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## **Exclusion of African-American High School Students from Selective Enrollment Schools: Their Views on Academic and Social Success in the School Environment and After High School Graduation**

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DePaul University  
College of Education

EXCLUSION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM SELECTIVE  
ENROLLMENT SCHOOLS  
THEIR VIEWS ON ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL SUCCESS IN THE SCHOOL  
ENVIRONMENT AND AFTER HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

A Dissertation in Education  
with a Concentration in Curriculum Studies

by

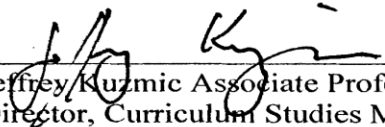
Deidre R. Walker-Berry

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

November 2019


We approve the dissertation of Deidre R. Walker-Berry

  
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### **Certification of Authorship**

I certify that I am the sole author of this dissertation. Any assistance received in the preparation of this dissertation has been acknowledged and disclosed within it. Any sources utilized, including the use of data, ideas and words, those quoted directly or paraphrased, have been cited. I certify that I have prepared this dissertation according program guidelines, as directed.

Author Signature Debra Berry Date 4-17-2019

## ABSTRACT

African-American graduation rates fall behind all other ethnic groups in the United States. Due to intensifying racial inequalities in Chicago, schools in low-income minority communities have confronted augmented segregation in educational opportunities. The closing of numerous schools, high-stakes, and standardized testing mandates, along with new educative options such as charters and military academies, have resulted in a dual-tiered educational system. These new educative options are entrenched in the neo-liberal ideology of free marketization and privatization of education and encourages the expansion of elite selective enrollment high schools. This expansion has marginalized and alienated many African-American students in addition to fostering more apprehension within the African-American community. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perspectives of African-American high school students attending selective enrollment and neighborhood schools as they experience inequity, racism, and the political process within and outside the school setting.

The research design for this study is described best as a qualitatively framed critical ethnography. Data was collected from a total of 19 interviews with African-American high school students concerning their views on each other's academic ability as well as their perspective on success and school disparities. A constant comparative approach was used in analyzing the data collected. What was also revealed was that 13 students were political activists. Results from the data revealed that students were mostly concerned with testing, school budgeting practices, and self-perceptions of race and academic success. Of the ten selective enrollment students, six thought that students attending neighborhood high schools were marginalized, a belief also shared by seven of the nine students attending neighborhood high schools. Of all 19 students interviewed, sixteen believed that attending a selective enrollment school garnered better chances for success.

This study concludes with a discussion from students on ways to remediate the educational gap and the researcher's suggestion that more studies focus on within-group variation. Also included is a discussion on the necessity of cultivating student voice through political activism.

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to the memory of my mother, Warree Walker, who instilled in me that I could accomplish anything with hard work and by putting God first in all my endeavors. Although she no longer walks this earth, her words and her spirit are the foundation and comfort in my life. This professional milestone could not have happened if I had not experienced her belief in my ability, her deep devotion to me and my sisters, and her profound understanding of the power of God's love. I love you mom.

## Chapter One: Introduction

### Background Rationale.

**The sorting and sifting of students.** The United States Department of Education has released data that confirms African-American high school students' graduation rates continue to lag behind those of Whites, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2015-2016; Tucci, 2009; Dale, 2010; Swanson, 2010). Honora (2003) assesses from Steele's (1992) essay that "too often, African-American students receive neither the quality nor the quantity of support needed to develop an identification with the academic culture of the school" (Honora, 2003, p. 60).

Jankov and Caref (2017) report about how Chicago continues to ignore the demands for an equal distribution of education resources, while education and corporate reformers deflect from the issues by pushing for more accountability through standardized tests. Corporate reformers have appropriated civil rights values as a strategy to close black neighborhood schools and replace them with charters and military academies. Since 2012, schools in low-income minority communities have experienced increased segregation in educational opportunities, as racial inequalities have risen (Jankov & Caref, 2017). Given that inequities in resources and opportunities have grown, so have the apprehensions in African-American communities over increased efforts to privatize public education. Despite the issues surrounding privatization, testing, and school closings, there is the more complex issue of educational policies that, in effect, create a dual-tiered system. In such a system, one group of students receive high-quality resources while another group receives the basics. This dual-tiered system, made possible by selective enrollment practices, uses the metrics of test scores, family income, and zip codes as the "gatekeeper" to opportunities. The result, authenticated by Delpit (1995/2005), is an



exclusion of specific populations of students from accessing knowledge, which is a ploy rooted in institutional racism that robs them of the education they deserve (Delpit, 1995/2005). Because of this dual-tiered system, there exists a struggle among African-American students to develop a sense of self-worth and a positive racial identity in the school setting. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the impact of selective enrollment schools within the African-American community.

### **Statement of the Problem**

**Alienation and privatization.** Along with the segregation of students, are issues of power and control employed to manipulate the existing economic structure. This manipulation has resulted in the alienation of minority students which allows privatization advocates to maintain control of educational and employment opportunities. They have redirected attention away from policies that do not demonstrate equity while claiming to provide educational opportunities and accountability. These practices send subtle messages to minority students about whom society values. Nieto (1992), Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), Steele and Aronson (1995), and Steele (1997) concede that minority students viewed from a deficit perspective suffer a psychological liability that encumbers achievement, with these students experiencing a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure (Nieto, 1992; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Steel & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997).

Steele and Aronson (1995) and Steele's (1997) work acknowledged that African-American students attached stereotypical assumptions of limited intellectual ability by other racial groups to their individual and collective identities (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997). In agreement with the previous mentioned scholars, Grant (1989) stresses that the curriculums these students experience have been born out of deficit models which are socially unsound. These models portray African-Americans negatively through such descriptions as "at risk," or

use various media venues to represent them as criminals. Additionally, African-American students frequently interact with teachers who would prefer not to teach them (Grant, 1989).

Teacher attitudes and low expectations of African-American students may have their foundations in the beliefs like those expressed in the writings of Herrnstein and Murray (1994) and Jensen (1969), who championed theories on I.Q and genetics as the primary reason for the lack of educational attainment (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1969). According to Valencia (1997) their work, from a historical standpoint, has been instrumental in shaping the deficit discourse. While the arguments of Herrnstein and Murray along with Jensen show no legitimacy, the current educational practice covertly portrays them as truths (Valencia,1997).

Even though education reformers have placed an enormous amount of attention on the academic benefits of segregating students by ability, they have neglected to consider the social and psychological consequences for students victimized by it. Several intimidating issues surface in determining the options available for minority students denied admission to selective enrollment schools due to poor performance on high-stakes tests. We must consider that these issues are firmly rooted in

- the misuse of high-stakes testing as an accountability method, which punishes students for not meeting dominant standards through no fault of their own,
- school privatization strategies shrouded as school choice, and
- the lack of rigorous curriculums that could enable African-American students to be competitive with their white and middle-class peers.

The above points reveal what Chavous et al. (2003) describe as the difficulties that black and Hispanic students encounter trying to access secondary educational opportunities. These students have connected the inequities of economic and social mobility to their racial groups; thus they

are reinforcing what Chavous et al. (2003), Booker (2006), and Mickelson (1990) have noted from other researchers; that there exist the negative perception that educational pursuits will not guarantee a prosperous future (Chavous et al., 2003; Booker, 2006; Mickelson, 1990).

**The misuse of testing.** The employment of high-stakes and standardized tests have a substantial influence on the educational attainment of minorities, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities. These tests influence grade placement and academic tracking along with graduation and college entrance (Banks & Banks, 2009; Gregory, 2004; Jones, Jones & Hargrove, 2003; Williams, 1971; Williams, 1983). This influence is primarily due now to The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). African-American students denied admission to selective enrollment schools may fear ostracism from the educational process because of poor performance on standardized tests. Delpit's (1995/2005) revelations confirm how test scores have served as the "gatekeeper" that often inhibits minority students' abilities to face the rigors of college. Delpit uses the term "gatekeeper" to highlight that those in power control access with veiled rules that regulate the distribution of opportunities (Delpit, 1995/2005). Parents, school administrators, teachers, education reformers, politicians, and students have associated the probability of having a better life with test scores that enable them to attend selective enrollment schools. Accordingly, these students have access to the best colleges and the best jobs. The study by Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, and Palma (2011) has reported the saliency of educational attainment in the personal and economic success of individuals in the United States. Those adults who do not achieve a certificate of completion from secondary schools encounter considerable barriers in obtaining adequate employment along with the perception of being a burden on society (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2011).

