to party.

I came from Washington DC.

And then I moved to 7-Mile in Detroit.

It’s different here in the suburbs.

It’s safer.

When I first moved here it was all Caucasian.

But a lot of Black people are moving out here now.

When new people come here,

like, they make them feel like they’ve been here forever.

One of my teachers lives two streets away from me,

in the same sub-division.

A good teacher is someone that explains it well.

Like, gives you examples.

And they get you involved in it.

I like this school because the teachers here,

Like, explain it well so we can understand it.

My favorite class is, Language Arts,

because my teacher, she breaks it down.

And we don’t just sit in class all day doing work.
Like, she be coming up with activities that we can do.

We watch movies.

We do stuff like that.

And she always listens.

Like, if we have a story to tell her, she will listen and tell her story afterwards.

And ask questions.

Yeah, like she talks to our parents, and sends them progress reports, and tells them how we’re doing.

*I don’t like the rules in this school.*

I got suspended because I wrote a note.

And it said “LMAO.”

And he said that that was cussing.

Or if you talk loudly in the hallway, you gonna get sent to the office.

*At our school everyone gets along.*

Kids from different groups could mix, but it wouldn’t happen.

Because, people care about their reputation.

*Wallace said,* “Sometimes people say stuff that they don’t mean. It hurts you.”

Like some people say, “Nig.”

They don’t finish saying it.

They just stop there.
Oh yeah, and they be makin racial comments about the Jews.

*People think* if you are from Detroit,

You ghetto.

You talk ghetto.

It’s not just the White people.

Yeah, they think you’re stupid.

And they think your house is smaller.

Like, my friend, she came to my house,

and she was like,

“I didn’t know you lived out here.”

She thought I still lived in Detroit.

Because some people come out here,

but they still live in Detroit.

At school,

sometimes people say things that they don’t really mean.

And you have to remember that they are just playing around.

The accelerated room people.

Like, they carry all their books home.

Like, ten books at a time.

They are like, the first people to the classrooms.

And they eat lunch in the accelerated room.

*The room* for kids who have 42 points,

which is like, 4 A’s, 2 B’s.

You get your lunch first.

Big Deal!
Themes

1. Transitioning to life in the suburbs.
2. Good relationships with teachers undergird the urban-suburban transition.
3. Intergroup relationships and the urban-suburban transition.
4. Typical school experiences as part of the urban-suburban transition.

Transitioning to life in the suburbs. When questioned about living in the suburban community, Kevin blurted out, “I love it!” The four students that lived in the suburbs did reflect favorably on their new community. Arielle noted that in the midst of increasing Black presence, the White neighbor made newcomers feel as if they had always lived there. Wallace, who lived in a predominantly Chaldean neighborhood, found the suburbs a place where he could make friends easily. Wallace, Arielle, and Shane felt safer in the suburbs, than when they lived in Detroit.

However, Shane, Arielle and Kevin had encountered racism in their new suburban communities. Shane gave a dramatic account of how a neighbor called the police after witnessing benign horseplay between two of his friends. Shane reported that at the word of the neighbor, the young adolescents were forced to stand against their garage while the police searched and questioned them. Kevin shared that his father had been profiled for driving an expensive car. Arielle reported that a suburban peer was surprised that she also lived in the suburbs. Her friend had taken it for granted that she was attending the school on an Interdistrict transfer from Detroit.

Good relationships with teachers undergird the urban-suburban transition. All of the students reported good experiences with their teachers. They all readily spoke about their favorite teachers, and they felt that some of their teachers genuinely cared for
them. They recognized good pedagogical practices that promote academic engagement. Students enjoyed their classes because they liked their teachers and because of their teachers’ ability to explain and demonstrate concepts in a way that they could understand.

**Wallace:** I like the experiments we do and stuff. And projects, like we get to do hands on activities and stuff

**Arielle:** Yeah, the teachers, like explain it well, so we can understand it.

**Catrina:** My teacher, she breaks it down.

Students did not report any instances of teachers being partial or prejudiced. When a couple of students made complaints about one teacher, Shane defended the teacher, giving examples to challenge the other students’ remarks. When Kevin complained that he was treated unfairly by a teacher, other students interjected that Kevin was responsible for the way the teacher reacted towards him. During this interview the students did not dwell on teachers’ bad attitudes or lack of teaching skills.

Catrina and Kevin also gave examples of teachers in their previous schools elsewhere, who had gone out of their way to make sure that students learn. Kevin recounted how a teacher in another suburb tutored him at home until he was able to grasp the math concept. Catrina shared how a teacher at the school she attended in Detroit rewarded students with snacks from McDonalds.

Kevin was the only student who had difficulties with his teachers. However, the difficulties were never attributed to race, but to Kevin’s behavior. He admitted to having a reputation for being somewhat of a class clown.

**Intergroup relationships and the urban-suburban transition.** The participants readily talked about groups in school such as the Chaldeans, as well as, religious kids,
nasty girls, accelerated kids, and Preppies. They spoke extensively about the accelerated kids. These were the students who, according to Arielle had acquired 42 points for grades and good behavior. These students were given privileges such as being first to enter the cafeteria and being allowed to enter the special Accelerated Room where they could listen to electronic devices and play games, while their peers who had fewer than 42 points watched. Wallace stated that in the school social hierarchy, accelerated kids maintained a position near the top, while football players occupied a much lower spot. Preppies were another often-talked about but disliked group. Catrina maintained that Preppy girls adhered to a strict dress code including clothes purchased at Hollister and large handbags. She and Shane felt that Preppy girls were often insincere. For instance, they had observed one of them complementing a person, and then later gossiping with someone else about the person she had complemented earlier. While Catrina felt excluded by this group, Shane said they got on his nerves.

After declaring that everyone got along in their school, the students demonstrated varying degrees of intergroup contact. At the top was Wallace, who readily made friends with Chaldeans and anyone else who played sports. Wallace also seemed well liked by AfA peers in the focus group. Catrina was quick to offer a pleasing description of Wallace, when participants were asked to describe themselves. Wallace returned the compliment, declaring Catrina the fastest girl on the track team. Wallace’s only contribution to the discussion about race and ethnicity concerned his t-shirt bearing the image of Malcolm X. Arielle also seemed to maintain a high level of intergroup contact. She reported having non-Black friends over to her house, and seemed to have intimate knowledge about students from different ethnic groups in school. Yet she seemed quite
comfortable with her Black Puerto Rican ethnicity. Shane said that he got along with everyone, but gave little indication that he actually crossed ethnic lines to form friendship. He sat at the Black table at lunch and reported playing with Black friends in his neighborhood. Kevin’s revelation that some Black students are called “White boy” may have referenced his preference for White friends, however, this never came up in the interview. Kevin did however protest when Catrina suggested that the only reason her White team mates spoke to her was because she won races during the track meets. Catrina admitted that as a newer student to the school, she had not yet crossed ethnic lines in friendship selections. Interestingly, both Shane and Catrina reported having been targets of racism by their peers.

One disturbing aspect of intergroup relationships in the school was the pervasive name calling. Minority ethnic groups (i.e., AfAs, EuAs, and Jewish) and new immigrants and nasty girls (however, not nasty boys explained Arielle) were subjected to derogatory name calling. Unlike peers in other schools, these participants did not respond with aggression when confronted with racist remarks. Instead they made excuses for their peers’ name calling behavior.

Participants also encountered name calling from both their Black suburban and urban peers. When recounting the ghetto identity thrust upon them because they came from Detroit Arielle injected, “It’s not just the White people.” This comment suggests that long-time African American suburban residents that perhaps had never resided in Detroit were also involved in the name calling. Carty and Arielle both made excuses for their Black and White peers’ name calling behavior, reminding the group that sometimes people say things that they don’t really mean.
African American participants were also confronted with stigma related to their residence, or prior residency in Detroit. They were made fun of because of the way they spoke with what Catrina called, “a Detroit accent.” Participants claimed that assumptions were made about where they lived and their economic status. Shane gave an example of a time that White students made assumptions about his intelligence. In the seventh grade he was involved in a group project. When he tried to contribute his ideas to the group project he was rebuffed by his White peers because they believed he lacked enough intelligence to make a meaningful contribution. Arielle was forthright, “Yeah, they think you’re stupid.”

**Typical school experiences.** While determining themes, I pasted all significant statements that did not apply to my predetermined themes into a separate unnamed column on the table of themes. Later I looked at all of these statements and discovered that the reason these comments did not fit into the thematic categories that I had constructed earlier was because these statements described what seemed to be typical school experiences. These were concerns that could be expressed by any adolescent attending any school. Although the participants were very aware of issues related to racism, yet their main complaints were not about being stereotyped and discriminated against, but typical adolescent concerns. They wanted more field trips and dances. They liked the food served in the cafeteria, but they grumbled because they didn’t have enough time to eat it. They talked about social media, favorite television shows and school drama. All of the students were involved in, or had been involved in sports at the school. When asked what they wanted the researchers at the sponsoring universities to know
about kids experiences in school, Kevin immediately answered, “Riverside\textsuperscript{16} ‘08’ eighth-grade class is the best in the world!”

They had little to say when prompted to discuss how media depicted different ethnic groups. However, participants did complain about the lack of diversity in their school curriculum. They were aware that Black History Month was not observed in their school, and they were unhappy about it. Even Wallace, who had little to say on issues of diversity, marveled that his peers did not recognize Malcolm X when he wore a t-shirt with his likeness.

**Textural description of the urban-suburban transition experience.** What participants experienced during their urban-suburban transition included supportive relationships with teachers, participation in school related extra-curricular activities and involvement in typical adolescent activities. The students reported a range of intergroup relationship experiences. The students encountered some racism from Black and White peers at school, and in their suburban neighborhoods. Racism and discrimination however, were not topics that they dwelled on. Fighting was only brought up once, when Arielle asked Catrina if she beat a girl up for calling her the N-word when she attended another school. Arielle had been suspended once for writing a note that the principal said contained profanity.

**Structural description of the urban-suburban transition experience.** How the participants in School B experienced the urban-suburban school transition was likely influenced by the length of time they had lived in the suburbs. Although all of the participants had lived in Detroit at some time, Arielle, Shane, Wallace, and Kevin had

\textsuperscript{16} Pseudonym
resided in the suburbs and attended suburban schools for at least two and a half years. Participants’ descriptions of their lives at school were not explained by comparisons to Detroit. Kevin and Catrina referenced previous schools to share examples of exceptional teachers. Catrina entered the suburban school a little later than the other participants, which may account for some of her reticence to seek friends from other ethnic groups.

Participants coped with racism and name calling in different ways. Shane and Arielle appeared to be in denial when they excused the name calling, claiming, “people said things that they really didn’t mean.” Another time Shane took a different approach by stating that he tries to take advantage of opportunities to “teach” his White peers about matters of race and ethnicity. Catrina, who at a previous school attacked a peer for calling her the N-word, now coped by keeping her distance from her White peers and assuming that they did not want to befriend her.

Previous residency in Detroit added another layer of complexity to the transition experience. Participants reported being stereotyped as ghetto by suburban European American and African American peers who were not from Detroit. Thus, although their families could well afford to live in the suburbs, stigma associated with previous residency in Detroit had the potential to limit adjustment strategies available to these participants.

Significant protective factors were in place to undergird all of these adolescents’ transition experiences. Kevin and Shane lived in homes where their fathers were present and involved in their lives. Shane referred to his father’s advice often, and it was obvious that he looked up to him. Shane, Wallace, Arielle, and Kevin’s families had the resources to live in homes in the same neighborhoods as their White suburban peers and some of
their teachers. Kevin, Wallace, and Catrina were involved in athletic activities at school. Catrina also benefitted from substantial involvement in her church. Attending church is associated with higher academic achievement, and lower risk behaviors among African American youth (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013).

**The essence of the urban-suburban transition experience.** The essence of the urban-suburban transition experience for students attending School B included supportive relationships with teachers, and engagement in school activities. For some participants it was in-group bonding, and for others it was both in-group and out-group bonding that preserved their connection to the school context. Catrina’s experience differed a little from the other four participants in that she expressed reticence to explore friendships outside of her ethnic group and seemed to consider overtures from out-group to be insincere. Factors outside of the school, such as supportive and intact families, involvement in extra-curricular activities and church, and higher socioeconomic status, may have also served as protective factors during the school transition experience.

**School C**

**Participants’ descriptions of the urban-suburban transition experience.**

School C had a reputation for high achievement. According to the yearly report for the previous school year, this school had received the Blue Ribbon School status; an “A” on the State School Report Card and over 60 per cent of students were on the honor roll. School C was the only school where AfA interviews were stratified by gender. A total of 12 students (female = 6) participated in two focus groups. Accompanied by a White female note taker, I conducted the back-to-back focus group interviews. The interviews were scheduled at the same time as an all-school assembly. The assembly featured a
group of men who were able to perform feats requiring great strength, as part of their motivational presentation.

The first was with interview with the female participants. It lasted a few minutes short of an hour. The participants were Kiesha, Laquita, Curry, Endia, Jamila, and Kristen. The girls were expressive and engaging; answering questions readily and providing stories as examples. Several reported having lived in Detroit, or were still commuting from Detroit. Endia had attended schools in Lansing, MI; St. Louis; and Indiana, before coming to the suburban school. The length of time that they attended suburban school did not come up in the interview. However, there were references to events that occurred at the school during the previous school year by a few of the participants. After about 50 minutes one of the participants asked point blank, how much longer the interview would last, because they were missing a school assembly. At that point I abruptly ended the interview, and dismissed them to attend the assembly.

The subsequent male interview lasted about 75 minutes. The participants were Roland, Giovanni, Felix, Marquise, Warren, and Steven. All the participants were from Detroit and had transferred to the suburban school at the beginning of or during the current school year. Roland had been homeschooled the previous year. Giovanni did not attend any school the previous year. The others transferred from assorted public and private schools in Detroit.

Early into the interview the principal escorted an additional participant into the focus group. Enthusiastic about the assembly that had just taken place; he gave rather lengthy pep talk to the boys about the process of change. He referenced the assembly speakers’ talk about the caterpillar’s metamorphosis into a butterfly, and reminded the
young men in the group that his expectation was that they would also go through a similar transformation.

This was the only focus group that I threatened to end early; not for misbehavior, but for a failure on the part of participant students to take the interview seriously. To their credit, the students apologized and stopped their heavy bantering when I asked them to return to class. The interview proceeded smoothly, for the most part, afterwards. Oddly, the students assigned themselves, as well as their friends, aliases during the audio recorded conversation. Giovanni asked if the “Feds” would have access to the audio recordings. Once during interview the jesting became too personal and presented the possibility that one of the students would lose face. Warren skillfully steered the conversation into a different direction. Not ready to return to their regular classes, towards the end of the interview the participants turned the tables and began to ask the note taker and myself questions about our educational interests and other aspects of our lives.