**Consequences of school choice: selective enrollment practices.**

The differentiation between selective enrollment and neighborhood schools is a maneuver that education reformers employ to persuade parents that school choice options are plentiful. They are, as Anderson (2007) described “made out of fear and ignorance” and “deeply contradictory and/or confused (Anderson, 2007, p. 148). Many argue that these options serve to preserve social reproduction for those in power. Through selective enrollment school choice options, parents often believe that they have choices in deciding what schools their children will attend. However, through school choice options, college preparatory academies, charters, and magnets schools are now making decisions on what populations they will educate and the curriculum to which those populations will have exposure. Egeland and McIlrath (2008) cite Anderson’s (2001) assertion that while those students with good test scores have access to better schools, schools with excellent curriculums get to exercise choice by rejecting a prospective applicant (Egeland & McIlrath, 2008, p. 84). Darling-Hammond (2010) argues for the necessity of safeguarding the public interest against the privatization of schools which disenfranchises parents and students from exercising their choice in the selection of schools. She avows that school districts must be totally transparent with parents and students and manage choice options to avoid creating educational environments that disseminate both privilege and disparity (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Ravitch (2010) agrees with Darling-Hammond by affirming that, through privatization practices,

the regular public schools will become the schools of last resort ... public schools will enroll a disproportionate share of students with learning disabilities and students who are classified as English language learners; they will enroll the kids from the most troubled home circumstances ... the market view of education

undermines traditional values, and traditional ties ... which rest on community consensus. (Ravitch, 2010, pp. 220-222)

Ravitch's resistance against the privatization of school is also a critique of Friedman's (1955; 1962) concept of making schools compete through the marketization of the voucher system. Stulberg (2008) conveys that Friedman's position was that vouchers would assist in establishing community control of local schools by privatizing them and eliminating the role of government oversight (Stulberg, 2008). Friedman's ideas on school marketization coincide with the 1954 *Brown v. The Board of Education in Topeka* ruling, which led to whites circumventing the desegregation of schools. Friedman asserted that poor or low-income African-American children suffered more from the inequities of public schooling. In contrast to Friedman's ideas on public school choice, those who were in favor of public schooling continued to espouse its benefits despite how public education had disenfranchised minorities. Friedman criticized African-American leaders who sent their children to private schools but would not advocate for their economically less fortunate counterparts in doing the same. He perceived these leaders as using the issue of public schooling to gain political power and control. Still, there was no complete similarity of thought among African-American activists that racial integration would remedy the issues of racial polarization, which we discuss in chapter three (Stulberg, 2008, pp.77-80). We should be clear that while advocating for school vouchers, Friedman condemned how southern whites used vouchers to evade the Supreme Court ruling on desegregating public schools (Green, 2006; Ravitch, 2010).

**Academic tracks equals competition.** The issue concerning competitiveness validates the use of standardized testing within the school environment for students enrolled in advanced placement and honors courses. Competitiveness is used as a means to segregate high performing

students from those enrolled in regular and low level tracked courses. Lipman, (2004) cites Carlson's (1997) outline of the current trend in educational tracking practices in Chicago and how it coincides with a stratified labor market:

The academic track is becoming more differentiated from other tracks and more spatially separate through magnet and specialty schools and separate academic programs within schools, thus stripping academic track students from the general high school. These selective programs, employing more constructivist and 'higher-order-thinking' curriculum, as well as advanced course offerings, prepare students to be knowledge producers in the new economy. (Lipman, 2004, p.173; also see Carlson,1997, p. 50)

Lipman explains Carlson's analysis of Chicago education policies as making efforts to carefully connect vocational Education-to-Career programs with academics, while general high schools continue curriculums that teach low level skills which correspond to low-wage employment. Lipman further illustrates this perspective by explaining how college preparatory and specialty schools in Chicago are habitually clustered in white middle-class neighborhoods, while academically challenging programs in low-income minority communities service only a small number of students and buttress gentrification (Lipman, 2004, p. 55). Lipman sees the issue as one, in which those who come with a history of not having access to excellent educational opportunities, still often find that the access that will prepare them for college absent (Lipman, 2004, p. 56). We can use Bernstein's (1996) work to describe the move toward privatization of education through selective enrollment schools as a way to

... create boundaries, legitimize boundaries, reproduce boundaries, between different categories of groups, gender, class, race, different categories of

discourse, different categories of agents. Thus, power always operates to produce dislocations, to produce punctuations in social space. (Bernstein, 1996, p. 19)

Moreover, we must first consider the subtle messages that we send these students about their place in the world of academics and their future in the global economy when we only provide them with basic skills (and the fallacy of opportunity). Castells (1996) maintains that although an assortment of abilities are the prerequisite for employment in the new economy, only basic literacies are needed for those employed in many low-wage occupations (Castells, 1996). Two reports for the Commercial Club of Chicago (1990; 1999) noted that the workforce will be comprised mainly of minorities from low-performing schools whose identities are fixed to lower tiers of the workforce. These lower tiers, as Lipman (2003) has pointedly stated, are severely entrenched in accountability measures that force students out of school through high-stakes testing and low-level curriculums that demonstrate little relevance to their post-secondary aspirations (Commercial Club of Chicago, 1990; Johnson; 1999; Lipman, 2003). Considering the competitiveness that selective enrollment schools have encouraged, Butler (2003) through analyzing the research of Allen-Meares (1999), Chizhik (2001), Mueller and Fleming (2001), and Spector, (2001) concludes the following below:

A potential manifestation of cultural contradiction may be found in academic situations in which independent and competitive forms of learning and achievement are emphasized. Such approaches may greatly conflict with the cooperative and collaborative learning styles preferred by some African-American youths, who may more readily embrace or be comfortable with pedagogical methods that are consistent with Africultural values such as communalism and collectivism. (Butler, 2003, p. 53)

For those students attending low-performing schools, it may be a means of emotional and psychological survival to shy away from advanced placement or honors classes. Butler (2003) cites studies of Constantine, Erickson, Banks., and Timberlake (1998), and Wilson, Cooke, and Arrington (1997), acknowledging that black students may fear the perception of “acting white” which may result in “bullying, ridicule, social isolation, reduced peer and social self-esteem, and feelings of community and cultural betrayal” (Butler, 2003, p. 52). Ford’s (1995) study revealed the circumstances in which many academically talented African-American students purposely underperform in the school environment because of the perception of acting white and abandoning their own cultural identity (Ford, 1995). Ford’s study substantiates Kohl’s (1994) findings that many disenfranchised students deliberately disengage from school when they believe the school environment considers their cultural identities irrelevant to learning (Ford, 1995).

Fan, Williams, and Corkin (2011) have referenced Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory, which explains that within the school context, the school experiences of students have more of an influence in shaping perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Fan, Williams, & Corkin, 2011). To support this, Smerdon (2002) cites several early studies of Calabrese (1987), Finn (1989), Goodenow (1993), and Trusty and Dooley-Dickey (1993) who corroborate how the school setting influences students’ self-perceptions. Calabrese (1987), Goodenow (1993), and Trusty and Dooley-Dickey (1993) observed that students who perceived themselves as having low socioeconomic or academic status do not experience full membership and are especially disposed to feeling inadequate. Goodenow (1993) highlights as well that low-performing students may feel unwelcome in the school environment by teachers and academically successful students.



Finn (1989) has noted that academically and socially disadvantaged students have experienced alienation within the school with teachers withholding encouragement and access to various course offerings. Students may also feel alienated if they feel their curriculum needs are not met and that discipline measures are severe and unfair (Finn, 1989). Smerdon, (2002) also cites Goodenow's (1993) belief that these students are cognizant of the inequity of benefits in school membership between themselves and their more scholastically adept peers (Smerdon, 2002). With this perspective in mind, it is necessary that schools create a climate that refutes negative assumptions surrounding the academic abilities of African-American students. Educators must be incessantly attentive to the challenges that inhibit a positive academic experience. Therefore, we should also examine African-American students opinions of their school environment and how they perceive the differences between academic settings.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of African-American students affected by reform policies that hinder academic achievement. Through their reliance and/or misapplication of evaluation tools such as standardized and high-stakes testing, these policies often result in unequal distribution of educational resources and the abandonment of schools in communities. Given the dynamics of the political power that influences school reform initiatives, this study examines the opinions of both selective enrollment and low-income neighborhood African-American high school students concerning reform policies. First, I seek to understand how students become cognizant of unequal educational resources; second, how they negotiate this disparateness within the school context; and third, what they may understand regarding privilege, status, and socioeconomic mobility. This study will add to the literature by 1) addressing how students make sense of the politicization and racialization of school reform and

its influences on students' identities, 2) the perceptions they hold about and from their peers, and 3) their aspirations after they have completed high school.

**Research questions.** There are two research questions for this study. The first question is how each group of students perceives each other's academic abilities in the school context and socially. The second research question is how each group of students defines success and to what extent expectations of success differ between African-American high school students who attend selective enrollment public schools, and those who attend low-performing neighborhood public schools. Through question two, I will investigate their expectations of career and quality of life that African-American students aspire towards after completing secondary schooling in both types of learning environments.

**Student perceptions of the school environment.** While attempting to answer the above research questions, I sought Noguera's (2007) study of ten high schools in Boston. Noguera's study uncovered four major themes of student concerns. First, students were disturbed about how their evaluation through high-stakes testing influenced the path of their high school academic experience and their success later in life. Second, students wanted to improve the relationship between themselves and teachers. Third, students were concerned about how discipline and order could be preserved. Fourth, they wanted to construct clear goals that would be a source of motivation for the near future (Noguera, 2007). Noguera's work with the ten high schools is indicative of the reflectiveness students demonstrate and their desire to develop agency. Oakes' (1985/2005) research demonstrated that low-performing students held low opinions and expectations concerning their futures and adjusted their opinions of themselves according to their track level and class status. This ultimately led to estrangement and alienation within the school setting (Oakes, 1985/2005). Black students may fear the connotation of *acting white* [emphasis

added] when they believe that their cultural identity is compromised while pursuing academic excellence. Yet, the need for acceptance and to belong to a peer group is as great as the need for validation from educators and parents. Tyson (2013) states that because of the disproportionate allocation of students across curriculum tracks by race and socioeconomic status, there is a constant bolstering of stereotypes combined with escalating hostility and antagonism within a school system. African-American students often possess the assumption that only smart or driven students can access advanced placement curriculum, but the relationship to the way in which students learn often can be linked to their racial, ethnic, or social class identities (Tyson, 2013).

Booker (2006) references the warnings of Becker and Luther, (2002), Dewey (1958), Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), Noddings (1992), and Osterman (2000) that socially and culturally, students must experience strong inter-personal connections within the school environment so that the learning experience becomes optimum. A student may wish to succeed academically and possess the ability to do so, but if the environment does not demonstrate support, the student is likely to experience lower levels of belongingness. This lack of belongingness can lead to poor academic achievement (Booker, 2006). According to Kuykendall (1991), Ogbu (2003), and Rosenbloom and Way, (2004) experiencing positive affirmations from both teachers and their peers is especially vital for the academic success of African-American students (Kuykendall, 1991; Ogbu, 2003; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Osterman (2000) takes notice of the observations from Maehr and Midgley (1996) on how teachers, in their desire for the success of students, reward those who can meet the established standards and norms, while creating an atmosphere where competitiveness and disparity become the veiled message that teachers convey in their interpersonal relationships with students (Osterman, 2000). Students who experience academic challenges need to have a voice in the educational dialogue to prevent

the creation of policies that might subject them to social, emotional, and psychological obstacles. We cannot address how students perceive each other or themselves individually until we realize the significant role that beliefs play in academic achievement.

### **The Significance of the Study**

**Giving students a voice.** What is missing alongside the discourses concerning selective enrollment, poorly performing schools, high dropout rates, and accountability, are the insights of students to which policy mandates are directed. First, this study is significant because it offers students the ability to develop agency in an environment that may marginalize them. Howard (2001) has substantiated the need for student agency by citing the necessity to investigate the perspectives of those students not frequently heard through the discourse on school reform. Howard's position is that even though there have been a variety of stakeholders offering opinions and theories concerning the lack of academic achievement for marginalized students, these students have not yet overcome the barriers to achievement. Howard urges us to question why students' "voices and viewpoints are so blatantly omitted" if reform policies are created in their interest (Howard, 2001, p. 132). James and James (2004) warn of an intensified risk of student disengagement and alienation when education reformers refuse to acknowledge the varied needs of students to whom policy mandates target. Due to this failure to acknowledge their needs, these students are left vulnerable to forgoing their aspirations or dropping out of the educative setting permanently (James & James, 2004).

Mitra (2009), who has written extensively on student voice and agency, declares that "Students rarely have a role in school decision-making processes and have even fewer opportunities to participate in educational improvement efforts" (Mitra, 2009, p. 312). Mitra also affirms that through sharing their views on issues concerning their communities and schools,

students can enable initiatives that encourage change in the school environment. The school environment must demonstrate to them that their knowledge and experiences are valued (Mitra, 2001). Students who have felt ostracized from the school environment can reconnect with the school community because of a strong sense of ownership in a school that fosters motivation (Mitra, 2003). Mitra (2004) also advises that school reform policies will be more successful if reformers invite students to take part in their formation. Student perspectives can foster better academic programs, teacher training, and improve student-teacher relationships. Candid and sincere dialogue can help students address injustices ignored by administrators and teachers seeking to circumvent conflict. Young people will acquire a stronger sense of their abilities through participating in policy reshaping (Mitra, 2004).

Brantlinger's (1993) ethnography includes the insights of Palonsky (1987), who asserts that although numerous studies expose the inequities of schooling, these studies have failed to reveal the insightfulness of student awareness regarding the political agendas that influence the disparities in their school environments. Neither have practical suggestions surfaced from students resolving the issues that shield the inequities they experience. These insights, according to Polansky, should be viewed as means to provide a critical analysis of what students believe to be significant in the forming of frameworks that assist them in defining their political lives. (Brantlinger, 1993; also see Polansky, 1987, p. 503 ).

The second significant justification for this study would be what Wiggan (2007) asserts from LeCompte and Preissle (1992) in that, "there have been relatively few studies specifically addressing how students themselves define achievement as well as what students do, feel, and think about in school" (Wiggan, 2007, p. 323; also see LeCompte & Preissle, 1992, p. 820 ). The essential questions should emphasize 1) how achievement is defined and what it means to

students, 2) in what ways achievement is demonstrated, and 3) how we can eliminate obstacles to achievement for distinct groups of students (Wiggan, 2007, p. 324). Thompson (2007) argues that there are few opportunities available for African-American students to voice their concerns and apprehensions regarding their school experiences and environment. Offering students the opportunity to express their beliefs is paramount to understanding why the achievement gap still exists and how it is influential in students' self-efficacy. Their insights are necessary to provide the appropriate support to achieve academically (Thompson, 2007). Thompson (2008) further argues that educators and policy reformers must acknowledge the potentially damaging school experiences of minority students that encourage their indifference (Thomas, 2008). McNeil (2000) reasons that the school culture must be examined comprehensively to counter issues of structural inequities and to consider the perspectives of students who are victimized by them (McNeil, 2000).

Third, this study can help educators in collectively eliminating the differentiation of social classes that will expedite equitable and true race-neutral curriculums. Mixon (2007) declares, "it is crucial for educators to understand the extent to which production and reproduction of social class occur in educational settings, as it has important implications to society" (Mixon, 2007, p. 72). Educators must also realize that best practices for education include the historical perspectives that facilitate understanding, and that the use of racialized discourses is counter-productive to achieving educational equity. Rogoff (2003) reminds us that frequently educators may unconsciously neglect the historical issues that can foster constructive social-cultural identity and academic success because they 1) lack understanding of the history of various cultures or 2) they stand in judgment of their practices without trying to understand their historical significance (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 14-17). Pearl (1997) proclaims that the inability of

minority students to meet subjectively defined standards is the reason behind a deficit label bestowed upon them. The history of deficit thinking is an essential lesson for all of us to understand regarding how it has influenced our lives (Pearl, 1997).

Fourth, while students are the most significant stakeholders in the educational process, they lack consideration by education reformers as having the right to fully express self-agency. Students look to education reformers to do what is morally and ethically right for them. Above all, education reformers and researchers can engage students in examining school issues that directly affect their lives. This engagement will help students to analyze ways they can promote and sustain democracy. Student perspectives offer insights not readily acknowledged by educators and reformers. These insights can change how we define “who is deserving of opportunities” and help correct public policies; policies that create barriers to equity within our current educational system. This work can help educators, as well as students, take a firm stance against educational practices that divide people into what Katz and Sugrue (1993) describe as “categories of moral worth” which assign blame and culpability to the marginalized (Katz & Sugrue, 1993).