**Participants’ significant statements.** During both interviews at School C I found it a little difficult to pinpoint what the transition experience was like for the students. The girl’s may have been preoccupied by the assembly that they were missing. The boys, on the other hand, may not have been wholly sincere. They admitted during the interview that joking around was their usual behavior when they came together, even during classes. Consequently, the three participants’ stories below are not as comprehensive as those from other schools. But they are unique. Roland’s story includes his entire, but short contribution to the interview. Curry’s story gives the perspective of an African American who had attended several schools, but urban-suburban transition was via a
private Christian school where she and her sister were the only Black students.

Giovanni’s story gives the perspective of a 16-year-old young man who in the eighth grade, was already hovering at the academic precipice.

**Roland’s Story.**

I’m Roland

I would describe myself as African American,

I have a thing here on my nose from when I had the Chicken Pox.

I have a birthmark on my cheek,

I guess that’s it.

I didn’t go here last year.

I was home schooled for a while.

About a year.

It was easy.

But I got bored,

because I was getting through with my homework so fast.

And I was waiting for my friends to come home from school.

I was waiting for them to play basketball with me.

I’m going to go to college.

*I’ve never been suspended.*

Black people,

they are mistreated in White schools.

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**Curry’s Story**

*I’m Curry.*

This the second best school that I went to.
When I was in sixth grade,
I went to a private school,
a Christian school.
And that school, as far as education goes,
it was great.
But when it comes to conflicts,
I was the only African American sixth-grader in that school….
And so me being African American,
I was treated different than everyone else.
So I chose between being treated right and education,
I chose this school.
But at that school,
education’s number one.
The only thing they don’t celebrate here is Black History Month.
I brought my social studies book home one day,
and my daddy told me back in the day,
they didn’t even have black people in the social studies book.
All they talk about was slavery.
And now you got people talken about,
like this one dude that went to war,
or led a war or something.
But, I feel uncomfortable when they talk about slavery.
Especially in those pictures… when they get whipped.
Or, you know how there only be one or two black people in the movie,
and they say they look like us?
I hate that.
What’s it like to live out here?

Back in Detroit I was never able to walk around like I can here.

Like I was only able to walk like, from the tree to the house.

I wasn’t able to go far.

I was walking home one day out here,

and there was this White man in a van,

and he thought I was crossing the street,

but I wasn’t,

I was turning and he was like,

“Hey, damn, you got a fat ass.”

Then I tell my mama that he was following me home.

I was scared.

I was crying.

I gave it (his license plate number) to my mom,

and my mom reported it.

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Giovanni’s Story

I’m G-Rock

I am:

An African American male,

heavy set,

funny,

and a scrapper.

That’s about it.

I didn’t go to school at all last year.

This school is like a regular school, really.
It's a lot more rules.

They too strict on everything.

In Detroit,
like, they used to let us talk on our cell phones during lunch.

But, it’s less fights here.

Every time I ate lunch at school in Detroit I got sick.

But now they got that good lunch here.

They let us decide where we want to sit at in the lunchroom.

Most of us sit at one table because most of we friends.

And, that’s where most of the attention is at.

They basically be yelling at our table because our table is straight Black.

Our whole table.

But, ain’t nothing gonna happen if you go to a different group.

We’d get along good if everybody stop trying to act tough.

Even though there are some racist White people around here, there are still some good White people.

My friend Brett, he White.

He cool.

He come over my crib sometimes.

He hook me up and we go to a party sometime.

They be over exaggerating school though.

That’s how I feel.

Okay, they say that you have core classes that you need.

They say that’s what’s gonna help you go through life.

What the use in taken
math,

science, 

social studies, 

and history?

They be havin you doin all this stuff,

and you be looken like,

“What’s this got to do with my life later on?”

It’s a couple of old folks that told me that they took all the classes,

and when they got older they didn’t really need it.

They felt like they just wasted their time.

Right now, I believe them.

My future plans are stayin alive.

That’s right, stayin alive.

That’s the best thing ever.

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Themes.

1. Transitioning to world of differences.

2. Relationships with teachers and administrators during the urban-suburban transition.

3. Peer relationships during urban-suburban transition.

4. Conflicting feelings about being from Detroit during the urban-suburban transition.

5. Transitioning to the suburbs.

6. Transitioning while standing at the educational precipice.
Transitioning to world of differences. At the start of the interview, I posed the initial interview question, “What’s it like to be a student here, at this school?” The immediate response was comparative, “You get a better education.” The student meant that he had access to better education in the new school compared to his previous school in Detroit. It turned out that this was the first year at School C for all of the participants in the male group. Upon hearing that early comparative response I veered a little from the protocol to ask them how this school compared to their previous schools. Felix replied, “Man, it’s different!” Marquis followed with, “It’s way different!” They gave the following examples throughout the interview.

“It’s more rules.” There were not only different rules in the suburban school, but there were also more rules to govern their behavior. Some of the behaviors targeted in suburban schools have been acceptable in their previous schools. They observed that there were school rules that prohibited them from wearing their loose sagging pants, but there were no rules against White boys wearing skin-tight girl’s pants (taboo in Detroit at the time). In the cafeteria there were rules for where they sat each day. Besides, even though they all agreed that food was better in the suburban school, there were rules governing what they did with their food while in the cafeteria. For instance, they could not share food with students at other tables. There were even rules governing how they interacted with the girls in school.

“Harder work.” The work in suburban schools was more academically challenging. Although they were mainstreamed in most of their classes, all of the participants spent one class period in an academic intervention designed for students who were not achieving grade level scores in math, as determined from previous test scores. In
spite of the increased academic rigor, the young men perceived a positive difference in their suburban teachers’ competency. “All the teachers do their job here… Not like in Detroit.” They believed that their suburban teachers were superior to their previous teachers in Detroit, and they were glad about it. The school and classroom environments were also perceived as less chaotic and more controlled than those in the Detroit schools. “There are less distractions in the classroom.” “It’s less fights here.”

Nonetheless, they also found differences in cultural values within their new school. Black History Month was widely observed and celebrated in Detroit schools, but went largely unnoticed in their new suburban school. This omission left participants from both groups disgruntled. Music and musicians that were well known and highly valued in Detroit, were unknown and unvalued in the new suburban school. The following discussion between male participants is an example.

Steven: Most people didn’t hear about Tupac.

Marquise: A lot of people didn’t know. Because Lindsey, she didn’t know who Tupac or Biggie was.

Giovanni: Everybody keep asken me who Left-eye was because I did my report on Left-eye. Everybody be like, “Who is Left-eye?”

Warren: Everybody know Fifty-Cent, because he friends with Eminem. Eminem White. All White people know who Fifty-Cent is.

Concerning what it was like to attend School C, female participants in consensus answered “boring.” Throughout their interview, no direct comparisons were made to Detroit.
Relationships with teachers and administrators during the urban-suburban transition. Students in both groups gave mostly positive reports about the teachers in School C. Steven gave the example of a teacher who did not wait for students to ask for help.

Like some people don’t like to ask for help, but she’ll come to you. Like sometimes your parents be like, “we can’t read your minds,” but she is one of those teachers that be like, read your mind.

Marquise also noted that teachers in the suburban school “will help students learn.” The girls gave several examples of their teachers’ positive qualities.

“The class, the class I like is Miss Berdan’s though. She’s pretty cool.”
“I like Mr. Boyd. He’s really easy. He never yells.”
“I like Miss Collese, she’s crazy.”
“I like Miss Stelapas, cause she always keeps it hype in the classroom.”
“My all-time favorite teacher was Miss Alt, because she was like, really nice.”
“Mr. Carn is a good teacher… he teaches it in a way… you can understand it.”

Nonetheless, participants from both groups had some complaints about teachers. Participants from the male group felt that despite their poor academic performance, teachers promoted them “just to get you out of their hair.” Another complained that some teachers, “just want you out of their class.” Marquise emphatically declared that one of his teachers was a racist. Warren believed that teachers showed favoritism to White students over Black students. Steven was offended at one of his teacher’s constant use of the word “ghetto.” Felix felt vulnerable and picked-on by the teacher when he was the only African American in the classroom.
Conversely, participants in the female focus group complained that some teachers did not accommodate their extra-curricular activities. All of the girls were involved in school and community sponsored sports. The girls who were in advanced classes complained that the teachers would not slow their pace or stop to answer questions. Some of them also believed that teachers gave preferential treatment to high achieving students over average students. Kristen felt that a teacher picked on her because she didn’t like her, while Endia hinted that race was the factor causing one of her teachers to target her and another Black student for discipline.

The two groups showed a marked contrast in their opinion about school administrators. The girls disliked the principal. One declared it in no uncertain terms, “I just don’t like Mr. ____. He’s always yelling.” They were offended when the principal and vice-principal publically singled out African American boys for discipline. In fact, Endia felt that the administrators had breached the rules of propriety in their treatment of the boys in the cafeteria:

In lunch they will go over the loud speaker and they will be like, “Pull your pants up.” When they could just as easily like, get their attention and talk to them properly rather than going through the whole lunch room saying it all out loud. Another female participant stated that she borrowed a male friend’s pants and wore them in the style favored by her AfA male peers to test if she would be singled out and reprimanded for “wearing sagging pants.” That she was not chastised for dressing inappropriately signified to these students that the teachers discriminated against AfA males.
The boys conceded that they were highly scrutinized and often singled out for discipline. Marquise observed, “I think we get picked on more.” Warren gave several examples of how the African American boys were either singled out by the school administrators. Yet, several of the male participants really liked the principal, in spite of his sometimes being as Steven stated, “a pain in the butt.” Steven compared him to a parent, and both Marquise and Giovanni claimed that he was the best principal that they ever had. While agreeing that he was a good principal, Warren suspected that the principal had ulterior motives. “He only cares because he wants us to play sports,” Warren insisted.

**Peer relationships during urban-suburban transition.** As expected, peer relationships were very important for all of these adolescent participants. For the male participants however, peers were particularly important. Marquise gave an account of what it was like for them at the beginning of the school year, before they had formed friendship networks:

When we first started, because like didn’t any of us really talk at the beginning of the year…. Everybody didn’t really talk, so we was like all to ourselves. Didn’t nobody really get into trouble.

The new male students did quickly form a bond with each other, “most of us sit at one table, because most of we friends.” This bond did not extend to African Americans who had attended the suburban school for some time. They explained that all of the Black males sit at the same table, “Except for like, the Black kids who went here last year.” Their group was quite insulated, thus when asked who the most popular group in the
school was, they answered themselves. They believed their group was the most admired in the school.

“Like when we come here, everybody say, ‘Wow!’ when you play sports, ‘Wow, I wish I was you.’”

“But like, they think you rich because, you got different pairs of shoes and junk. It’s crazy.”

At the same time, the male participants recognized the liabilities that were associated with their close relationship. Their typical group behavior included constant joking and bantering back and forth. They readily admitted this behavior caused them to lose out on educational opportunities in classes where they were together. This was the case in the academic intervention class that they attended together. This may have been one of their most important classes, yet they reported that they accomplished little in this class because they spent most of their time there joking around with each other.

The female participants had a much more sophisticated understanding of the social groups in school. For instance, they were much more aware of groups in school and how groups interacted with one another, as well as hierarchy of groups. When asked to name groups in school they listed the Preps, Emos, Nerds, Scenes, Skaters, “Ghetto People,” and Flunkies. The Preps were at the top of the social hierarchy and Emos were at the bottom. The Flunkies were, “People that are dumb, that really don’t care.” They may have been referring to some of the participants in the male focus group. When I asked who the Ghetto People were, the girls replied with no shame, “us.”

The girls were also aware of the great variety of ethnic groups in school. During the course of the interview AfA female participants demonstrated empathy for the new
immigrant students who experienced alienation because they were considered culturally
different. While conceding that they were the largest of the minority ethnic groups in the
school, the girls were also very conscious of their overall small number in school. Curry
mused, “If only we could like multiply, there’d be a lot of Black people in this school.”
The girls felt that they got along with other groups in school. However, with the
exception of Kristen the interview participants had few friends from other ethnic groups.

“We get along, we just choose not to sit together.”

”We don’t communicate with them.”

“We don’t have a problem with them… we just don’t try to be friends with them.”

**Transitioning to the suburbs.** Life in the suburbs was discussed extensively
during both focus group interviews. The female participants reported feeling safer in the
suburbs and having more freedom to walk throughout their neighborhood, than when
they lived in Detroit. Nevertheless, the girls shared several stories about being followed
and subjected to both sexist and racist taunts by drivers as they walked along these
“safer” suburban streets.

“I was walking to my bus stop, and this one black guy, he was like thirty-
something. He pulled up behind me, he was like, ‘You live around here?’ And I
didn’t say nothing. I just kept on walking. And he kept on bothering me.”

“We was walking to Felicia’s apartment. And there were these girls in this black
car. They were Caucasian…. She yelled out the window, ‘Nigger.’”

Two of the incidents described were serious enough, that they were reported to the police.
Endia, in particular, was aware of the suburban community’s reputation for racism, “It’s
been stated and witnessed that ____ has the biggest population of racists... It’s not just
gainst Black people, it’s against a whole bunch of others as well.”

Several of male participants, on the other hand, did not feel any safer in the
suburbs than they did in Detroit.

“To be honest, I feel safe one minute, and another minute I don’t. Because in
Detroit, I mean it’s all cool and all, but I don’t feel safe over here.”

“It’s like you feel safe in Detroit because you know everybody who go to your
school, right? Out here they be makin those bomb threats, Emos be talking about
they gonna shoot you and all that.”

“I feel the same cause some people, some people they don’t like Black people, so
much that they might come try do something to ya, while you walkin down the
street. Then, while you in the hood, somebody don’t like you, they try and do
something.”

In addition, the male participants reported being profiled and discriminated against in the
local stores. Giovanni said that every time he shopped at one grocery store, the same man
was called from elsewhere in the store, just to follow him around. When I asked how this
made him feel, he replied, “I think it’s disrespect.”

**Conflicting feelings about being from Detroit during the urban-suburban
transition.** This theme was demonstrated among male focus group members only. The
participants were aware of the stigma that was associated with Detroit. Felix was
embarrassed when his suburban peers asked him if he was from Detroit. He answered,
“No, I’m from Highland Park.” Although the participants were quick to point out the deficiencies in some of the Detroit schools, they still identified with Detroit and its unique culture. They were perturbed when teachers and peers referenced Detroit in disparaging terms. Warren was disturbed by his White peers’ stereotypical descriptions of Detroit. They complained that their teachers often used Detroit as the example, when explaining poor social outcomes. Steven bristled when one teacher pulled him to the side to remind him of how well he had it in the suburban school, rather than being in some “dump hole” school in Detroit. Participants even challenged each other when Detroit was poorly referenced.

**Marquise**: Yeah, you have to give it to them, all the teachers do their job…. Not like in Detroit. In Detroit they be, “Do problems one through twenty, I’m going to sleep or I’m watching the game.”