Mirón and Lauria (1998) demonstrate in their study how the context of schooling shapes students’ identities along race and class lines. They point to Hall (1991) and Gilligan (1993) as examples of how to do ethnographic research and suggest that in the past, when the lives of students have been examined, their lived cultural and social experiences have been scrutinized through a lens where the focus is on the limitations of their subordinate positions. Additionally, these studies did not allow for the revelation of student perspectives concerning their school setting or the ways in which they could transform their lives. Mirón and Lauria advise us not to perceive students as powerless and that students do not necessarily perceive themselves as

complacent victims. On the contrary, they are active players in the educational arena who can denounce policies that block equal opportunities (Mirón & Lauria, 1998). Most importantly, this study can provide new insights on why some African-American students do not conform to traditional school values. It may assist educators in becoming more sensitive to diversity issues and develop programs of instruction that are more culturally inclusive.

### **Chapter One Conclusion**

Smyth (2006) advises that when the school environment belittles the experiences, ambitions, or cultures of students, they (students) become alienated and resentful of the schooling process. “They feel that schooling is simply not worth the emotional and psychological investment necessary to warrant their serious involvement” (Smyth, 2006, p. 279). We cannot deny that disengagement of most minority youth from the school environment has coincided with education policies that are insensitive to their needs. The heavy emphasis on accountability and testing are prompting many minority students to believe they do not have a place in school (Smyth, 2006). Students most affected by the current United States educational policies do not have, according to Smyth, an “official” voice (p. 282). However, we should not perceive them as being ill-fated in advocating for themselves. Issues such as dropping out of school, acting out, and occasional violence, along with refusing to learn (Kohl, 1994), are but a few ways students demonstrate their resistance to policies that fail to recognize their needs (Smyth, 2006).

Osterman (2000) is adamant that students with the greatest need for connecting with the school academically and socially, frequently find there is a lack of opportunities to connect themselves with the school environment (Osterman, 2000). Lipman (2011) offers this insight into youth agency in the educational setting: “Through collective inquiry, youth have opportunities to disrupt dominant discourses and reframe educational debates” (Lipman, 2011, pp. 117-118). We



can no longer view students as powerless victims of insensitive educational reform policies. We can only witness various efforts of students to call attention to the many policies that continue to marginalize schools and communities in this city and the nation. It is my intent, through this investigation of selective enrollment policies and practices, that students will

- demonstrate their agency as an individual and collective endeavor,
- disrupt and challenge the dominant discourse on power and control, and
- that this study becomes a vehicle to facilitate thoughtful, meaningful dialogue among students, educational and political reformers, teachers, and the broader community.

### **Chapter One Summary and Organization for Study**

Chapter One offered insight into the difficulties that a great majority of all African-American high school students face as products of low-performing schools. It discussed how African-American students may fail to develop a positive identity with academic achievement, fear ostracism from the educational process, and school reform policies that send subtle messages to minority students regarding their value in society. This chapter highlighted that 1) the selective enrollment process acts as an indicator of social, cultural, and economic success long after secondary school completion, and 2) it points out that students rarely have a voice in the implementation of school policies. This chapter also revealed that there is a need for education reformers, practitioners, and administrators to acknowledge the negative experiences of African-American students and how these experiences contribute to academic failure for some. By acknowledging students' insights regarding policies and practices, we empower them to develop an agency that will provide opportunities to participate in the decision-making process. The subsequent chapters (two and three) are organized to provide the reader with an in depth understanding of the theoretical frameworks which help to underscore the intersectionality

of race and class and their influence on educational practice and policy. Section one of chapter two focuses on how Critical Race Theory is used as the broader theoretical framework for this study, while section two utilizes Conflict Theory to examine stratification in education. Conflict Theory offers an in-depth analysis of the structural, political, and social methods used to hinder African-American achievement. Chapter three reviews the literature that focuses on the history of school choice, how it evolved as the foundation for selective schools, and other educative options. Chapter four, the methodology section, explains the rationale for using critical ethnography as a research paradigm. In this chapter the reader can become acquainted with my perception of my role in the research process, my understanding of my identity, and how it influenced my approach to the research process.

The remaining chapters provide the narratives of the 19 students interviewed in this research study. Chapter five is the beginning of narratives where both neighborhood and selected enrollment school students express their views about the effects of testing, grades, school environment, and various inequalities. The Thirteen students who are politically active are quite articulate in expressing their opinions on race and class inequities. However, the six remaining students not engaged in political activities are equally articulate in expressing their perspectives concerning the issues of race and school disparities. Chapter five delves intensely into testing, grades, and their influence on students; especially the statistical significance that feeds the fear of racial stigma and encourages racial micro-aggressions. In chapter six, students voice their views of resource inequities, school closings, and the mismanagement of financial, curriculum, and human resources. Chapter seven is devoted to students experiences in the political process and how this process has shaped their individual political ideologies and collective activism. Here students reiterate the racial and cultural stigmas they confront as they describe their motivation in

becoming politically active and their everyday involvement in the political process. In chapters eight and nine, students speak of their perceptions of each other's academic ability and opposite school settings. Their narratives reflect the perspicacity of their views on merit and advantage and the desire to better their future.

Chapter eight reveals class differences in their views on education that are critical to their definition of success. Where some students have high aspirations for the future, others are struggling to survive. Chapter nine illuminates the internalization of blame that some students in both groups experience as a result of the stereotypical representations they must confront. In chapter ten, students offer their insights on improving academic achievement. They focused on better ways of dealing with negative stereotypes and erratic discipline policies to teacher instructional techniques and learning strategies, forming caring relationships between teachers and students, and finally their beliefs on whether intelligence is fixed or malleable. The final chapter reminds the reader that while comparing the differences between whites and other minorities uncovers various inequities, what happens within an ethnic group cannot be addressed with one-dimensional measures. Only through measures that closely examine various nuanced variables that are embedded primarily in social class, economics, and cultural capital can we even hope to unearth what seems to be a conundrum to African-American students trailing their white counterparts in achievement. Yet, there are numerous suggestions that involve promoting political activism and redefining the purpose of education that may help resolve the mystery of the achievement gap beyond providing financial and instructional resources.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Section One: Theoretical Frameworks of Critical Race Theory and Conflict Theory**

This chapter includes the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Conflict Theory as the umbrellas for theoretical analysis. Several topics are part of the discussion concerning selective enrollment. These topics include cultural explanations for the lack of achievement of African-Americans. It highlights the five tenets of CRT which focuses on how race and racism intersect with power. This chapter also contains a discussion on the structural and institutional methods that encourage stratification. It utilizes six points of Conflict Theory by highlighting the social, economic, and government roles in the reproduction of privilege, dominance, and subordination.

#### **The Saliency of Race**

As the researcher, I believe that the answers to several questions are necessary to adequately address the issue of the educational marginalization of African-American students. These questions are 1) what assumptions are being made regarding the academic ability of students of color? 2) How do these students perceive their place in the politicization of the school environment?, and 3) How do we change the beliefs of those whose ideologies are rooted in the historical mistreatment of others believed to be inferior? Those of us concerned with equity and democracy may not have the resources to implement many concrete solutions that can address all problems. Unless we analyze the roots of differentiation and the practices and policies that lay their foundation, true reform cannot take place. True reform must start with asking how we can negotiate changing the social order so that the labels of differentiation need not exist.

Race, being a social construction that can be variable has been a complicated and formidable tool that either restricts or provides opportunities in this country (Omi, 2001; Omi &

Winant, 2015). Persell (2012) writes that there has been much effort in research studies to explain racial differences in educational attainment when it concerns comparisons between the black and White populations. From a historical perspective, the enslavement of African-Americans is directly responsible for the current race-based system of stratification from which the dominant culture has enjoyed tremendous economic, social, and political benefits (Persell, 2012). Persell has referenced other critical race theorists such as Bonilla-Silva (1997, 2001) and Omi (2001) who agree that race is the principal structural condition to take into consideration regarding social relationships. Omi and Winant (2015) make it more cogent concerning race with this statement; “race is a master category – a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States” (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 106).

Persell also references Fischer et al. (1996) asserting that a group’s relationship to other groups becomes inferior through racialized power structures where intelligence is the currency that affects academic achievement (Persell, 2012). Fischer et al. (1996) outline how the racialized relationships between groups evolve through processes such as “1) socioeconomic deprivation, which is accentuated by low-income, 2) racial-ethnic segregation which concentrates disadvantages and heightens them, and 3) stigmatization as inferior by the dominant society’s perception of them” (Fischer, et al., 1996, pp. 173-174). Fischer et al. are critical of Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) argument that socioeconomic difference is not an adequate explanation for the test score gap between blacks and whites and notices their unwillingness to examine other issues. Fischer et al. additionally acknowledge that all subordinate groups in the United States experience segregation and that children in subordinate groups are consistently disadvantaged. Children belonging to subordinate groups must deal with the stigma associated

with the group in which they belong (Fischer et al., 1996). According to Persell, there are a few arguments that better address the unequal educational attainment of blacks compared to whites in this country. These arguments assign fault to cultural, genetic, and familial roots in order to legitimize practices and policies that facilitate inequity (Persell, 2012). I will examine some of these arguments later in this section. To fully comprehend the narratives of African-American students who attend selective and non-selective enrollment schools, this research study will employ Critical Race Theory as a major tool for analysis. I have chosen CRT as a framework because of my personal experiences as an African-American educator who has suffered marginalization. My primary motivation for this study centers on my being able to advocate for those disempowered by societal structures of oppression. CRT, in conjunction with Conflict Theory, will help critique how current educational trends differentiate students according to class, socio-economics, and community demographics. The participants this researcher interviewed are African-American and thus face some difficulties of which those in the dominant culture may neither be aware of nor be able to comprehend.

### **The Lens of Critical Race Theory: The Five Tenets**

DeCuir-Gunby and Dixson (2004) detail how Critical Race Theory (CRT) was originally founded through the work of legal scholars Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado. CRT was a reaction to Critical Legal Studies' (CLS) inability to speak appropriately to race and racism occurring in the United States in the 1970s (DeCuir-Gunby & Dixson, 2004). In the 1980s, CRT made its way from American law schools into education and other social science disciplines through the scholarship of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Duncan (2002), and Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, and Parker (2002) (DeCuir-Gunby & Dixson, 2004, p. 26). In CRT, race becomes the emphasis for investigating the converging relationships amid race, racism, and

power (Bell, 1992). This theory employs five tenets of analysis (Donnor, 2005). DeCuir-Gunby and Dixson list the five tenets to this theoretical approach, citing four other scholars prominent in the development of CRT along with Bell, Freeman, and Delgado. The first tenet of CRT is permanence of racism, in which racism is applied and preserved in society (Bell, 1992, 1995). The second tenet concerns how whiteness is valued as a source of property (Harris, 1995), and the third tenet – interest convergence (Bell, 1980), refers to how people of color are allowed to advance only when it is to the benefit of whites. The fourth tenet is the critique of liberalism (Crenshaw, 1988) in which the slow progress in attaining racial equality is examined, and the final tenet, counter-story telling (Matsuda, 1995), is where participants of color are provided the opportunity to be heard (DeCuir-Gunby & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). Through interviews with student participants, I examined, 1) the extent to which school policy affects educational attainment, and 2) the influence these policies have regarding how students shape their identities and their future aspirations after high school completion.

**Permanence of racism.** In addressing the first tenet, permanence of racism, Ladson-Billings (1998), citing Bell (1992) and Delgado (1995), calls attention to how race and racism have become so deeply rooted in the structure of American society that it is viewed as legitimized and normalized. In the educational system, racism has become persistent and routine in the American educational practice (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Our educational system has long been plagued with inequities that even the current NCLB legislation does not seem able to eradicate. Unequal resources in school funding and curriculum choices can be viewed as a matter of low economic status because the funding for education is primarily based on property taxes. Schools in communities with a healthy tax base are able to select from a plethora of rich curriculum offerings and extra-curriculum activities. In contrast, schools in poor areas are unable

to offer much beyond the most basic curriculum. Most would assume in all fairness, that society views this as a monetary issue alone. On the other hand, by delving deeper into the issue one can see that the majority of low-income schools exist in underserved minority communities, making race a salient factor.

**Whiteness as property.** DeCuir-Gunby and Dixson (2004) argue that the second tenet, Whiteness as property, exemplifies how our current selective enrollment policies and practices “are employed to restrict the access of minority students to high quality curriculum and safe and well-equipped schools” (DeCuir-Gunby & Dixson, 2004, p. 28). Those who design and implement current policies do so under the veil of providing equal access while knowing that they continue to enjoy the privilege of being in the dominant culture or the privilege of being white. Along with this privilege is the practice of making cultural assumptions of others through hierarchal methods in which the white culture is the top of the hierarchy. The placement of selective enrollment schools in white and affluent neighborhoods reinforces the perpetuation of privilege and hierarchal ideologies. Students attending these schools have access to resources that are lacking in the neighborhood schools, particularly those in impoverished communities. The expectation of a good education, good jobs, and a good life is the property assumed with the privilege of being white or those with political power. Delpit (1995/2005) affirms that people of color may function well in their own cultures but will not have the same access to power as those who have already established their political dominance (Delpit, 1995/2005, p. 25).

**Interest convergence.** Donnor (2005) describes the third tenet, interest convergence, as “an analytical construct that considers the motivating factors to eradicate racial discrimination or provide remedies for racial injustice on the basis of merit and color-blindness” (Donnor, 2005, pp. 57-58). Delpit’s (1995/2005) assertion is that “Those with power are frequently least aware



of—or least willing to acknowledge its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (Delpit, 1995/2005, p. 24). In the standpoint of Milner (2007) referencing Delpit, there is frequently little incentive (for those in power) to risk negotiating away their own privilege in order to provide minorities with enhanced opportunities or to “level the playing field” that empowers them to make decisions for themselves (Milner, 2007, p. 391). An example of this would be school reform policies in minority communities that ignore those who are most impacted by them. This results in the disempowering of communities in having a say over the educational outcomes for their children.

Ahmed-Ullah, Chase, and Sector (2013), Jankov and Caref (2017), Lipman (2011), Weber, Farmer, and Donoghue (2016) report that the Chicago Board of education cited underutilization/under-enrollment or low performance as legitimate reasoning for closing several schools in low-income communities. Yet, as some astute citizens have observed, most school closings occur on the south and west side of Chicago in African-American neighborhoods. Furthermore, these closings are executed without consideration of parental and community concerns for the safety of children who now must travel great distances to attend school. Additionally, board members also fail to consider whether the receiving schools are better performing or more adequately resourced learning environments than the schools targeted for closure (Ahmed-Ullah, Chase, & Sector, 2013; Jankov & Caref, 2017; Lipman, 2011; Weber, Farmer, & Donoghue, 2016). Those possessing the political and social capital to close or remediate schools act in a “patriarchal role” that infers they know what is best for those whom they believe merit no voice in such matters. While those in power believe that they are behaving in an equitable manner, all they have done is preserve the status quo. Hooks (2000) asserts that for the affluent, the traditional methods of philanthropy stress the initial motives of sustaining

their economic and social class interest. Rarely does this perspective reveal how those without power are exploited (Hooks, 2002, p. 150).

**Critique of liberalism.** The fourth tenet, Critique of Liberalism, can address social reproduction in the schools where meritocracy is the assumed foundation of the purpose of school. Its meaning is construed as all members of society having the same opportunities to succeed without acknowledging color. Still, it seems contradictory to promote the idea that all students have the same access within the school setting to libraries, computer labs, fine arts courses, availability of advanced placement classes, and teachers with the appropriate certification in subject assignments. Under the concept of liberalism, we may find many paternalistic methods where middle-class values are supplanting and negating the inherent culture of a community in the name of addressing a civil rights issue of educational achievement.

Leonardo (2007) asserts that federal law shields the whiteness of NCLB in order for it to regulate how the failure of schools can be explicated and amended. Leonardo quotes Da Silva's (2005) description of the current NCLB mandate as a continuation of the separate but equal policies which "reinforces and contributes to color-blind racism and the preservation of white privilege ... NCLB overtly targets minority children, students with disabilities, poor, or English language learners" (Leonardo, 2007, p. 268). Leonardo reasons that NCLB's policy renders a self-help philosophy that does not appreciate or acknowledge the role that structural racism plays within our school systems. The depiction of the achievement gap as a concern of teachers in individual states, places the burden for overcoming this gap upon their shoulders and is tied to job retention. On the other hand, NCLB does not provide the extra resources needed to assist students and teachers in closing the achievement gap (Leonardo, 2007). Education policy reformers like Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom contend that blacks' lack of achievement within

the socio-economic structure of the United States has nothing to do with the hierarchal structure of race, but their “low value on education” and what the Thernstroms believe to be “pathological cultural practices” (Leonardo, 2007, p. 266). It is difficult to address this civil rights issue if we continue to ignore underlying social and psychological reasons that go beyond questions of educational funding. We must acknowledge class, socio-economics, and race, and engage in an honest discourse regarding issues of power and social control that recognizes the differentiation and nullification of students’ individual cultures. In a meritocracy, policy makers and reformers must bear the responsibility to guarantee the equitable distribution of resources, despite race and ethnicity.