**Warren**: No, not all schools. Don’t be coming at Detroit like that.

**Marquise**: (apologizing) My bad, my bad.

**Felix**: You use to go to those “wak” schools. That’s your problem. Blame that on your mama, not Detroit.

**Transitioning while standing at the educational precipice.** Four of the six male focus group participants transitioned to suburban schools even as they questioned either the usefulness of school or the importance of certain core subjects in the school curriculum, and were at risk of dropping out of school. I asked the question, “What do you think schools can do to make things better for students?” Steven immediately responded:

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17 Highland Park is a small, primarily AfA (93%) city that is nearly completely engulfed by Detroit.
To be honest,

I wish there wasn’t no school,

but if there wasn’t no school,

I think we’d be dumb!

I don’t even think we’d know how to say “the.”

I think it’s good to have school.

But, sometimes I don’t.

You know how sometimes you just feel like being lazy,

and you don’t want to do no work?

Well, sometimes that’s how I feel.

I do be thinken that we do need school because,

you will have to fill out a job application one day.

And you is gonna have to read.

A deeper look at some of Steven responses suggest that he was struggling academically. He was in an academic intervention class with other students who had recently transferred from Detroit schools. He also hinted that some of his teachers had already given up on him, “These other teachers don’t care. If you get a D or an F in they class, they say you don’t wanna learn.”

Steven’ remarks were a catalyst for Giovanni to build a case for dropping out of school altogether. He didn’t understand how school connected to his current situation or his future plans. Some older people he knew supported his point of view, claiming that what they had learned in school had not proved to be useful in their lives. Then Giovanni colorfully presented the notion that he was spending too much time in school.
I’m here from 8:40 in the morning to 3:00 in the afternoon.

I’m spending more time here than at my house.

I might as well bring a toothbrush,

a pillow and a comforter.

Finally, he shared what may have been a hypothetical scenario to justify dropping out of school.

Put yourself in this position right now.

Say your family was poor and everything.

And it’s hard for your mama to get a job.

But you, you’ve got a man who offered you a job.

But school is cutten it off.

School’s cuttin off some of that cake.

Felix and Marquise questioned the usefulness of learning science, and astronomy in particular. Marquise complained, “I don’t think that science is ever gonna help me in life.” Felix agreed, “I think you should only have science if you want to be a scientist.”

While Roland remained silent, Warren was the lone voice of dissent. He insisted to the others that schooling has future benefits. He openly declared the value of education, “It’s all gonna pay off.”

**Textural description of the urban-suburban transition experience.** What was the transition experience like for participants at School C (Moustakas, 1994)? The male participants at School C provided some evidence of what the immediate transition experiences to suburban schools entailed for students who had formerly attended the urban and more impoverished Detroit schools. They were faced with a world of
differences such as the schools’ ethnic composition, norms regarding dress code and schoolwork, and behavioral expectations related to interactions with teachers and peers, to name a few. Race, ethnicity, and former place of residence took precedence in the way they were viewed by others in their new suburban context. They experienced a degree of social alienation from AfA students who had attended the school longer than they had, but were able to form friendship networks with the AfA students who, like them, were new to the school.

There seemed to be attempts made by the school to help these new students align their social behaviors and academic work with the suburban school’s expectations. The students were enrolled in special classes to help bring them up to speed academically. They were encouraged to participate in extracurricular sports activities. They attended out of town field trips. Students mentioned one such trip to see a baseball game in Toledo the previous week. They were also closely scrutinized by school administrators, especially in the lunchroom. In addition they were given frequent “pep talks” by the school principal, such as the one given during the focus group interview.

Most of the participants from the female group had likely been in the suburban school for a longer period of time. Most if not all were involved in sports activities. Some were enrolled in the more rigorous advanced classes. Their primary concerns were not related as much to race and ethnicity, but what may be viewed as typical suburban middle school hassles, such as, juggling between school and extracurricular activities. Although they had a sophisticated understanding of the ethnic and social groups in the school, their primary friendship networks were limited to their own ethnic group. They were well
aware of racism in their community and school, but did not directly attribute it to problems at school.

**Structural description of the urban-suburban transition experience.** How did the participants in School C experience the urban-suburban transition (Moustakas, 1994)? For some of the male participants, transferring to the suburban school was likely their last chance to redirect their academic and social trajectories. Thus, how they transitioned took on greater importance.

For the young men, who were all new to the school, the transition experience required a huge amount of adjustment to a world of differences both in the school and in the community. These young men, for the most part, leaned towards the Separatist acculturation orientation. Their attachment to their previous community was evident in their primary use of Black colloquial English with no attempts to switch codes. They students also continued to dress in the large “sagging” pants without belts, even though they violated the new school dress code.

These students were marginalized in some ways from their student peers. They sat together at the lunchroom table and did not mix with the AfA students who had been in the school longer than them. They found a great deal of comfort in their bonds of friendship with other new students from similar backgrounds. While with their friends, these young people were able to retain a reassuring link to Detroit, the place where they and their culture were understood and valued. These types friendships are also important factors in forging a sense of connectedness to their new surroundings (Juvonen, 2007) providing them with a place of belonging within the new school.
These young men acknowledged that stereotyping and discrimination existed in their school, but they did not have the strong affective reactions displayed by Black students who had been in the community longer. They showed little evidence of internalizing the stereotypes held against them and believed that they were valued and envied by their White peers for their athletic prowess. These less angry reactions were similar to those displayed by very new Arab adolescent immigrants who acknowledged stereotyping and discrimination, but did not share the same strong reactions about discrimination as their peers who had been in the US longer (Kumar et al., 2015). Thus, their relative isolation may have a protective effect against the effects of discrimination.

There were indications that the participants were making small steps in the acculturation process. Steven was beginning to realize that their friendship sometimes limited their ability to have a positive learning experience. Their typical behavior when together included incessant joking and teasing, even during class. Steven, for this reason preferred not to be in classes with his friends. They also inferred that they needed to change in other ways. For instance, fighting and acting tough – a highly valued quality when in Detroit schools – was no longer necessary in the new school. When asked how kids get along in school, Steven replied, “We get along. We’d get along good if everybody stop trying to act tough.” In a different way, Giovanni was also changing. He reported developing a friendship with a White friend outside of school.

The female participants, who had attended school longer leaned towards a separatist orientation in friendship selection, but also displayed an integrationist approach in other areas. They did interact with students from other groups in classes and in sports activities. They were aware of the different groups in school and understood how they
interacted. They had also integrated well enough into the school culture to begin to access the academic resources associated with attending the suburban school. It appeared, based on statements made by some participants that they were in the advanced classes. All of the girls seemed to relate well with their teachers and believed that many of their teachers genuinely cared about students and were cognizant of their (students’) needs.

All of the participants perceived the school, in many ways, to be a supportive and favorable context of reception. They felt valued for their athletic abilities, and were encouraged to participate in sports. However, they also believed that they were being stereotyped. While they found the principal to be annoying, for the most part, they believed that he had their best interests at heart. They had mixed feelings about some of the teachers, but in general felt that the teachers were there to help them learn. Perceived unfavorable reception contexts included the unbridled stigmatization of Detroit, being under constant scrutiny by school administrators, and the devaluation of cultural traits associated with Detroit, such as dress and speech. They were also bothered by the way the African American males were publically targeted for discipline.

The essence of the urban-suburban transition experience. For the students at School C the transition experience varied by amount of time in the new school. For the male participants who were very new to the school the transition experience required adjusting to multiple differences between the old and new learning contexts. Male participants tended to interact primarily with other African American newcomers from Detroit. Their transition was supported by strong friendships with other new students and perceived support from the school administrators and teachers. For the girls, the transition at this point was a more cohesive experience. They no longer assumed questions about
school required a comparison to Detroit to be adequately answered. For them, school was no longer different, it was just school.

**School D**

**Participants’ descriptions of their transition experiences.** The focus group at School D consisted of seven students (\text{FEMALE} = 4). I conducted this interview, accompanied by an Arab American female note-taker. The interview lasted a few seconds over 50 minutes. The interview was rushed because we were only allowed to keep the students for one class period. School D had the lowest proportion (8%) of AfA students of all the schools participating in this study. Interview responses suggested that two or maybe three participants had lived in the suburbs for some time and had attended School D since the 6th grade. The other students had recently transferred from Detroit schools, and one from a school in Atlanta. The interview was dominated by a participant named Andre’, who described himself as “articulate.” Two other young men, Josh and Ryan, shared quite a bit as well. The young women in the group shared, but not as readily. Notable remarks were rendered by Becky, Brittany, and Michaela. Becky, who had lived in the suburbs for some time stood apart from the rest of the group members because she chose to socialize with White students only. The beauty of this interview was that the experiences of AfA students who had been in the school for some time could be compared to those who had been there only a short time.

Ryan’s story presents the perspective of a student who had made the urban-suburban school transition some time ago. Ryan comes from a mixed ethnic background, but identifies as Black. The urban-suburban transition is still a new experience for Andre’, who enjoys expressing himself. Josh is also new to the suburban school, but
comes from another urban area, Atlanta. Josh presents the perspective of a student who is
trying to find his niche.

Participants’ significant statements.

Ryan’s Story

My name is Ryan.

Here’s how my friend, Michaela described me,

“Ryan is not like that talkative, but he do talk every now and then.

He quiet.

Every now and then he can be nice.”

Even though I’m mixed, I am Black,

Andre’ says I’m Black.

I’m from Detroit,

but I have lived out here for a while.

Most of my neighbors are Chaldeans.

I only know four other Black families that live out here.

People out here make assumptions when you come from Detroit.

This lady was giving me a ride home,

and she went into the store to get something to eat.

She told me not to steal her car.

She was like, “Please, don’t steal my car.”

It was my friend’s mother.

I think she was mixed.

Yeah, she was like Black and White, I guess.
She told me not to steal her car.

Please don’t steal my car!

I’m from Detroit, but I don’t know how to steal.

I never stole from someone when I was in Detroit!

I have attended this school since the sixth grade.

We don’t acknowledge Black History Month here, but they give us Martin Luther King Day off though.

That’s it.

In one class, we did commemorate MLK.

She had us writing an essay about it.

In the lunchroom kids from different groups sit together.

I sit at our Black table.

And then, there is just a bunch of Chaldeans sitting together.

Oh yeah, the Chaldean boys don’t like us going out with Chaldean girls.

They will want to fight us and stuff.

You will have to deal with her brothers, and just like, people she’s not even related to.

Cuz, I was dating a Chaldean girl.

One of my teachers is constantly trying to get us in trouble.

I don’t know, they (teachers) just follow us down the hallway, keep an eye on us and stuff.

And like, send us to the office for the simplest things.

Like, I’ll get suspended for having my pants sagging.

Then another kid comes in with his pants sagging, and he gets away with it.
Like, I get suspended for saggen my pants for something like three days.

And another kid gets into a fight, like a real bad fight,

and he only get suspended for the same days I got.

*There are rules in this school.*

It’s probably like about three months ago,

they put down this green table *in the hallway,*

and you had to stay on one side of it.

*And at our lunchtime,*

we trying to keep, like our table together and stuff.

And so first, they move our table to the front so they can keep an eye on us.

And then, they just split us up today.

Now I sit with people I don’t know.

But like everybody looks at us a different way though.

Like *teachers,* if they see a gang-sign on the wall,

they’ll ask our table about it.

No other table.

One time they spray painted the school,

*the Librarian* came up to me and asked me if I had anything to do with it.

*After school,*

they tell us to go home.

They walk us down the catwalk and stuff.

*I have one teacher,*

she just sits on her desk,
crosses her legs,

folds her arms,

and just stare at you.

*My social studies teacher is different.*

He like, encourages you do more stuff.

You like, don’t do *too* much.

In ten years I *will still be* in college.

***

Andre’s Story.

*I’m Andre’.*

I am very articulate.

*I came here from* Detroit.

*Now,* I live down the street *from the school.*

It’s so quiet *here.*

It’s so quiet you can hear somebody drop they pen,

outside.

All you hear is a bird.

*In my neighborhood* it will be like me and a whole bunch of Black people,

and there will be like a couple of girls or something,

and *White people* walk across the street...

It’s many ways you can explain being a student at this school.

My first year here *at this school,*

a kid called me the N-word.
If you are from Detroit,
Like, people *here* ask you,

“Have you ever been in a gang?”

Or like,

“Have you ever shot somebody?
Or, have you ever been shot?”

A kid asked me that before.

Another assumption people make about Black people,
they figure just because you come from Detroit,
you know how to steal.

Although that’s partially true,

from my experience,

Still, you shouldn’t make that assumption about somebody.

*There are* different people *here*.

people from different countries,

different backgrounds.

Caucasian, and uh, Polish, Puerto Rican *and* Asian.

They stay away, they stay to they-self.

They don’t go around other people.

They wouldn’t say anything about *me* hanging with Chaldean boys.

No, because nine times out of ten,

all guys are the same.

Like, kids who have been here for a while,
are the ones who conversate or communicate with every different race.

Some who have been here since last year or this year,
	hey communicate with they own kind.

They don’t communicate with everyone.

They, the students, basically think it’s different,

like if you Black you should hang with Black people.

At this school,

if you get into a fight,

there’s no such thing as self-defense.

If you getting jumped,

what you supposed to do?

Just stand there?

Six kids come up to you,

you just gonna stand there?

You gonna get suspended anyway because there was a conflict.

So you might as well fight back.

But, then they say there is no such thing as self-defense.

They said we should walk on different walls instead of us being bunched up,

because some kids complaining about they get bumped into.

They books fall down because kids walk around with books all the way up to here,

_to all they classes.

I’m wondering well dang,

how can you see?
Do you even know where you goin?

_In the lunchroom they separated the boys who sit at the Black table._

Like they basically spreaded them out…

They split them all up.

They put them all over the lunchroom at different tables.

Teachers be talking about us.

She be like,

“Look at them.”

That’s how they do me...

Cuz they be standing right there.

In the door right there.

She be like (whispering to another teacher)

“You need to talk to him about his pants.

They too low.

You need to tell him to pull em up.”

And he come up to me,

and I be walkin,

listenen to them talk about it and I keep walkin.

Then he come up to me,

“Either you go to the office or you pull up your pants.

You need to fix those before I write you up.”

Certain portions of the _school_ work _here_ might be overwhelming to certain kids.

It’s like _with one teacher_,

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when the bell ring,
and she starts class,
it’s like she take a deep breath,
and then she just start talking.
It’s like she don’t breathe!
She just talk that whole hour.
And then once everybody leave,
she just goes “haaaaa” (Exhaling sound).
It’s not boring,
but after you listen to the same,
if you listen to this person talk for a whole hour,
every day,
you get tired of hearing it.

This other teacher,
if she tell you to do something and then you don’t do it,
well, she’ll tell you over and over and over.
She’ll call your house.
And then if don’t nobody do nothing,
she’ll just ignore you.
I’m sorry,
but that teacher is just a person that I don’t like.