**Voice and narrative.** Dixson and Rousseau (2005), in describing the importance of the fifth tenet, voice and narrative or counter-story telling, wrote that voice concerns “the assertion and acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 10). When the stories of those who are marginalized are relegated to the bottom rung of society by the dominant culture, in many instances, students and researchers of color “illustrate how race and racism continue to dominate our society” (Bell, 1992, p. 144). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) believe that counter-stories can be utilized in four different methods. Counter-story telling

- builds “community” for the marginalized by allowing educational thought and practice to address them in a humanistic or holistic manner;
- provides the marginalized an opportunity to confront and transform established belief systems and/or misconceptions;
- provides opportunities for the marginalized to bring new realities into realization separate from the experiences they have had previously; and

- teaches others valuable lessons from the story told in which a new reality would become much richer in context. (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36)

Additionally, Solórzano and Yosso implore us to embrace the following about CRT:

- It demands the development of theories of social transformation in which knowledge attained will facilitate the eradication of oppressive conditions (see Lincoln, 1993, p. 33);
- It provides a way to comprehend what minorities encounter while navigating through the educational pipeline; and
- It focuses research on how students of color perceive and respond to the U.S. educational system. (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 37)

The following section will illuminate the five tenets of CRT with an explanation of theories regarding lack of academic achievement that are racially focused.

### **Racial and Ethnic Explanations for Lack of Educational Attainment.**

**Disidentification, deficit, and stereotype theories.** There are numerous theories regarding the low academic performance of African-American students. Thompson (2004) and Whaley and Noel (2011) provide brief synopses of three popular theories that explain African-Americans poor academic performance. These three theories include 1) Disidentification Theory where black students disconnect themselves from the school environment, 2) Deficiency Orientation and Deficit Thinking, where students' lack of achievement is blamed on cultural characteristics, and 3) Stereotype Threat, where students become preoccupied that their performance will confirm negative group stereotypes held by the dominant European American culture (Thompson, 2004; Whaley & Noel, 2011).

**Disidentification theory.** Honora (2003) notes through the study by Osborne (1995) the strong probability of becoming disconnected from the school environment for African-American

youth educated in urban settings. Honora, also referring to the research of Ford and Harris (1996) and Ogbu (1987) suggest that educators should be concerned about African-American students becoming estranged from the school environment because they do not see educational endeavors as valuable (Honora, 2003, p. 59). Disidentification is strongest among African-American youth during their transition from grade school into high school. Their predisposition to sever connections from the conventional concept of school success makes the school environment less important to their personal sense of worth. This theory has considerable influence on understanding the development of identity for African-American students and the planning of curriculum and instructional delivery directed toward them (Honora, 2003).

Jordan (2002) argues that the assessment methods used to evaluate African-American students are based on the knowledge that favors the dominant culture's best interest, with the ultimate purpose of forcing minorities to change their cultural values, language, and ways of behaving. Since the mainstream culture frequently identifies African-American culture as sub-standard, African-American students' have faced a tremendous burden to navigate between assimilating to white societal standards and that of their own culture (Jordan, 2002, pp. 16-18). Ladson-Billings (1995) informs us that within the context of school, African-American students face the challenge of integrating academic demands with the demands of demonstrating cultural competence. A "culturally relevant pedagogy," one that recognizes and values their strengths and cultural traditions, is needed for them to "maintain their ethnic integrity and to succeed in school" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). Ladson-Billings (1998) cautions that school reformers averse to acknowledging the disparities that African-American students (and other minority students) face because of race and cultural misrepresentations will only perpetuate difficulties navigating between their culture and white standard norms (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

**Deficiency orientation and deficit thinking.** Sleeter and Grant (2009) along with Thompson (2004) verify that there is a large amount of literature written on the effects of viewing minority students from a cultural deficit perspective. Minority students are often seen as culturally deficient, and this negative perspective by others hinders their academic achievement and becomes a prediction of failure (Sleeter & Grant, 2009; Thompson, 2004). “The deficiency orientation focuses on what one believes members of another group lack, usually based on the comparison to the abilities and cultural resources one has, and with which one is familiar” (Sleeter & Grant, 2009, p. 46). Banks and Banks (2009) have stressed that “deficit thinking occurs when educators interpret differences as deficits, dysfunctions, and disadvantages ... minority students are often labeled as at risk and their shortcomings are emphasized rather than their strengths” (p. 374). Through the deficit view, differences in various cultures are perceived negatively by the dominant culture (Banks & Banks, 2009). Deficit thinking theorizes that the intellectual abilities of African-Americans are inferior to that of Caucasians. This ideology accompanied the enslavement of African-Americans during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in which two of the most prominent theoretical perspectives at that time, monogenesis and polygenesis,<sup>1</sup> justified keeping African-Americans enslaved. Jairrels (2009) references Franklin and Moss’s (2005) and Fitzhugh’s (1857) perspectives on the way white Christians felt it their duty to spread Christianity to savages. Their account also includes the rationale of needing slaves for economic development and from becoming a burden on society because

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<sup>1</sup> The origins began during slavery with monogenesis and polygenesis theories. The monogenic theory states that living organisms are descended from a single cell whereas the polygenic theory posits that living organisms originate from more than one ancestral species or line. Africans and other non-whites were considered part of the animal kingdom thus making them inferior beings. This theory was supported by craniology, (also known as phrenology) a pseudoscience of the 18th and 19th centuries based on the belief that a person's character could be learned by looking at the shape of their head. See also M. Manchaca’s *Early racist discourse: The roots of deficit thinking* in R. Valencia’s (pp.13-40) *Washington D.C*, Falmer Press.

negroes were thought cognitively and genetically inferior to whites (Jairrels, 2009). After the emancipation of slaves these perspectives continued to evolve, and education was aimed at maintaining order and control because slaves were conceptualized as highly emotional and impulsive (Watkins, 2001). African-Americans would receive educational training that was geared toward agricultural vocations, while intellectual pursuits were not encouraged or allowed.

Valencia (1997) asserts that through current educational practice and curriculums, deficit thinking is still greatly maintained in this country (Valencia, 1997, p. xi). Skrla and Scheurich (2001) allude to Valencia's argument on educational leadership, in stating that educators are swift to illuminate the cultural limitations of children of color and low socio-economic status. They then explain these limitations as lack of intelligence, the result of family dysfunction, or even heredity. Educators have the tendency to blame children and their families for failures that are perpetuated by the dominant culture's racial misconception about African-Americans and other minorities (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Au (2009) conveys that, due to this perspective, minority students are not seen as part of humanity. They are commodified abstract beings within the classroom whose "lives, home cultures, socioeconomic conditions, and educational differences mean nothing" and are therefore ignored (Au, 2009, p. 43).

**Response to stigma and stereotype.** According to Williams (1971), the intellectual capacity of African-Americans has produced more controversy than any other psychological issue of our time. Questions have surfaced as to whether or not traditional standard measures of intelligence are a valid means of assessment (Williams, 1971). These questions also raise concerns of how African-Americans and others see their intellectual abilities amid high-stakes testing. While performing academic or intellectual undertakings, African-American students face the risk of negative judgment through the lens of racial stereotype. Claude Steele, a social

psychologist, developed the theory called Stereotype Threat. Steele and Aronson's (1995) work on Stereotype Threat tries to explain the ways in which race is made salient in academic achievement situations. Their findings suggest that students become preoccupied with the belief that their performances confirm negative group stereotypes held by the dominant European American culture (Steel & Aronson, 1995). This fear can create such extreme anxiety that one becomes incapable of performing.<sup>2</sup> Steele's theory has had a profound influence on investigating how African-Americans and other minorities cope with negative perceptions from others based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Steele (1992) suggests that while the contributions that African-Americans have made in building the economic structure of the United States have been substantial, American society has been reluctant to acknowledge and place value on their accomplishments. In contrast, African-Americans, in the quest to assimilate to mainstream America, have acquiesced their own cultural traditions and practices for acceptance by the dominant culture (Steele, 1992).