At this school,
she is the only teacher I have an issue with.
And some teachers think that you ain’t gonna pay no attention to them,

they not gonna help you.

They not gonna pay attention to you.

_I have another teacher_,

she a little more patient teacher.

Yeah,

she try to get the understanding of _things_.

I understand almost everything I do.

Maybe a few things,

every once and a while,

I may not understand.

I just choose not to do it.

Concerning the future,

ten years from now

I’ll probably still be in college.

Because,

I want to go to college to be a lawyer and an architect.

So just in case one doesn’t work out.

***

**Josh’s Story.**

_I’m_ Josh.

I am bored,

sleepy,
and usually happy.

*I moved here from Atlanta.*

*Where I live now,*

It’s just so quiet.

There’s a Hindu family *living* under me,

sort of.

I can’t understand half the things they say when they are under me,

when I’m just sitting on the floor.

All I hear is a whole bunch of laughing and a whole bunch of gibberish.

*School?*

It’s okay, I guess.

*What I like about it is* friends *and* food sometimes.

Well, if the teachers aren’t paying any attention,

there is plenty of time to sleep.

I sleep a lot in many of my classes.

It doesn’t matter which one.

I get bored.

And they will just wake me up,

and I’ll do the work.

And I don’t know what they’re talking about at all.

*I am falling behind* in math.

*I used to be able to* keep up *though.*

Especially math,
for me,

is overwhelming.

*One of my teachers,*

like, she gets mad at the slightest noise.

I try to catch up on work and she always…

I was up the whole hour.

So she don’t be trying to help me,

so I just sleep.

It’s math for me,

that’s just about it.

I can get help at the help center,

that’s about it.

*What I don’t like about school?*

I’d say it’s some of the rules.

I’m probably one of the exceptions in the African American part,

because all I do is sleep.

*I don’t fight.*

All I do is sleep,

most the time.

*My peers in school,*

They think all African Americans are alike.

Like, *because* I don’t act like Andre’ and Ryan do,

they think I’m not Black.
They just go around me like,

“Hey White kid.”

I’m like,

“Do I look White to you?”

Concerning whether people from Detroit steal,

I have no opinion on this,

nothing.

No, the other thing that they think about African Americans from Detroit is,

you have done drugs.

Concerning the future,

I’ll deal with that when I get there.

That is pretty much the way I am.

I don’t want to have to deal with stuff.

***

Themes. Four intertwining themes were identified in students from School D’s descriptions of their transition experiences:

1. Transitioning into socially and ethnically diverse suburban schools.
2. Feeling unsupported by teachers during the urban-suburban transition.
3. Feeling singled out and falsely accused during the urban-suburban transition.
4. Cultural maintenance during the urban-suburban transition experience.
Transitioning into socially and ethnically diverse suburban schools. When asked what they liked best about attending their school, all the students agreed that it was the ethnic diversity in the school.

“We get to meet different types of people.”

“Yeah, different people from different… countries.”

“Different ethnic groups and different backgrounds.”

At different times participants identified with Chaldean students. For instance, when describing the students who sit at the Chaldean table, Josh remarked, “It’s really like the Black table.”

However, when questioned about how they interact with students from other backgrounds, the participants who were new to the school reported little interaction. Michaela reported, “Yeah, we hang with each other, in classes. In classes, that’s it.” Michaela marveled that Brittany, who had attended the school since she was in 6th grade, was friends with students from so many different ethnic groups. Andre’ then made the observation that it was a matter of length of time in school that determined the amount of intergroup interaction. Andre’ observed, “Like kids who have been here for a while, are the ones who conversate or communicate with every different race.” Indeed, Ryan, who had attended school since the 6th grade, and lived in a Chaldean neighborhood announced, “Everybody loves me.” He even made advances toward a Chaldean girl, only to be thwarted by several Chaldean boys.

Although the participants were fascinated by students from other countries, they ridiculed their peers from predominantly White mainstream social groups. When asked to describe the “Preps” group, one of the girls responded, “We make fun of em.”
asked to describe “Skaters” Andre’ offered a long and entertaining story about the way Skaters dress. He remarked, “I seen a boy, a boy with pants so tight they looked like they was spray painted on him.”

Diversity did not end at the school for these young people. The neighborhoods that many of them lived in were also ethnically diverse. Students reported having neighbors from groups including: Chaldean, Albanian, and “Hindu.” They described their neighborhoods as quiet and boring.

**Feeling unsupported by teachers during the urban-suburban transition.** The participants spent a good part of the interview describing their teachers. Becky and Josh reported sleeping through classes, often undisturbed. Josh and Andre’ admitted that school work had become overwhelming. Yet, they felt that their teachers would not give them the help that they needed. Andre’ believed that at least one of his teachers had given up on him and no longer cared if he learned. He also believed he would be mocked by his teacher and peers if he asked questions in class. Josh believed that his requests for help would be rebuffed by his teacher.

In contrast Becky, who gave no indication that she had ever lived in Detroit, believed that a lot of the teachers in school were “really, really nice to Black people.” However, her observation was challenged by Michaela, “Some of them ain’t though.” Brittany and Michaela believed that one teacher in particular understood them, and Michaela said that she was the only teacher she liked. Andre’ found this teacher to more patient than his other teachers.

**Feeling singled out and falsely accused during the urban-suburban transition.** All of the participants indicated that they were singled out for discipline, and
were often falsely accused of breaking school rules. “Everybody looks at us a different way though,” complained Ryan. Students reported being held responsible when the school walls were spray painted. Michaela complained that they were blamed when banned cell phones rang and when fellow students’ lockers were robbed. The following account was given by Michaela:

We was in gym,

and,

apparently somebody stole something.

It was out of my locker,

and Bernita locker,

Renaja locker,

Shartae locker,

and Targe’ locker….

The gym teacher blamed it on me and Bernita,
because we were the last two girls out of the locker room.

But we didn’t take nothing.

And she finally realized that;

after she found out how much money was missin,

and what all was missin.

Participants believed that their actions were particularly scrutinized by the school librarian. “I don’t think she likes Black people,” confided Brittany. “She don’t,” replied Michaela. As a side note, this female African American researcher had a strange encounter with the same librarian. She allowed us to conduct the focus groups in the large
school library. Thus, I was leaving a thank you note on her desk, when she walked into
the library. She appeared very concerned, apparently not recognizing me; she demanded
several times, “Sir, can I help you?” I explained that I was leaving her a thank-you note.
She then recognized me and apologized profusely, while rushing to her desk to read the
note without further comments.

There were a number of rules that the male participants did not understand. They
believed some of the rules were created to target their group. It made no sense to Andre’
that a student would be punished for defending himself, even if the other student
assaulted him first. The male participants complained that there was a new rule
orchestrating how they would navigate the hallways from class to class. Ryan felt that the
dress code regarding “sagging pants,” an urban style, were administered unfairly. A
sentiment also echoed by Brittany:

There’s a whole bunch of teachers in this school.

They see all the boys walking around with their pants sagging,

but, they pick on certain ones.

They make them either change their pants,

and they give them a belt,

or they give them a rope.

On the day of the interview, the boys were upset by a new rule disbanding the single male
“Black table” in the cafeteria. They claimed no other ethnic groups were separated in the
lunchroom.

Cultural maintenance during the urban-suburban transition experience.

While the newer students were appreciative of the cultural diversity in their school, their
friendship networks were limited to students of their own ethnicity. Participants who ventured out to form friendships with other students or did not act in prescribed cultural ways were accused of “acting White.” When participants were asked to describe groups in school, Brittany blurted out, “Blacks trying to act White.” The comment garnered loud laughter from Michaela, while Andre’ remarked that he could not believe she said that. The comment may have been directed toward Becky. Becky and Josh reported being called “White” by fellow students; Josh, because he did not live up to the prescribed Black masculine role, “I don’t act like Andre’ and Ryan do,” and Becky, because she neither followed the prescribed pattern for African American behavior, nor formed friendships within African American circles. Brittany, in contrast, had formed friendships across ethnic groups, yet remained well liked, and perhaps admired, by fellow AfA students.

**Textural description of the urban-suburban transition experience.** What did students in School D experience as they transitioned from urban to suburban schools (Moustakas, 1994)? The students who were new to the school, especially those from Detroit, encountered a new and different world in the suburbs. There were new and different ethnic groups, social groups, social hierarchies, and social guidelines. They met new rules and policies for school, some that were recently enacted with them in mind. Thus, they believed themselves to be under close scrutiny by teachers and administrators. The participants encountered some teachers, one in particular, who they felt had their best interests at heart, but many more who they believed to be uncaring and unapproachable. Yet, two of the male students, perhaps others, found the work in their new school to be, in their own words, overwhelming. The newer students reported isolated acts of racism
by peers and were very aware that they had been stereotyped because of their previous residency in Detroit.

**Structural description of the urban-suburban transition experience.** How did participants at School D experience the urban-suburban school transition (Moustakas, 1994)? Participants, especially males, found their teachers to be unapproachable. Some felt as if their teachers no longer cared, and had given up on them. Instead of being supportive, they believed their teachers were for the most part: easily aggravated, impatient, tired, and critical. Participants also believed that they, as an ethnic group, were singled out, and often falsely identified for disciplinary action from their teachers. Although they acknowledged that they needed help adjusting to the increased academic rigor of the suburban school, Andre’ and Josh were reluctant to ask for help because they believed their requests would go unheeded by their teachers.

Although the newer students encountered a vastly wider array of ethnic and social groups in school, they remained for the most part, isolated. They also retained cultural features associated with Detroit, such as dress and speech. Furthermore, there were sanctions against Black students who did not act according to prescribed rules for Blackness. Andre’s authentic Blackness rested in his recent residency in Detroit, his distinct patterns of speech, and his urban clothing. Although he was of mixed ethnicity and had resided in the suburbs for some time, Ryan was also considered authentically Black because he still claimed his previous Detroit residency, he dressed in urban styles, and he maintained close ties with other “authentically” Black students in school. Josh however, coming from Atlanta, stated that he acted differently than Andre’ and Ryan. He
had thus been accused of acting White. Josh resisted being called White. He replied to the White boy taunts, “Do I look White to you?”

**The essence of the urban-suburban transition experience.** The urban-suburban transition experience for participants at school D was a bit overwhelming because the suburban school was so different from their previous urban schools, especially the more rigorous academics. They felt unsupported by teachers as they attempted to reconcile the differences between their previous and present schools. In spite of their delight at being in a multi-ethnic environment, new students were reluctant to intermix. Indeed, in-group friends discouraged them from forming cross-group friendships and their attempts to form friendships with out-group peers were met with rejection. Participants who had been at the school for a longer time however, did have friends outside of their ethnic group.

**School E**

**Participants’ descriptions of the urban-suburban transition experience.** The focus group in School E was comprised of four female participants: Brianna, Ayannah, Morgana, and Caitlyn; and two male participants: DeQuan and Jimmy. Jimmy, Brianna, Ayannah, Morgana dominated the discussion. Caitlyn, who arrived late, was described by the others as very quiet. DeQuan also had little to share during the focus group discussion. At least two of the female participants had recently moved into the area from Detroit and another from a different predominantly AfA suburb of Detroit. Jimmy had lived in the suburban community for some time. His neighbors however were either immigrants, or descendants of immigrants of Middle Eastern heritage. At least one participant lived in an adjacent predominantly-AfA suburb. I conducted the interview and was accompanied by a female note-taker of Asian Indian descent.
Of all the schools in this study, School E was the least diverse with the dominant ethnic group being of European descent. While AfA students were over 12% of the school population, AfAs represented only 1% of the population in School E’s zip code. Many of the African American students at School E were bussed in from nearby communities. Thus, the lines of separation were drawn as soon as the bussed students entered at the rear door of the school, and those who walked from the surrounding neighborhood entered at the front door of the school.

The stories of Brianna, Ayannah, and Morgana are in some ways similar. Even though Brianna was the only clearly new student to share her story, it was apparent all that all three girls wanted their stories to be told. When they understood that we really wanted to know how things were for them in school, their stories erupted like a volcano, and flowed out like lava. At the end of the interview, when they were allowed to share anything they wanted, Morgana asked, “Have you all basically heard the same thing at other schools?” She wanted to know if they were the only kids having a hard time in suburban schools.

**Participants’ significant statements.**

**Brianna’s Story**

*My name is Brianna.*

I just moved out here from Detroit.

It’s different *here.*

When we first moved here,

like the neighbors,

she did not like us or whatever.
So she called the police on us,
because our dog was barking.
And we had to give our dog away.
Because the police came and said,
“You have to keep your dog down.”
They was looking for something to find on us.

So they called the police,
instead of just coming to our house,
and asking if we can do something with our dog.

This school? It’s okay, I like it.
I think you get a good education here too.

But, the teachers are mean.
They can’t ever be wrong.
I just got in trouble before I came here.
Just because she was over there,
yelling at me for no reason.

I’m like,

“Why are yelling at me and we right here?”

She say,

“I’m not yelling at you.”
And she was still yelling at me.

A good teacher is like someone who understands.

Take they time with you.
Not just explain something for a day or so and be like,

“Okay, I expect you to get it.”

They take they time with you.

The teachers.

If they *would only* sit down,

and take time to listen to what you gotta say.

But some teachers don’t do that.

They doubt us.

Like some people, they doubt us.

Some students do too.

They judge us.

They put us in a category.

They compare their self to us.

Like this girl *in my* health class.

And we were talking about AIDS and HIV,

and we were supposed to list the facts about HIV.

This White girl said that she heard that only Blacks get HIV or AIDS!

It wasn’t funny to me at all.

And my parents, they not married,

but someone asked me if my parents are married and I said no.

The same girl that said she heard that Black people only get AIDS,

she said “eeww” when I said my parents wasn’t married.

I’ve gotten called a gorilla.
In class, right in a class,
“...I didn’t know Black women counted as gorillas.”

I laughed at it though.

Then White people walk around trying to be Black.
Talken about some, “Ooo girl, fix my weave.”

“Ooo girl, my baby daddy.”

Cause we’re Black they assume we’re dumb or something.
I get 3.0’s,

just to put it out there you guys.

*And I hate it when* they call us the same name.

My bus driver always call me Ayannah…

She don’t even ride our bus anymore.

She like, “Ayannah sit down, or Ayannah turn around.”

And I’m like,

“My name’s Brianna.”

And she’s like,

“Oh, it doesn’t matter.”

It do matter, that’s my name!

Even Black people walk around saying,

“Ooo, I hate Black people.”

My close friend said it.

*There are* just different groups.

They think they’re more superior than the others.
Some Black people think they better than other people too though.

We all get along.

They just make it a big deal that we in one school together,
when it’s not a big deal.

It’s just different cultures.

We should say how we feel about each other.

Just talk about it so that way we can get things off our chest.

Instead of people just getting hurt.