The fear of substantiating the stereotype interferes with the ability to function in an academic environment, especially when high-stakes testing is involved (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Steele and Aronson's (1995) findings indicate that the performance of African-Americans was poorer when racial identity was designated relevant before testing. Racial identification can be disruptive to academic performance, cast doubt about one's intellectual abilities, and encourages disidentification with one's ethnic origin. When faced with psychologically and emotionally intimidating circumstances, minority students may disengage from the school environment by devaluing the importance of academic achievement (Steele &

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<sup>2</sup> Stereotype Threat is the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm a negative stereotype. Stereotype Threat is situational and can adversely affect any individual or group



Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997). Kellow and Jones have also examined the impact of Stereotype Threat. Their findings (2005; 2008) showed that, 1) African-American high school students performed weaker than their white counterparts when told that their results would predict future scores on high-stakes tests, and 2) African-American students held lower performance expectations because they believed their intellectual ability was weak due to their race. Conversely, white students outperformed African-American students when told that their performance would predict future test scores (Kellow & Jones, 2005, 2008). The overall indications for the previously mentioned studies demonstrate that Stereotype Threat does undeniably influence the testing environment of African-American and other minority students.

African-American students in particular are at a disadvantage in comparison to white students when knowledge and skills are assessed through standardized tests. It is no secret that African-Americans have continually endured socioeconomic and racial hindrances to equity. It also makes sense that these conditions persistently call attention to the gaps in academic achievement between mainstream America and minorities (Steele & Aronson, 1995). African-Americans steadily face devaluation that stems from the images that the white American ideology preserves as the standard of beauty, class, and success. In absence of the value and respect that African-Americans and their culture deserve, they must confront a purposeful devaluation that consistently chooses to see only negative traits (Steele, 1992). Educators must consider historical factors associated with students' cultural practices. The insights that come with these factors can assist students in achieving academically. Nonetheless, it is our duty as educators, scholars, and members of the community to assist in the positive development of identity that upholds and validates their culture and gives voice to their cultural uniqueness.

## Section Two

### **Conflict Theory in Education: Impediments to Educational Attainment**

While this study uses Critical Race Theory as its broader framework, an examination of education stratification offers an analysis of the structural, political, social, and psychological methods by which African-American students have been stratified within the educational process, thereby making educational attainment and upward mobility difficult to realize.

Andersen and Taylor (2011) outline six points that describe class struggle within our society:

- Different groups struggle over societal resources and compete for social advantages.
- Classes exist in conflict with each other as they vie for power and economic, social, and political resources.
- Inequality results from a system of domination and subordination where those with the most resources exploit and control others.
- Inequality prevents the talents of those at the bottom from being discovered and used.

The more stratified a society, the less likely that society will benefit from the talents of all its citizens.

- The most powerful use their resources to reproduce their position and advantages.
- Elites shape societal beliefs and laws to make their unequal privilege seem legitimate and fair. (Andersen & Taylor, 2011, p. 200)

Today many minority and low-income students are placed into curriculums that can negatively affect their futures. These placements implicitly transmit a message about how the educational system determines their ability to rise to a higher social or economic position.

Various political and educational ideologies are significant to the preservation of social reproduction which are the foundations of neoliberal education policies. These policies,

according to Lipman and Haines (2007), claim to offer students equitable educational opportunities, yet do nothing more than sift and sort students and schools. This is the true meaning of stratifying the population.

Ballantine and Spade (2011) implore us to recognize that schools demonstrate various forms of stratification with the ultimate end resulting “in one group having an advantage over another” (Ballantine & Spade, p. 268). In clarifying how education becomes the mechanism that distributes and prohibits advantages, Ballantine and Spade focus on the theories of Marx (1971) and Weber (1958, 1961), both of whom are at the forefront of many stratification theories that exist today. They cite Marx’s argument that schools encourage a “false consciousness” where students must become complacent with the oppression in their lives. Accepting this oppression as a way of life shapes the belief that they are unworthy because those who have dominance and status have advantages. Schools replicate the needs of the powerful and dominant groups according to Conflict Theorists. This replication serves to preserve a capitalistic system in which social classes are consistently propagated and does not focus on intelligence or ability when comparing academic performance among students. The idea they all have an equal chance in this society is the myth of meritocracy. Marx also believed that schools were organized in ways that did not allow for equity in educational attainment, thus making low-level employment more of a probability. Ballantine and Spade (2011) also cite Weber’s (1958, 1961) argument that schools perpetuate status cultures through credentialism that forever inflates the requirements for high level or high-status jobs. Weber expressed that an insider-outsider culture exists within school systems whereby those who are considered insiders are constantly positively reinforced, and those who are outsiders must repeatedly confront obstacles to school success (Ballantine & Spade, 2011, pp. 21-22).

## What Is Stratification?

**Subordination and domination.** Kerckhoff (2001) defines stratification as both a condition and a process. As a condition, persons belonging to a particular population have attributes that differentiate them into various levels of categories. It becomes the process of social stratification through the many ways in which populations and individuals are hierarchized (Kerckhoff, 2001). Kerckhoff (2001), citing Spring (1976), maintained that our schools have become “sorting machines” that are established to position students into gradient levels of education in which certification and credentials vary (Kerckhoff, 2001, p. 3). Educational attainment is the driving force behind occupational attainment and occupational attainment feeds the stratifying factors of our society. Course offerings in secondary schools often connect to opportunities to continue education in advanced educative settings (Kerckhoff, 2001).

Conflict theorists contend that the various levels of educational attainment are a vehicle for generating inequality in our society (Anderson & Taylor, 2011). Collins (1971) reminds us that employers use education as a mechanism to discern who has adapted dominant cultural norms. Collins believes the teaching of specific status cultures, be they within the school setting or outside of it, is the principle function of schools. This view is supported by the following researchers Kahl (1957), Dalton, (1959), and Crozier (1964) in that there are (a) distinctions among status groups based on race and ethnicity (Kahl, 1957), (b) status groups occupy different occupational positions (Kahl, 1957), and (c) occupants in various positions struggle over power (Dalton,1959; Crozier,1964) (Collins, 1971, p. 1011).

Hauser (1970) contends that schools act as the foremost agent in the selection for youth in the United States and play a prominent role for socialization outside of family relationships. The decisions regarding the sorting of students by standardized tests scores, grade and track placements,

course selection, grade promotion/retention, and matriculation is fundamental in the school's dissemination of hierarchies and the categorizing of students (Hauser, 1970, p. 106). Ewert, Pettit, and Sykes (2010) acknowledge the work of Kozol (1991), Lareau (2003), and Lucas (2001) when discussing the numerous methods in which inequality can be reproduced within the educational system. These methods include the way students are socialized, academic tracking, and the ways in which schools are funded. Students who have socioeconomic advantages benefit from the inequity that is produced. Students coming from minority and low-socioeconomic communities may find their access to academic success persistently hindered by the inequity they experience and the poor quality of education they are offered (Ewert, Pettit, & Sykes, 2010, p. 9).

### **Stratification in the Educational Setting: Competition for Social Advantages**

**Tracking.** Within the post-industrial system, attainment of a high-quality education is now a critical dynamic that determines one's upward mobility. According to Lauen (2007), the discourse over the ways in which schools increase the chances for improved social status only preserves the current predisposition of inequality (Lauen, 2011). Lucas' (1999) definition of the separating of students into ability groupings is called tracking, which is crucial in educational attainment (Lucas, 1999). Lucas explains how tracking is the heart of the structure in which stratification occurs in the educational setting. Students are assigned to classes with others who demonstrate the same level of ability. While tracking is viewed as a means to place students in settings that are complementary to their innate academic abilities, tracking on a much larger scale theoretically is an institutional practice designed to sort students, thereby bringing selective enrollment measures to new heights (Lucas, 1999, p. 20). Lauen (2007) states through the work of Rosenbaum (1976), MacLeod (1995), and Oakes (1985/2005) that through tracking and other

structural hindrances that are implicit in the hidden curriculum, the stratification of minority and disadvantaged students is reinforced instead of being eradicated (Lauen, 2007). According to Lucas, tracking was designed with two purposes; 1) to ensure certain employment positions were available to students, and 2) to also ensure that students were accepting of the positions they attained and that this acceptance was seen as fair (Lucas, 1999).