It’s better to criticize you in a good way,
instead of just staying in the negative.

***

Ayannah’s Story

My name is Ayannah

It’s boring at this school,
but it’s fun sometimes.

Teachers is strict.

Not all of them are mean,
but most of them are.

They yell at you for no reason.
And they always gotta be right.

They got anger issues too.

You get in trouble for the dumbest reasons.

I think some teachers at this school got like, attitudes.
It’s not mostly students that get attitudes,
    but they get attitudes too.
Sometimes it’s kind of hard,
Sometimes people are a little racist or prejudiced,
so you just sit with the people you get along with best.
People that you can relate to.
Someone who’s not going to judge you.
Black people sit with Black people,
    and mostly like that.
So I sit with them at lunch time.
*This White girl* was like,
    “Are your parents married?”
And I was like,
    “No, why you ask me that?”
And she was like,
    “I never knew a Black person whose parents was married.”
It’s always assumed that we’re from the hood.
Like, “Oh Ayannah, are you from the hood?”
    Again, categorizing us.
    Judging us.
You don’t assume I’m from the hood just because I’m Black.
And they think like if you get into an argument with a Black person,
    they’re gonna solve it with violence.
Not all Black people do that.
Some people do.
But not all.
Or they call you ghetto.
And they talk about our names.
Like that one girl,
just always gotta say something about our names.
Like “Oh, you guys names are so ghetto”.
She just like, just come up with names,
“Oh Tanesha, or Tameka, or Feliciana,“
And think it’s funny.
It is not funny at all.
But then when you be like,
“What did you say about me?”
“Oh, I’m just playing, I’m just playing.”
Dang.
that was for real though.
That don’t really bother me or upset me,
because it’s not a big deal to me.
I’m not racist,
prejudiced,
or none of that.
Just don’t categorize me.
Don’t judge me.

***

Morgana’s Story

My name is Morgana

This school? If you hang around with your friends, then it’s fine.

I think the best thing about this school is the education.

You get a good education here.

I like the teachers that like,

understand you more.

A little more so than the other teachers.

The teachers that has your best interest at heart.

And, most of them all do,

but it’s just that some teachers,

they just quick to give up.

February was Black History Month.

I see nothin’ at all,

didn’t bring it up at all.

I see hearts on Valentine’s Day for February.

What happened to Black History Month?

This one girl tells me,

“I feel if Black people have a Black History Month,

then why can’t we have a White History Month?”

My mom told me it’s White history all the time.
At this school it’s not really that much violence,
like everybody get along.
I think it’s just hard being Black.
I mean, there’s not that many Black people here.
It’s kind of hard when there are a lot of White people around you.
And they think it’s like a way to talk to people.
Like, “What up my ‘N,’” and all that stuff.
But they don’t know like the real meaning of it.

They say that we say it all the time.
That’s a different thing coming from you.
It hurts and it’s offensive.
And some of the girls in our school,
they label all our friends.
Yeah, like it’s like five or six people in our group.
And everybody’s like,
“Oh those black girls are gonna beat you up.”
But it’s not all Black girls in our group.
We have a Puerto Rican person in our group.
It’s not like a group,
but it’s our friends.

I think that most of the boys in this school aren’t as racist as the girls.
There’s this one specific Black boy,
everyone like thinks he’s the best.
Yeah, they give him money for a hug.

They be all over his locker.

Like, “Oh my god I’m not moving until you give me a hug.”

They treat him like a superstar.

So, I do think it’s different between the males and the females.

I think it’s a lot different.

I don’t know,

it just seems like the males get treated better.

Everybody gets categorized.

It’s just more harmful for Blacks, though.

Like out of all the nationalities,

it’s just more harmful for Blacks,

I’ve been dealing with that since like the 4th grade,
cuz I’ve been going to majority White school since 4th grade.

I try not to let it get to me cuz that’s just how some people are.

You can’t change the way people think or feel about you.

But sometimes it do get to me.

And sometimes it don’t.

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Themes

1. Unsupportive teachers during the urban-suburban transition.

2. Racism, discrimination, and stereotyping during the urban-suburban transition.

3. The urban-suburban transition, a gendered experience.
Unsupportive teachers during the urban-suburban transition. When asked the initial question, “What’s it like being a student here?” the unanimous answer was “boring.” But when asked specifically what they liked about school, Brianna and Morgana replied quickly, that they were able to get a good education. They recognized that teachers were central in obtaining a good education. Participants identified two exceptional teachers. They explained that these teachers were, “someone who understands…. And take they time with you.” References to teachers took a different direction throughout the remainder of the interview.

At various times participants described their teachers as mean, angry, strict, critical, inflexible and nitpicking. They felt that they were targeted for disciplinary action, and that teachers showed preference towards White students. For instance Morgana complained, “Me and this White kid be coming to class, we both laughing, she tells me to leave the class.” Brianna and Morgana hinted that the teachers had low expectations for AfA students. “Some teachers, they just quick to give up.” “They (teachers) doubt us.” Students also shared scenarios suggesting that teachers and other adults connected with school either ignored or dismissed the racist behavior White students displayed against them. They recounted how one teacher ignored White students’ dehumanizing comparison of Black women to gorillas. When another participant was called a nigger, the school bus driver told her, “Just don’t deal with it, it’s not anything.” Jimmy complained that he was disciplined for calling a White student a “cracker” while the same student went unpunished for calling him a nigger. Students were particularly perturbed that their teachers and other adults at school frequently called them by other African American student’s name.
Racism, discrimination, and stereotyping during the urban-suburban transition. Students reported being subjected to racial slurs and dehumanizing comparisons to gorillas and orangutans by White and Arab peers. They were stereotyped and made to feel inferior about their places of residence, economic status, their clothing, their speech, the way they wore their hair and their intelligence. They, their friends, and family members were stereotyped as violent and immoral. The most hated stereotype “ghetto,” was used in reference to their names. Exasperated, Brianna made her complaint:

They don’t have nothing positive to say…. They always come and say something negative about the way we are, but never nothing positive.

When asked how often this happens, several students replied, “Every day.”

The two students who lived in the suburban community said that they were not only alienated from their neighbors, but disliked as well. Jimmy reported that one of his neighbors claimed that their religion forbade them to associate with him. When asked who his out-of-school friends were, Jimmy replied, “I don’t have friends out of school. I had friends but then they moved.” Brianna recounted that when her family first moved into the neighborhood the neighbors showed their disapproval by calling the police on them because their dog was barking.

The urban-suburban transition, a gendered experience. The female participants perceived a gender difference in the ways their peers dispensed racism. Brianna remarked, “Most of the boys in this school aren’t as racist as the girls.” Ayannah talked about two African American males in school who were well liked by the White students and were given special treatment. For instance, one of the boys was reportedly paid for hugs.
Many of the stereotypes imposed were associated with women only. African American feminine names, clothing brands, and hair styles were disparaged by the White females in school. A White male students’ comparison of Black females, and not Black males, to a gorilla was particularly harsh. When Jimmy protested that boys were not treated better, the girls countered that Jimmy was an example that boys got on better with other groups, “Jimmy, you don’t hang out with no Black boys. You hang out with a lot of White boys…”

**Textural description of the urban-suburban transition experience.** The textural description provides the “what” of the transition experience (Moustakas, 1994). Although there were two students for whom this was their first year in the new school, Brianna was the only one to share her experience in depth. She described her new suburban community as “different.” What she perceived as different was the cold and unwelcoming attitude of her neighbor. Brianna entered her new school with the expectation of getting a good education. She was proud of her above average grade-point-average. Yet, she felt “doubted” and disliked by some of her teachers. She felt that she was sometimes unfairly disciplined, and her teachers showed favoritism towards White students over Black students. One of Brianna’s first experiences in her new school was being warned by a White peer, “There are a lot of ignorant Black people here, you shouldn’t hang out with them.” In the new school Brianna experienced discrimination and stereotyping on a daily basis. Experiences of discrimination and stereotyping may have differed by gender, with females being targeted more harshly. Brianna socialized mostly with other Black female students in school. She had formed a bond with Ayannah, calling her sister when the note taker remarked that their names rhymed. She also
reported some positive interaction with White students, “one of my best friends, he
White…”

Structural description of the urban-suburban transition experience. The
structural description describes the “how” of the transition experience (Moustakas, 1994).
Brianna, by her own account was a good student and wanted a good education.
Furthermore, this view was supported by her mother, who grounded her for a month after
a teacher reported her misbehavior in school. In spite of her desire to do well, she
believed her teachers doubted her ability. There was no sense that Brianna liked her
teachers or had formed a special relationship with any of them. Brianna experienced
stereotyping and discrimination on a daily basis. Brianna stated that the reason White
students treated them badly was because they were not wanted in the new school. “They
(White students) just make it a big deal that we in one school together, when it’s not a big
deal.” She also thought that other students in school felt as if they were superior in
comparison to African Americans. She coped with the discrimination in different ways.
For instance, she responded to the gorilla name calling episode by denying she was hurt,
“I laughed at it…” When a White student used the N-word, she became confrontational,
“I asked her and she admitted to it.” She was aware that some of her friends had begun to
internalize the harsh attitudes of some students. For example she was referring to a friend
when she stated, “Even Black people walk around saying, ‘Ooo, I hate Black people.’”

Unlike other participants in the group who had been there longer, Brianna still
felt that if they could just sit down and talk, with peers and teachers, that their differences
could be resolved. In a similar way, she wondered why her neighbors did not come over
and talk things out, instead of calling the police. As the focus group interview was ending, Brianna admitted wistfully, “It’s hard, just trying to fit in.”

**The essence of the urban-suburban transition experience.** The urban-suburban transition experience for Brianna, a student at School E was in her own words “hard.” Having moved into a new neighborhood where she felt unwanted, while negotiating a context of reception in her new school that included discrimination and stereotyping from peers, and encountering teachers who seemed to hold low-expectations for her success were major contributors to the difficulty of the transition. While Brianna had found a group that she felt a part of, she had yet to discover where she “fit in” within the new school context.

**School F**

**Participants’ descriptions of the urban-suburban transition experience.**

Although School F was 86.3% European American, roughly half of that number were of from Middle Eastern backgrounds. The focus group interview at School F was comprised of three female participants: Angelica, Ra’shay, and J’lyn; and two male participants: Keevon and Lorenzo. Accompanied by a European American female note taker, I conducted the nearly hour-long interview.

Claiming he came from another, predominantly White suburb, this was Lorenzo’s first year at the School F. However, from his narratives, you get the feeling he had spent more time in Detroit than he let on. Having “barely lived” in Detroit, this was Angelica’s second year at School F. Keevon and the other two girls might have attended the school since the sixth grade. Not one of the students actually said where they were living at the time of the interview.
Strangely, although nine participants were summoned over the school loud speaker, only five actually showed up. Lorenzo and Keyshawn acknowledged that two boys from their friendship network were missing from the interview. Initially the participants’ responses were very tentative. When posed with the opening question about what it is like to attend that school, Angelica volunteered that the school is diverse and everyone gets along. The participants were very hesitant about answering questions related to intergroup relationships; questions such as, who sits together in the lunchroom and how do students form groups. Midway through the interview however, the participants began to loosen up and share detailed accounts of life at school and their very sophisticated thoughts about American society in general. Towards the end of the interview Lorenzo and Angelica entered into a lively conversation about current politics, the death penalty, and unequal penalties associated with illegal substance use and distribution. As the interview was coming to a close, Lorenzo decided to turn the tables and ask us what it was like to attend our university. Perhaps he was delaying his return to class. Angelica and Lorenzo dominated the interview, providing rich narratives of what it is like to be a new AfA student in a predominantly White suburban school.

**Participants’ significant statements.**

**Angelica’s Story**

My name is Angelica.

I’m new here.

I think people think that,
sometimes, I just lash out for no reason.

Or, I be acting dinghy sometimes,
and I’m silly.

When I first came here,

a group of people welcomed me in.

So I just kept sitting with them.

Like, no race or group,

act a different way toward another one.

It’s just like, if you friends with someone,

it’s not because their race or anything….

Most people get along without any drama or racial conflict…

We all get along.

Like some of my friends,

they don’t know nothing about Arabs,

but they got to stereotype them.

If a person doesn’t be around a certain race,

they think what everybody else think about them.

I think in this school there is less drama.

Cuz at my last school I had a lot of drama.

I was always into something.

Always got in trouble.

Always yelling at a teacher.

And at this school I’m more calm and relaxed,

and not as bad as I use to be.

I think just being at school with your own race causes problems.
I think other kids our age like to start drama,
   especially girls.
I try not to start drama….
This year I tried to do a whole different me.
   So I stop the gossiping,
and stop the arguing for no reason.
   Stop the talking about people.
   And stop,
   as people say,
   thinking they joking or whatever.
I haven’t gotten into any confrontations with anybody.
   And that’s so surprising.
Cuz when I went to an all-Black school,
   it was different.
When I first came here last year,
   people were asking me like,
   “You move from Detroit?
   You moved here from Detroit?”
People think that just because a lot of African-Americans live in Detroit,
   they think all of us do.
And I barely lived in Detroit.
Just because I’m Black doesn’t mean I’m from Detroit.
Why do all of us gotta be from Detroit?
It’s just a stereotype.

And the teachers here,

like if you failed a test,

they give you many opportunities to try to make it up.

But, I got like a specific teacher that I really don’t like,

and that’s like the only class that I’m doing wrong in.

I used to like science.

I like math,

Because it challenges me.

And social studies,

The teacher that we have for that class,

like I think I’m not paying attention for like a day or two,

then when I get home or we have a test,

I know what’s everything.

Or if I get home,

I just be thinking about things that he said.

Or if I hear something related to something that he said,

I just think back to what he was saying about it.

He know how to have fun.

He be joking round with you sometimes and makes it fun.

Do my teachers understand me?

I think even if they would try,

it still wouldn’t make a difference for me.
Cuz, like there’s just some much stuff going on,
they just wouldn’t understand.
And, it’s like my situation is,
that teachers give all these tests on the same day,
all these taking notes,
and all this yelling,
it just puts extra stress on me,
and I already got a lot of stress….
So, I don’t know if they knew.
I get very defensive when people yell.
It gets me in a lot of trouble.
Like one teacher know I get stressed easily,
so she like, tones it down a little.
Teachers…like,
they forget they was once thirteen-year-olds….
Everybody likes to talk when you’re thirteen,
you’re very social.
I think African-Americans are the most put though at race.
And it’s like, why my dad wants me to get good grades at school,
to show people that African-Americans are not all bad,
or to like,
go to college and get the best job I can.
Because there not a lot of jobs out here for us.
Cuz most of us are *conforming* to what the people are saying,

and not doing good,

like dropping out,

and not finishing college.

All that kind of stuff.

***

**Lorenzo’s Story**

My name is Lorenzo.

I think I’m the newest one here.

First thing everybody thought,

I was from *Detroit*.

I didn’t move from Detroit over here.

I moved from Bluemore\(^{18}\)

But some people got sense enough to ask you like,

“Where’d you move from?”

Instead of just accusing you of moving from Detroit.

Detroit is a good place.

It’s just some people,

just be at the wrong place,

at the wrong time.

That’s all that is.

Some people think,

\(^{18}\) Pseudonym for another predominantly White suburb of Detroit.
cuz I heard somebody tell me that before,

“You think you better than everybody?”

I was like,

“I’m not sure what you are saying?”

It’s not my fault I act mature and you don’t,

it’s not my fault.

Being a student here, it’s ok.

I like the sports here.

I play basketball and football.

I like math.

Yeah,

I like math.

I don’t like science,

I hate science.

I like Social Studies

I like social studies cuz Mr. Nesbitt,

he’s a real good teacher.

He’s not like the average teacher just telling you something,

or just give you the answer.

When he tell you something and try to give you the answer,

he break it all the way down…,

go all the way deep into what it’s about.

He start from the beginning to the end,
and, you gotta get the right answer.

You’d be, you know,

like educated,

on just that one,

that one question.

So, he a real good teacher.

I get along with all of my teachers every now and then.

Except for my first hour teacher.

They just yelling at you for no reason.

They always say how you gotta give the respect,

in order to get respect….

They just barley give us respect.

The fairer the teacher,

the better the student,

that’s what I think.

_A teacher is fair if:_

If they let you explain yourself when something happens.

*And not* just tell you _you’re_ wrong and send you to the office.

_Do my teachers understand me?_

They still wouldn’t understand.

Like, here’s an example.

_In_ fourth hour we doin that paper on gangs.

The area I come from,
I know a lot about gangs.

And like a lot of stuff,

it was from the school website,

and it was all articles written by other teachers and stuff.

Like a lot of the articles they wasn’t really true…

I know a thing or two about gangs.

So, they don’t understand where everybody come from.

I do like being at a mixed variety school.

Instead of like… a Detroit school,

that’s just basically an all-Black school.

*This* is like a mixed-variety,

so everybody can be comfortable with it.

And if you really think about it,

I know I haven’t been here that long,

but I ain’t ever really seen like,

no big racial fights or nothing.

*Some kids from other groups try to act Black.*

They make it into as a joke though.

But I will admit,

they do know when to stop.

Like, when they notice that you like that you not really laughing.

They do know when to stop.

Like, “I was just playing you know.”
And not making it a racial debate.

They do know when to stop.

Everybody knows when to stop playing.

All boys mess with each other,

just to see like,

is he gonna do something?

or is he tough?

or this, that, and the other?

But all boys act tough.

It’s just a habit….

I know people that’s not tough at all,

but when they go to school they act tough,

like they really tough,

but then when something get ready to happen,

they back down.

They get scared.

***

Themes

1. Teachers and the urban-suburban transition.

2. Intergroup relationships and the urban-suburban transition.

Teachers and the urban-suburban transition. Angelica and Lorenzo spoke at length about their teachers. They had problems with some of their teachers. Lorenzo had issues with his first hour teacher, but he didn’t elaborate. Angelica was disgruntled for
receiving a low grade from her science teacher. She admitted that she talked quite a bit in
the class, and she had been disciplined for talking too much. However, she did not
believe she deserved the low grade. “As much as I talk, when it’s time to work, I work
because I care about my grades,” she lamented. Later she said that it was the teachers’
fault that she didn’t learn. Lorenzo interjected that the teacher lacked a sense of humor.
Angelica said that she used to like science, but no longer liked it, because of the teacher.
When Lorenzo expressed that he too didn’t like science, J’lyn responded that he had the
wrong teacher.

When Angelica and Lorenzo liked the teacher, they also liked the classes that the
teacher taught. Angelica said that she liked her math class because of the teacher.
Lorenzo and Angelica both liked their social studies teacher. Both described this
teacher’s instructional methods in detail, and exactly how the teacher helped them learn.
Both Lorenzo and Angelica were very aware of social and political issues, and articulated
their viewpoints very well; perhaps owing some to this teacher’s influence. Angelica
nonetheless, was having trouble coping with the academic demands of her new school,
“all these tests on the same day all these taking notes and all this yelling, it just puts extra
stress on me.” However Angelica felt supported when one of her teachers adapted her
instructional approach to meet her needs, understanding that Angelica was easily
stressed.

There was another teacher that all of the participants, even participants in other
focus groups conducted in School F, spoke highly about. The teacher had recently
transferred to another school accept an administrator position. The students shared this
teacher’s story so passionately and beautifully, that it had to be included.
Mr. Habib’s Story (From his students’ perspectives)

Mr. Habib

He was a great teacher.

Mr. Habib.

Best teacher in the world!

Oh my god,

I love him.

I love Mr. Habib.

That’s the one teacher that,

like, everything we just said we don’t like about teachers,

he never did.

He never accused you of anything.

He had everything.

He the best teacher ever.

He funny and everything.

If he knew you did something and he seen you …

He just pull you aside and tell you just to calm down,

and then he send you back…

He gave us all our freedom.

But, it also seems that when he left,

the school fell apart like with the teachers.

That’s why the school is like that.

The school was better.
Mr. Habib knew everyone.

Everybody loved Mr. Habib.

He barely had any problems, he just…

It’s like he kept the school together.

He was a teacher and a coach.

He was organized.

He explained all the work down to a “t”.

He was just the best teacher.

Everything you look for in a teacher, he had.

**Intergroup relationships and the urban-suburban transition.** Angelica and Lorenzo liked attending an ethnically diverse school. Angelica attributed her positive change in attitude at her new school to the school’s ethnic composition. “This school like, because it’s a different group of people. I don’t know, I think just being at school with your own race causes problems.” Lorenzo believed the school was ethnically balanced between African American, European American, and Arab American. He noted that the ethnic balance contributed to everyone’s level of comfort in the suburban school.

I do like being at a mixed variety school. Instead of like, you know you got a Detroit school that’s just basically an all-Black school…. This school is like a mixed variety, so everybody can be comfortable with it.

They both displayed empathy for Arab Americans and identified with them as a stereotyped group.
Lorenzo: I think Arabic’s and Black people have like the same thing going on. Like, some people think that all Arabic’s is from Iraq or something and it’s not like that, like the whole you know, the Bin Laden thing.

Angelica: Like some of my friends, they don’t know nothing about Arabs, but they got to stereotype them. And they be saying some stuff that just get on my nerves…. it’s like them stereotyping us… So, I think you have to be around a group to truly understand them, instead of just stereotyping them.

The participants made few references to their relationships with, or thoughts about, their European American peers in school.

When Lorenzo marveled at how little conflict there was between the different groups in school, students who had been there longer told a different story. Keevon related that there had been conflictual relationships between Arab American and African American boys in the prior school years. These conflicts erupted into fights in the hallways and after school. As a side-note, during the Arab American male focus group interview at this school, when one participant began to talk about these incidents, another participant silenced him with an elbow to the side. Keevon explained that the conflictual behavior had been addressed and arrested through interventions by teachers and the principal earlier in the (then) current school year.

Participants were annoyed when they were stereotyped by other groups in school. They did not like it when students from other ethnic groups pretended to “act Black” by imitating the way that they spoke or referenced other cultural traits, such as the food they ate. They believed that it was ridicule and not admiration that prompted these imitations.
However, their out-group peers apologized when they sensed when that they had crossed the line.

Participants were especially distressed when other students assumed, based solely on their African American ethnicity that they were from Detroit, because participants associated Detroit with connotations of ghetto and hoodlum activity, and gun violence. They were deeply embarrassed about Detroit, and lamented the city’s reputation in the larger society. Angelica felt that Detroit contributed to the vilification of all African Americans. During the discussion about Detroit she interjected, “people do dumb things and the whole African-American community gets blamed for it.” At the same time, participants defended Detroit. Keevon said Detroit is the place to go to have fun, while Lorenzo insisted that Detroit was an overall “good” place with only pockets where undesirable outcomes take place.

Another aspect of attending diverse schools was the inclusion of different food on the lunch menu. They complained that because the food was halal, their favorite foods (i.e., pepperoni pizza) were not included on the menu. In some instances they may have believed that healthier food choices in their suburban school, such as wheat bread and the removal soft drinks, were also part of a halal diet.

As reported in all the focus groups, friends were an important component of participants’ transition experiences. All the same, despite the school’s diversity, participants’ friendship selections in-and-out of school were exclusively within their own ethnic group. One of the first experiences for Angelica and Lorenzo as they entered their new school was being welcomed into an established African American friendship network. There was no mention of African American students grouping by those who had
attended the school longer. Angelica and Lorenzo however, tended to hang around with friends from previous schools during out-of-school time. Students who had attended School F longer did not respond when asked whether their in-school and out-of-school friendships were consistent.

**Textural description of the urban-suburban transition experience.** The textural description provides the “what” of the transition experience (Moustakas, 1994). The urban-suburban school transition for Angelica and Lorenzo included higher academic expectations and more challenging course work. While they each had at least one teacher that they did not like, overall, they got along well their teachers and spoke about them in glowing terms. The ethnic diversity of their school was also new to them, and they enthusiastically spoke about this as a positive feature of their new school, even though they encountered stereotypes related to race and residency in Detroit as they interacted with peers from other ethnic groups. Stereotyping and prejudice notwithstanding, as new students in School F, they were welcomed into an established African American peer network.

**Structural description of the urban-suburban transition experience.** The structural description speaks to “how” the transition was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Angelica stated that she was always getting in to trouble in her previous school but this was not the case in the new school. She even admitted that she had committed to making positive changes in her attitude and behavior during that school year. However, she was overwhelmed by the academic rigor in her new school, especially in science where she received a lower than expected grade. However, she also seemed to enjoy learning, particularly when she liked her teacher. For example, she liked her social studies teacher
and was able to connect what she learned in his class to her everyday life experiences. Lorenzo was involved in both basketball and football at his new school, which offered him opportunities to interact with peers from different ethnic backgrounds. Lorenzo was in the same social studies class as Angelica, and shared her enthusiasm for the teacher and the subject. He also gave a detailed account of how the teacher’s instructional methods allowed for him to gain a deep understanding of the subject matter.

While Angelica and Lorenzo developed a more profound understanding of other cultures in their new school, they were also stigmatized and stereotyped by their peers because of their ethnicity and perceived previous places of residency. They found these actions annoying, and when their annoyance became obvious, their peers usually backed down.

Angelica and Lorenzo’s urban-suburban school transition was supported by a welcoming African American friendship network and teachers they liked. Although they did not report developing friendships with students from other ethnicities, they did develop favorable intergroup attitudes that were likely supported by teachers and school administrators. The stigmatization of Detroit by the majority groups in school may have been internalized by Lorenzo and Angelica as they vehemently opposed any association with the city.

The essence of the urban-suburban transition experience. In School F Angelica and Lorenzo encountered wider ethnic diversity among students and teachers. Although they enjoyed the diversity in their new school, and were developing greater intercultural awareness, they also received some stigmatizing and stereotyping messages from other ethnic group peers. These messages were related to their place of residence
and their African American ethnicity. Angelica and Lorenzo expressed shame for Detroit and at the same time defended Detroit. Racism encountered from other group peers was countered by welcoming and supportive relationships with same-ethnicity peers and participation in sports and other school activities.

Angelica and Lorenzo also encountered a more rigorous academic agenda in their new school. Angelica found coping with academics particularly stressful, especially in light of her new resolve to improve herself. The stress in adjusting to the school’s more academic emphasis was countered by a receiving context that included teachers whom they liked and considered, for the most part, very competent. Despite these positive experiences, a heightened salience for race and ethnicity were expressed as these students discussed social issues towards the end of the interview. I suspect, having evidence from this interview and an Arab American interview from this school, that the social studies teacher had a lot to do with students’ awareness of and generally tolerant responses to issues related to racism and discrimination.

Summary

This chapter presented a phenomenological analysis of seven focus group interviews conducted in six suburban Detroit schools. The focus group participants were 48 AfA eighth-grade students. For each school significant statements were identified and clustered into thematic units. Textural and structural descriptions of students’ urban-suburban transition experiences were drawn from the thematic units, and synthesized to create a composite description of students’ experiences at each school.
In Chapter Six, the results of the analyses from the six schools were synthesized to present a composite description of the urban-suburban transition experience. This analysis was be accompanied by a discussion of the findings.
Chapter Six

Tying it All Together

What is the nature of the transition experience of 48 African American adolescent students as they move from schools in Detroit to schools in nearby more affluent suburban communities?

In this chapter the phenomenological analyses from Schools A through F were integrated to create a composite description of the participants’ urban-suburban transition experience. This composite description also connected the study findings to the literature review, thus adding in interpretive element to this analysis. This chapter is organized into six sections: 1) themes uncovered in the urban-suburban transition, 2) intergroup relations during the urban-suburban transition, 3) understanding the urban-suburban transition, 4) study implications, 5) study limitations, and 6) future directions in urban-suburban transition research.

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the lived transition experiences of urban African American students who transferred to schools in predominantly White and more affluent suburban communities. Specifically, this study aimed to shed light upon how these young people thought about their lived transition experiences.

Themes Uncovered in the Urban-Suburban Transition

Merging of the results of data analyses of focus groups in the six schools produced four themes that were essential to the urban-suburban transition for this group of participants. These themes described key features of their transition experiences.

1. Relationships with teachers.
2. Intergroup and intragroup relationships.
3. Differences between Detroit and the suburbs.

4. Educational Barriers

Table 1

*Common themes identified in schools A through F*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
<th>School E</th>
<th>School F</th>
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These phenomenological themes produced a broad description of the urban-suburban transitions for this group of participants. Integral components of the urban-suburban transition common to participants in all schools were relationships with teachers, as well as relationships with both in-group and out-group peers. In Schools A, C, and D where the participants were mostly new to the school, participants were more apt to retain psychological ties to Detroit.
Pertaining to the common themes, what participants experienced during the urban-suburban transition was similar across schools, with the only variation being the intensity of the experience. For instance, while participants experienced racism and discrimination in every school, the experience was felt more strongly in some schools and less in others. The same can be said about relationships with teachers. Participants in every school had teachers that they liked and disliked. However, in some schools participants had generally good relationships with all of their teachers, and in other schools participants seemed to have generally poor relationships with their teachers. In contrast there was considerable variability in how participants experienced the urban-suburban transition. This variability was associated with differences in school rules and policies, differences in relationships with teachers and peers, and the amount of time spent in the suburban school.

**Intergroup Relations during the Urban-Suburban Transition**

Intergroup and intragroup relationships were key components of the urban-suburban transition experiences across all six schools. When asked what they liked most about school, participants invariably responded being with their friends. Participants also enjoyed and appreciated attending ethnically diverse suburban schools, especially when there was more than one other ethnic group in school. Yet, attending ethnically diverse schools carried a price for participants.

**Participants in every school reported varying degrees of intergroup conflict.**

Peers’ racism was overt; readily displayed in their racist jokes, racial slurs, stereotyping and the devaluation of anything associated with Detroit or African American (AfA) culture. At the same time participants described racism among and discrimination by
teachers and administrators as being more covert. Teachers’ racism was demonstrated by in-group favoritism towards White students, scrutinizing the actions of AfAs more closely, singling out AfAs for discipline, having lower expectations for AfA students, and either ignoring or minimizing acts of racism displayed against AfA students by non-AfA peers. In addition, participants described their schools as being either ethnically polarized, or places where there was very little meaningful intergroup interaction. This polarization was particularly obvious among AfA female participants who rarely reported having cross-group friendships at school. Gender differences in intergroup relationships have been noted in other qualitative studies. In their works with high school students Holland (2012) and Ispa-Landa (2013) noted that in majority White schools AfA male students’ garnered social status by participating in sports and exemplifying hyper-masculine stereotypes (i.e., urban hip hop artists). In contrast, AfA females in these studies had less access to sports activities and identification with aspects of urban AfA culture caused them to suffer greater, devaluation-by and isolation-from, their White peers. Generally speaking, even though the participants in the current study attended ethnically diverse schools, their experiences in school, for the most part, took place at a parallel existence with other ethnic groups, with only occasional vertical intersection. It is possible that in highly segregated macro contexts, such as metropolitan Detroit, that segregation will re-establish itself in micro contexts, such as schools, even when there are multiple ethnic groups present (Dixon, Tredoux, Durrheim, Finchilescu, & Clark, 2008).

Application of intergroup contact conditions in these suburban schools might have eased the urban-suburban transition for these participants by creating an atmosphere where they felt more welcomed and included in school life. The Intergroup Contact
Hypothesis (Allport, 1954/1979) outlined four conditions necessary to reduce intergroup conflict and increase harmonious relations between different groups:

1. Groups must have equal status in the contact situation.
2. Groups must share common goals.
3. There must be cooperation between the groups in attaining their common goals.
4. There should be support at the institutional or authority level in the contact situation.

There has been remarkable success in reducing conflictual relationships between diverse groups, especially during the initial contact, when all conditions are present (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

**Intergroup contact conditions in suburban schools.** Participants presented little evidence that their schools had intentionally implemented conditions specified by the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis. Creating conditions of equal status was a particularly thorny issue. For instance, by implementing the earned privilege interventions, Schools A and B had deliberately created social hierarchies within the school. The intended message of these interventions was that students should take responsibility for their experiences at school. However, the intervention may have given the unintended message that some students are more highly valued than others. This message was echoed when participants perceived their teachers to hold lower expectations for them than other White students, or that their teachers had given up on them.

School F was the only school that seemed to demonstrate institutional support for intergroup contact conditions. This was displayed by administrators’ and teachers’ willingness to face conflicts head on, and to teach students about intergroup dynamics.
Interestingly, Lorenzo and Angelica, who were both relatively new to School F, described having positive experiences in School F. Perhaps they were reaping the benefits of the school’s recent commitment to increasing intergroup harmony. Overall, gleaning from participants’ descriptions, there seemed to be little support for intergroup contact conditions among schools in this study.

**Can we expect schools in majority White suburbs to implement intergroup contact conditions?** Given metropolitan Detroit’s history of racial conflict, calculated segregation, and entrenched assumptions of White racial superiority (Farley, et al., 2000) an important question must be posed, can we expect schools in majority White suburbs to implement intergroup contact conditions? This sentiment was displayed in Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2005), from a head teacher at a high school in Bradford, England; a city impacted by racial conflict and violence in 2001, who suggested that there is little guidance on how intergroup contact conditions can, “be achieved in places where racial segregation and inequality are deeply entrenched” (p. 697). While giving an overall endorsement the intergroup contact concept, Dixon and colleagues (2005) posited that the theory had a utopian outlook; an outlook that may be out of touch with the realities of day to day race relations.

**Understanding the Urban-Suburban School Transition**

This study combines intergroup contact theory with acculturation theory as a lens to view participants’ descriptions of their urban-suburban transition experiences. While intergroup contact theory aids in understanding optimal receiving contexts for cross cultural transitions, acculturation theory aids in understanding the mechanics of how young people cross cultural boundaries.
The two-dimensional model of acculturation. Berry (1997) proposed that acculturation studies are concerned with “how” people who have developed in one cultural context change after migrating to a distinctly different cultural context. Therefore, describing the urban-suburban transition through an acculturation lens aids in understanding how this group of participants made sense of their transition experience. Most importantly, participants’ descriptions of the urban-suburban transition are supported by Berry’s (1980, 1990) bi-dimensional model of acculturation, which proposes that how newcomers make cultural transitions are determined by a combination of first, the degree to which they identify with their traditional culture and second, the degree to which they identify with the receiving culture. For these participants the traditional culture relates to the ideas about what is generally thought to be right, good and practical; and how these ideas are related to customs and practices (R. A. Shweder, 2003) observed in the urban enclave of Detroit and Detroit’s schools. The receiving culture carries the same definition, but in reference to more affluent White suburban schools and communities.

According to Berry (1980, 1990) how closely newcomers’ identities align with traditional and receiving cultures can result in their leaning toward one of four acculturation orientations to help them make sense of their transition experience. Descriptions of acculturation orientations were adapted from Berry et. al., (2006).

- **Separatist Orientation:** Participants who demonstrated and endorsed in-group orientation, maintained same group friendships, used colloquial English associated with Detroit, and showed little interest or involvement in the school related activities.
• **Assimilationist Orientation:** Participants, who demonstrated and endorsed out-group orientation, maintained friendships primarily with out-group members, spoke Standard English, did not identify with Detroit or traditional culture, and strongly identified with the suburban school and its activities.

• **Marginalization Orientation:** Participants who spoke only in colloquial “Detroit” English, but were low on ethnic identity. They interacted little with both in-group and out-group peers.

• **Integration Orientation:** Participants who demonstrated high participation in activities involved with their African American heritage culture and the suburban school. They have strong feelings of belonging to both their ethnic group and to their suburban school. They understood and communicated in colloquial “Detroit” English, but they were able to code switch to Standard English when appropriate. They interacted with both in-group and out-group peers and they were comfortable across cultural contexts.

Participants in this study displayed aspects of Berry’s (1980, 1990) model of acculturation in their descriptions of their urban-suburban transition experiences. Participants in School D clearly demonstrated the range of acculturation orientations. Brittany was most aligned with the integrationist orientation, having friends across ethnic groups while still identifying with AfA traditional culture. Becky, having never lived in Detroit still acknowledged her AfA ethnicity, but leaned closer to the assimilation orientation; preferring to form friendships with White students over Black students. Both
integration and assimilation orientations seemed to be associated with having spent more time in the receiving culture (Berry et al., 2006). Andre’ and Ryan followed the separatist orientation for acculturation, having strong identity with Detroit and AfA culture. Finally, Josh seemed to display features associated with the marginalized orientation for acculturation. He was disengaged from school, finding it boring, and sleeping through most of his classes. Although he did not meet the standards for acceptance among the AfA male students, evidence of friendships with students from other groups was curiously missing during the discussion. Josh’s multiple reports of sleeping during class may have been more of a coping mechanism rather than a response to boredom. His academic struggles were a clear signal of his difficulty in adjustment.

**Extending the Two-Dimensional Model.** The two-dimensional model has been criticized for presenting acculturation as a uniform and inflexible concept that ignores individual variation in the process (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005). Criticisms notwithstanding, the two-dimensional model serves well as a starting point for describing and interpreting the experiences of the participants in this study. Berry’s (2006) proposition that young people display distinct characteristics associated with each of the four acculturation orientations has been supported in this study. Findings from this study also extend the two-dimensional theoretical model to suggest acculturation is not uniform and inflexible. Indeed, there may be tremendous variability in how acculturation is experienced over time, and within each orientation, as well as across acculturation orientations. Understanding variability in acculturation experiences within and across orientations may explain why some students acculturate more successfully than others.
Acculturation orientations vary by length of time in the suburban school. A strong separatist orientation was prominent among participants who were very new to the suburban school. The all-male focus group at School C provided an example. This was the first year in the new school for all of these participants. Their strong attachment to their previous community was evident in their primary use of the colorful colloquial-English associated with traditional AfA communities. These participants made no attempts to switch codes between colloquial and Standard English. They continued to adhere to styles of dress that were popular in Detroit. “Like we sag our pants and all.” When they were together, they reverted to distinctive behavior that may have been associated with Detroit; explaining that when they were together in a class they tended to act out by joking and talking at inappropriate times. This was the initial behavior observed during the focus group interview.

School C male participants’ primary friendships were with each other, and not with students who had attended school for a longer period of time. They sat together in the lunchroom and even shared a remedial math class together in the afternoon. They spoke openly about the depth of their friendship. “Cause the three of us, we closer than anybody in this school.” Same group friendships can be sources of social support during this challenging school transition (Chan & Birman, 2009). They seemed to take little interest in other groups in the school and how these groups interacted with each other.

In contrast, participants most aligned with the integration orientation had attended the suburban school for some time, many since the sixth-grade. For example, Brittany attended School D since 6th grade and by the time she was in 8th grade, which is when this interview was conducted, had formed friendships with students across the ethnic
groups at school. However, she maintained strong affiliation with her African American friends at school and seemed to retain in-group values. Wallace, at School B is another example. Having attended the school since the sixth grade, Wallace enjoyed playing basketball with Chaldean friends throughout his neighborhood. Yet, Wallace’s commitment to his African American roots was apparent in his clothing choice (i.e., Malcolm X t-shirt) and his complaint that he had read only one book about African Americans since attending that school. Both of these young people enjoyed attending their schools and had good relationships with their teachers. Participants who had lived in the suburbs for some time rarely described their school experiences in comparison to Detroit. Instead, school experiences were described within the context of the current school. Students leaning more strongly towards the integrationist orientation seemed to display only lingering traces of the Detroit “accent.” Even so, they believed their accents were easily detected by suburban peers who had never lived in Detroit.

**There may be variability within each acculturation orientation.** Although there are distinct characteristics associated with each of the four orientations, the participants in this study demonstrated that there may be gradation in the strength of their alignment with individual orientation characteristics. From this point of view, orientations are neither seen as “either-or” nor “all-or- nothing” propositions. Rather each pattern can be experienced as more of a continuum as the individual becomes more strongly or less strongly committed to an orientation. For example all of the male participants at School C exhibited characteristics consistent with a separatist orientation. Giovanni and Steven demonstrated a stronger commitment to this orientation; which was evident in their strong use of Detroit colloquialism, in-group friend selection, and seeming lack of
interest in school activities. In contrast, Warren seemed to be less committed to a separatist orientation. For instance, there was evidence that he was more engaged in cross group interaction. A White male student in another focus group at that school talked about his friendship with Warren. In addition, participants in the African American female focus group spoke about the uproar among students stemming from a White female belonging to the “preppy” group making amorous overtures towards Warren. Additionally, Warren exhibited more interest in the school and strongly endorsed the value of education when others in the group questioned whether the education they were currently receiving was valuable for their futures. Other research has found that the integration orientation can also be experienced in multiple ways (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005).

Figure 2. Variability of experiences within acculturation orientations.
It may be possible to occupy multiple orientations at the same time. From this viewpoint there is no solid line separating one orientation from another, but rather lines are blurred as the individual exhibits less commitment to one orientation and more commitment to the next. Using Felix as an example again, as his commitment to the separatist orientation weakened he was also seemed to be moving toward the integration orientation. Thus exhibiting characteristics associated with both orientations. Ryan, in School D offers another example. He had attended the school for some time, and was bi-racial, but still exhibited characteristics consistent with a separatist orientation. He likely

Figure 3. Variability in the acculturation experience may extend across acculturation orientations, and may straddle multiple acculturation orientations.
leaned toward integration or assimilation orientations earlier, but upon encountering racism at school, over time assumed or returned to the separatist orientation (see Landrine & Klonoff, 1966). Variability in acculturation experiences either within, or across orientations may account for differences in how successfully newcomers acculturate.

**Forces that can influence which acculturation orientation availability and desirability.** Another criticism of the bi-dimensional model is that it assumes acculturation orientations are chosen by newcomers. Schwartz et al. (2010) proposed that acculturation is a process involving interaction between the newcomer and the receiving context, and that context can influence whether-and-which acculturation orientations are available to newcomers. Participants in this study demonstrated that there are at least three forces contributing to acculturation orientations in urban-suburban school transitions.

1. **Individual preferences (What does the newcomer desire?).** Participants did not arrive at their new suburban schools as “empty slates” so to speak. They had already formed expectations about what their lives would be like in their new context. As have African Americans throughout their history in the United States, these participants expressed the belief that a sound education would set them on the road to upward mobility. Thus, their urban-suburban transition was an intentional effort, with the expectation of receiving a better education than they had received at their previous schools in Detroit.

Therefore it is safe to assume that these participants initially desired to integrate into the school culture to the degree that they could receive a good education (see Lacy, 2004 and Portes & Zhou, 1993). Furthermore, a major characteristic of adolescence is the
need to belong. This characteristic strengthens the proposition that initially participants’ leaned toward the integrationist orientation. However, contextual forces upon arrival to the new school can cause the initial orientation to be strengthened, weakened, or altogether abandoned.

2. **Forces emanating from the in-group.** Participants related that in their first days of attending suburban schools finding a social group to identify with was of primary importance. Being new to majority White middle schools, participants formed closest bonds with other students who, (a) shared their ethnicity, (b) were in the same grade-level, and (c) were also new to the school. This route to group formation is predictable given the salience or race-ethnicity in US society (see Tajfel 1982). Once a group is formed there is a tendency to demonstrate favor towards members of the in-group and bias against other groups (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). In addition, recent intergroup research with middle school students has emphasized that in-group norms for intergroup relationships can predict individual group members’ desire for intergroup friendships (Tropp, O’Brien, & Migacheva, 2014). Participants, especially those who were very new to the suburban school, noted in-group pressure to maintain exclusive ties to the in-group, rather than forming cross-group friendships. Strong in-group preference is aligned with a separatist leaning in acculturation orientation.

In several interviews accusing in-group peers of “acting White” was identified as a form of in-group sanctioning against forming cross-group friendships. In their classic study Fordham and Ogbu (1986) proposed that acting White was associated with behaviors linked to academic achievement, such as: speaking in Standard English, completing homework assignments, and engaging in classroom activities. However, the
participants in the present study indicated acting White had more to do with perceptions of inauthenticity or “being fake.” According to participants, being fake is when AfA students speak differently and act differently around White students. Rondell, in School A for example, complained that when he tried to reach out to White students in his school, other members of his Black in-group expressed their disapproval with accusations of acting White. In this way, in-group members may have limited Rondell’s ability to move away from the separatist orientation and toward the integrationist orientation.

**Forces emanating from out-groups.** Schwartz et al. (2010) pointed to how contexts within the receiving community influence which adaptive orientations are available to newcomers. Participants often faced pressure from their schools to assimilate to a mold shaped by White suburban values and experiences. For example, at the beginning of the male interview in School C the principal made it clear that he expected nothing less than a complete metamorphosis for these young men. It was as if they had brought nothing with them from Detroit that was of value in the suburban school. To force assimilation, School C administrators and teachers gave extra attention to these students. Participants complained about being under constant scrutiny by school administrators and teachers. The school’s effort to force assimilation may have had the unintended effect of making that orientation undesirable to these participants. The school’s assimilation efforts may have been interpreted by the participants as discrimination and devaluation of cherished cultural characteristics. Participants in all schools reported experiences of racism and discrimination from both teachers and peers. The intensity of these experiences however, varied by school. Perceptions of discrimination in the receiving context can place limits on newcomers’ ability and
willingness to pursue both assimilation and integration orientations (Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989; Berry et al., 2006).

Berry (1997) proposed that the integration orientation is available to newcomers, only if the receiving context embraces multiculturalism and pluralism. Yet, participants in this study were sometimes bewildered that highly valued cultural traits and artifacts associated with both being African American and coming from Detroit were unknown or devalued in their suburban schools. Participants across schools reported being derided because of the way they spoke English and their distinctive names. In some schools female participants were targeted for wearing clothing brands more associated with hip hop culture, rather than the preppy brands that were highly valued in the suburban community. In Detroit schools Black History Month was widely acknowledged and celebrated. Activities and observances also took place in community organizations such as churches and libraries and well. However, participants at all schools complained that while suburban schools recognized a number of holidays, Black History Month went for the most part, unnoticed. In schools where newcomers were marginalized for their distinct cultural characteristics, the integrationist orientation was likely unavailable.

In this study participants leaning toward integrationist and assimilationist orientations were more likely to display a sense of belonging to their school. These participants were also more likely to believe that their teachers were competent and cared about them. Angelica and Lorenzo from School F presented an example. They felt they were a part of their new school, partially because they were graciously welcomed by other AfA students who had attended the school for some time. They also spoke highly about many of their teachers and believed their teachers had their (the students) best
interests at heart. Both Angelica and Lorenzo displayed some characteristics associated with the assimilation orientation, such as their aversion to being identified with Detroit. They also leaned toward the integration orientation as they displayed favorable intergroup attitudes.

In summary, the urban-suburban transition experience for the participants in this study was embedded in human relationships. These relationships were with teachers and both in-group and out-group peers. In turn, the nature of these relationships was influenced by contextual issues in the school and wider community. School issues included ethnic make-up, school rules and policies, and openness to multiculturalism. Issues in the wider community included entrenched racism and a history of racial conflict and segregation. In all schools, participants’ primary relationships both in-and-out of school, were with peers who shared their ethnicity. Participants seemed to be more academically engaged when they liked their teachers and perceived them as competent.

This study moved the transition literature forward by combining the two-dimensional acculturation theory with the intergroup contact theory to provide a lens to view the urban-suburban school transition experiences of 48 African American students, most who had formerly resided in Detroit. Findings from this study suggest that the application of intergroup contact conditions in schools located in communities with a history of racism and segregation may not be easy, or desired. School administrators and teachers were more committed to assimilationist tactics requiring newcomers to fit into a frame shaped by White suburban values and experiences.

This study found that participants’ commitment to acculturation orientations was not stable and inflexible. For this group of young people the acculturation experience was
very fluid, as they shifted within and between acculturation orientations. This fluidity in acculturation may be connected to the adolescent search for identity. Early adolescents are more likely to be heavily engaged in identity negotiations (Yip et al., 2006) and for transitioning students may include the “trying on” of a variety of acculturation orientation configurations. Nonetheless, for participants in this study there were forces that constrained the availability and desirability of certain acculturation orientations. Schwartz et al. (2010) advised that positive and negative features within the receiving society affect the availability of acculturation orientations. For participants in this study, the acculturation orientation of in-group peers also influenced the availability of, and desire for, the integration acculturation orientation.

**Implications of the Study**

This study explored and presented urban African American students’ descriptions of their urban-suburban transition experiences, and how they made meaning of these experiences. The study findings suggest several implications for teachers and administrators in White suburban schools to make transitions easier for urban African American students.

**Decreasing dissonant acculturation expectations.** This study found that teachers and administrators play a huge role in the urban-suburban transition process. Study findings suggest that forcing assimilationist orientations may not be the most beneficial receiving approach for urban newcomers because it assumes that traditional urban African American culture and experiences can have no value in suburban schools. Urban students in this study tended to push back against such approaches by forming firmer commitments to separatist orientations. Instead, schools should attempt to employ
a more multicultural approach as they receive these students into suburban schools (Berry, 1997). This approach acknowledges that while the suburban schools have much to offer newcomers, newcomers also bring something of value to the suburban schools. Certainly, as the race-ethnic demographic landscape in the US transforms within the coming decades, all students, and especially White students, will benefit from understanding and appreciating the unique contributions of Americans from diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds.

Racial and ethnic differences are the proverbial “elephant in the living room.” Even if it is ignored, it will not go away. Although difficult to embrace, suburban schools may benefit by facing diversity head on with the implementation of policies and practices congruent with the intergroup contact hypothesis.

**Implementing equal status in schools.** Equal status is the expectation and perception of equal standing by all groups within a situation (Pettigrew, 1998). Equal status also carries the implication of equal access to the rewards of education (Cushner, 2004). A potential benefit of the perception of equal status at the school level is the potential for the school to develop a common in-group identity. The Common In-group Model is a re-categorization intervention that reduces the saliency of in-group and out-group perspectives, while increasing saliency for a single group identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005), in this case, at the school level.

To create an equal status school Schofield (2001) advised that structures within the school hierarchy be examined for evidence of equal status at all levels. For example, is there an imbalance of teachers and administrators from diverse and minority groups? Schofield (2001) also suggested implementing multicultural curriculum to help bridge
factors related to unequal status outside of the classroom (e.g., race-ethnicity and economic status). At last, specific to schools in this study, interventions such as the earned privilege program should be re-evaluated for its potential to create hierarchies of inequality.

**Cooperation between groups and common goals.** Allport (1954/1979) emphasized that intergroup contact had to reach beyond casual acquaintance to be effective. Genuine cooperative intergroup experiences decrease the tendency to reenact competitions that have historically favored dominant groups and led to ethnic stereotyping (Schofield, 2001). Cooperative interaction works best when paired with common goals (Dovidio, et al., 2003). In this sense, activities must be authentic and practical. For instance, simply changing seating patterns is not likely to promote meaningful intergroup interaction. Cooperative learning strategies have been identified as successful tools for both decreasing intergroup conflict and increasing higher thinking capacities (Cooper & Slavin, 2004). Schools should encourage newcomers to be involved in extracurricular activities such as theater, band, clubs, and athletics. Involvement in these types of activities offers opportunity for cooperative interdependence, if every member has a meaningful role in accomplishing the activity (Schofield, 2001).

**Support from authorities.** Authority support sets the standards for intergroup interaction (Pettigrew, 2005). Authority support is best seen in school policy statements that promote intergroup contact conditions and discourages discriminatory acts and prejudiced behavior (Cushner, 2004). Cushner also advised that school policy concerning disciplinary procedures be examined and reevaluated in light of the disproportionate rate at which ethnic minorities are disciplined in comparison to White students.
This was a particular issue among participants in this study. An example can be drawn from policies about fighting. In the online Detroit Public School’s policy manual, fighting was defined as, “a physical confrontation between one or more students that does not cause serious injury.” In the suburban district’s policy manual, fighting of any kind was considered a physical assault, or assault and battery, and fighting was listed among major infractions. Yet, suburban schools stipulated that students must not fight, not even to defend themselves when assaulted by someone else. Participants however, indicated that fighting was normal behavior, especially for boys, and unavoidable. Participants also insisted that walking away from a fight would make them look weak and would place them in the firing line for derogatory name calling. Considering that in years 2007 and 2009 approximately 50% of the 9th graders in Detroit schools had been involved in physical altercations (Youth risk behavior surveillance --- United States, 2007, 2008) discrepancies in urban and suburban attitudes about fighting are understandable. Hence, it comes as no surprise that urban participants were puzzled by the harsh penalties for fighting in their new suburban schools. When beliefs about fighting inherited from urban schools collide with harsher penalties for fighting in suburban schools, some students are bound to get caught in the crossfires. Such was the case with Rondell who was relegated to the lowest rung of the hierarchy of privilege for fighting in the suburban school. Of course, fighting should never be condoned in any school context. However, school policies could have been re-examined in light of the dissonant expectations for behavior between the two districts.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations refer to factors that have the potential influence the research; specifically factors that are out of the control of the researcher. This research was limited in several respects.

**The qualitative paradigm.** As is the nature of qualitative studies, because data was collected in a naturalistic environment, the study might be difficult to replicate. Additionally, because this study focused on the experiences of 48 students, most of who had transitioned from schools in Detroit to suburban schools, the findings from this study may not be generalized to other populations. However, findings from this study may suggest what may be found in similar populations. Nonetheless, additional research is required to determine if findings are generalizable to other populations.

**Participant selection.** Participants in this study were a subgroup from a larger study. Thus, they were not recruited specifically for this study and may not have shared the full range of the transition experience. However, questions from the interview protocol from the original study were examined and found compatible with the purpose and research question posed in the current study.

**Focus group methodology.** Focus groups are an ideal medium for research with adolescents. However, there are limitations possible with this methodology. There is the possibility that individual responses will be influenced by the larger group. The second limitation is that dominant voices may be mistaken for the opinion of the group. The influence of both limitations was reduced because of the thorough training received by this researcher before conducting these focus groups. This training in conducting focus groups included measures to draw out and include less dominant voices. In addition,
when there were dominant voices in a focus group, it was revealed in the results section. These limitations were also reduced when focus group voices were disaggregated during the phenomenological analysis.

**Future Directions**

Findings from this study lay the groundwork for future research concerning urban-suburban school transitions. Although literature regarding normative school transitions is voluminous, less is known about this increasingly important topic. Many of the findings from the present study fall along the lines of extant research. Yet, the study also generated questions about the nature of urban-suburban transitions and measures that can be taken to make them easier for students.

The mostly positive results from the application of intergroup contact conditions when people from different groups interact have remained remarkably consistent for nearly six decades (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Therefore the question remains, why did not the schools in this study implement them? Thus a fruitful line of research might be to explore if and how suburban schools are implementing intergroup contact conditions when they become more ethnically diverse. If suburban schools are not providing interventions that incorporate facets of the intergroup contact hypotheses, then steps should be taken to understand the source of reluctance among school staff.

Secondly, participants’ descriptions of the urban-suburban transition in this study suggest that there are deeper issues involved in this type of transition. Issues such as, how are urban-suburban transitions impacted by adolescents developmental stage? For example, is movement within and between acculturation orientations influenced by or correlated with Marcia’s (1980) identity statuses? Adolescent moratorium for instance,
may be associated with increased movement across orientations, as the identity search approaches widened horizons for exploration. In contrast, in situations where acculturation orientations are limited by the reception context, identity explorations may also be hindered.

Finally, findings from this study imply that there are motivational implications involved in the urban-suburban transition. School policies have the potential to encourage students to adopt motivational goal orientations that not only impede academic achievement, but can also feed into intergroup conflict. Two of the suburban schools had adopted an academic-behavioral intervention based upon social comparison and hierarchies of privilege. This intervention is in line with the performance Goal orientation. Ames (1991) advised that performance goals were grounded in internal attributional belief of self-worth and the ability to “outperform” others. This goal orientation in individuals is motivated by public recognition of one’s achievements in comparison with others, which in turn bolsters that individual’s self-worth. Nonetheless, this goal orientation may present a greater academic challenge for Black students, when compared to White students. African American students who adopted a performance goal orientation were more likely to also adopt self-handicapping learning tactics, but White students did not (Midgely, [Arun]kumar, & Urdan, 1996). Moreover, there may be a direct connection between school policies, goal orientations, and level of intergroup conflict in the school, as illustrated in Figure 4. An expanded investigation of motivational implications involved with the urban-suburban transition may assist in understanding the academic and social outcomes associated with this type of transition.
Table 9

*Interaction between school policies, academic motivation, and intergroup relations.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Policy</th>
<th>Goal Orientation</th>
<th>Intergroup Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Privilege hierarchy</strong></td>
<td>Promotes performance goal focus through social comparison.</td>
<td>Produces within school segregation because White students are more likely to be concentrated in higher privilege groups and Black students in lower privilege groups.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Consequences**
- Lower privilege students may see little benefit for effort may easily give up.
- Higher privilege students may limit their academic potential because their goal is only to compare favorably to lower privilege students.

**Consequences**
- Hierarchical groupings discourage perceptions of equal status in the school.
- Students express less interest in cooperative and interdependent activities.
- Lower privilege students may be prevented from gaining access to higher ability groups in spite of effort extended or ability displayed.
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### Appendix A

**Focus Group Protocol**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Probe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge about School</strong></td>
<td>What’s it like to be a student in this school?</td>
<td>What do you think are the best things about this school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What do you like least (do not say dislike) about this school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Composition of groups</strong></td>
<td>Describe the group of kids you eat lunch with at school.</td>
<td>– Can you give me a description of this group, what are they like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Describe the groups that sit at the different lunch tables everyday.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are some of the other groups in the lunchroom?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Permeability of groups</strong></td>
<td>So can you tell me…… how kids come together to be a group?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What happens when someone from one group prefers to be with another group?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intergroup Conflict</strong></td>
<td>How do groups get along one another in school?</td>
<td>How about out of school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are there conflicts among the different groups?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Sensitivity of Schools and Teachers</strong></td>
<td>About your classes. Any classes you like better than others?</td>
<td>Give me two or three reasons that this class is more enjoyable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Give me two or three reasons that this class is more enjoyable.</td>
<td>What part does the teacher play in making the class enjoyable?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You know we really want to know what you think makes a teacher a</td>
<td>Can you share an experience that you have had with a good teacher?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Is fairness important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How can you tell whether a teacher is fair or not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Issues</td>
<td>Gender Issues</td>
<td>Discrimination and Media Representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s it like to live in your city?</td>
<td>Like best?</td>
<td>How would you describe yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like least?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Talk a little bit more about that (If they say teacher understands them).

Can you describe an experience that let you know a teacher really understood you?

What makes a good teacher?

Does the school make accommodations for you to observe holidays and events that are important within your community?

Are there any classes such as Literature where you read works of people from your community? Or have any of you had a social studies teacher who helped you explore about your own community or when/why people from your community started immigrating to the United States?

Can you describe an experience that let you know a teacher really understood you?