Lucas alerts us to the many social stratification theories from Bowles and Gintis (1976), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Collins (1979), Meyer (1977), and Becker (1964) that focus on the role that schools play in transmitting social values and class status (Lucas, 1999). Bowles and Gintis (1976) contend that the public-school system in the United States has been driven by efforts to shape the mindsets of children to reproduce an appropriate subservient adult population. This can be done in both a blatant and subtle manner. Bowles and Gintis also argue that inequality of years of schooling is indicative of the much larger inequities that exist within the educational system. They cite the work of Jencks (1972) in asserting that children whose parents have income within the top 20% will receive twice as many educational resources as the child whose parents fall in the bottom 20% (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 33).

Lucas reiterates that earlier research underscores how social class, ethnicity, gender, and student performance are relevant factors for track placement and references Oakes' (1985/2005) study that blacks and Hispanics are overrepresented in non-college track placements. With this over-representation, tracking encourages resegregation by maintaining racial and cultural exclusion, even after the judicial de-segregation mandate of the 1954 Brown ruling. Furthermore, Lucas emphasizes that higher social class shows a relationship to being placed in advanced placement or college preparatory curriculums. Lucas (1999) also offers a rebuttal to those who advocate that social class is not a suitable determinant for tracking placements. He believes that

those who endorse the argument against social class as a factor in tracking placements do so with the opinion that academic achievement is the result of students matched to the appropriate curriculum. One can make the argument that tracking is a consequence of meritocracy because students are getting what they deserve based on their ability. Lucas, on the contrary, refutes this belief by arguing that students differ in their abilities across various subjects. Placing students in courses that fit certain domains may not reveal if the actual placement is where a meritocracy is taking place. Put more simply, achievement matters for the subject taken only if other unrelated variables (e.g. socio-economic status) do not coincide with curriculum placement. If this is not the case, then the argument for meritocracy loses validity (Lucas, 1999, pp. 40-42).

Meier, Walker, and Walker (2009) affirm that there are distinct differences in the instructional and curriculum quality between what minority students in lower tracks and students in higher tracks receive (Meier, Walker, & Walker, 2009, p. 9).<sup>3</sup> Minority students are more disposed to receiving curriculums that focus on repetitive drills in preparation for standardized and high-stakes tests. Conversely, white middle and upper-income children often experience placements in challenging “gifted and talented” curriculums in which preparation for college is the focus. However, concerns have risen over cultural bias and test validity and the non-academic circumstances that influence low test scores and poor academic achievement for minority students (Fairtest.org, August 2007, para. 3). The previous statements are verified by scholars Anyon (1980; 2006) and Darling-Hammond (2010) and will be discussed further in this chapter.

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<sup>3</sup> Historically the track system was developed in 1954 by Carl Hansen the superintendent of Washington D.C. schools to alleviate teachers having to deal with a wide range of student abilities. All students were placed in tracks based on I.Q. tests and on teacher recommendations. Students with an I.Q. below 75 entered the remedial or "basic" track students with an I.Q. above 120 went to the "honors" track and the rest of the students could choose between the general and college preparatory placements. The majority of Black students were placed in remedial tracks while the “brighter” white students were placed in general or college preparatory tracks (Cozzens 1998). Gilmore (as cited in Irvine 1990) emphasized the fact that teachers’ “perception of African-American students’ attitude was a more salient factor in their achievement than their academic ability” (Irvine, 1990, p.10).

Banks and Banks (2009) cite the revelations of Dreeben, and Barr (1988) and Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, and Stluka (1994) that students' social class is linked to most of the tracking placements in schools through circumstances in which tracks are available, and the various ways tracking assignments are made. Banks and Banks reiterate Lucas' (1999) assertion that tracking implements three separate mechanisms that affect the educational environment of students which will be discussed in more depth later in this section (Banks & Banks, 2009, p. 93). Irvine (1990) contends that placing students in homogenous ability groups is an unsound practice that is contributory to the lack of academic achievement of African-American and other minority children (Irvine, 1990). Oakes, Joseph, and Muir (2004, cited in Banks, & Banks, 2009) also argue that African-American students, and their parents, are not always mindful of what tracking is; neither do they fully realize and appreciate how seventh and eighth grade decisions can influence what opportunities are available in high school. They are not always cognizant that advanced placement courses are weighted more when their grade point averages are calculated, and this may drastically impact their options for college (Oakes, Joseph, & Muir, 2004).

**The role of selectivity in education.** The selective enrollment process is an example of how the system siphons off the best-prepared students from those without adequate preparation. Massey (2007) emphasizes how America situates its best-prepared and brightest students in areas where resources are plentiful. It cannot be highlighted enough how poor and minority students, whose parents lack adequate educational preparation and are besieged with social problems, are persistently thrust into schools with insufficient resources. These students are left to navigate in settings that reinforce an inflexible system of stratification (Massey, 2007). Regarding school choice and selectivity, Lipman (2011) has observed that the current trend for selective enrollment schools has perpetuated more inequalities within the school system. Those with middle-class



status benefit from these inequalities because they can negotiate within and around system policies that enhance their social and cultural capital. Within-class differences, according to Lipman, seem to have a profound influence on inclusion or exclusion of selective enrollment schools that focus on income (Lipman, 2011). This focus will be discussed later in chapter three on the college preparatory admission process.

Lauen (2011) has established through opponents against the marketization of schools that issues surrounding class and racial equality will continue to exacerbate an existing stratified educational system. This exacerbation is because of the failure of choice programs to lessen the complexity that socio-economically disadvantaged families experience when trying to navigate through the school choice process (Lauen, 2011). Lucas (1999) advises the educational community that it is essential to understand how education has a role in preserving stratification and the accompanying mechanisms that sustain it. Lucas informs us that there are three separate and distinct mechanisms for tracking: social context, instructional, and finally, institutionalized entities. Whereas it may be easy to ignore tracking in terms of the curriculum, the societal and institutionalized effects of stratification through tracking cannot be ignored because of the consequences it bears on minority students. Lucas also cites Meyer's (1977) assertion that the meaning of different tracks informs the larger society on how to interact with the student based upon where the student is placed and labeled within the stratified public system. Most of society is cognizant of the social meanings of low and high track academic placements (Lucas, 1999). We will examine if students understand the impact of tracking and school selectivity on their future social mobility. By examining the structural and political barriers manifested through stratification measures, we gain insight into how these measures impede educational attainment.

**Social mechanisms: perceptions of students of the social context.**

Paulsen (1991) explicates how the intersection of social class, education, political socialization, and non-institutionalized politics engenders class effects in three ways:

- it reinforces the individual class socialization initiated in the home,
- it is structured to treat class groups differently in the tracking process, and
- it varies in the way communities address curriculum emphasis in their schools. (Paulsen, 1991, p. 96)

Paulsen notes the assessments from Finkel (1985) and Travers (1982) that the above factors contribute to the sense of political efficacy in students within the school environment. The perception of accomplishment is both cultivated and discouraged within our current school system with efficacy influencing “institutionalized and non-institutionalized political participation” (Paulsen, 1991, p. 96). Paulsen also looks to the study by Oakes (1982), which points out Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) position that close interpersonal relationships are non-existent due to the disintegration of various ability groups and the reward system directed toward various groups in the school setting.

Bowles and Gintis ardently state that the school system “tailors the self-concepts, aspirations, and social class identifications of individuals to the requirements of the social division of labor” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 129). Oakes (1982) highlights Bowles and Gintis’s observation that through selectivity, apportionment of resources, and the differential treatment that students receive within schools, students’ self-perceptions and aspirations are either strengthened or weakened. The educational system produces an environment where lower status students are positioned to become estranged from various educational institutions and later acquiesce to subordinate positions in the workplace. On the contrary, high status students are

positioned to activate social relationships where the internalization of established norms can be employed to circumvent outside control (Oakes, 1982).

**Instructional.** Lucas (1999) provides an explanation of how the school environment matters in stratification and that there are structures within the school environment that hinder the elimination of tracking. Lucas writes that urban public schools are perceived as disorganized and mostly concerned with discipline, which makes them ineffective educative settings. Lucas cites the research of Riehl, Natrielo, and Pallas (1992) who validate the above statement made by Lucas, arguing that because public school course assignments are disorganized, tracking is not the intended result of a differentiated curriculum. In order to comprehend fully how schools work, it is necessary to examine their instructional and resource differences (Lucas, 1999).

Hallinan (2011), along with Riehl, Natrielo, and Pallas (1992), substantiates the claim that academics are not the only consideration for which tracking decisions are made; there are non-academic factors as well. While grades, standardized test scores, the course requirements, teacher and counselor recommendations, and prior course taking are the academic factors that influence tracking decisions, there are logistical issues concerned with the course selection for students that are not grounded in the best academic fit for subject specific curriculums. Issues of class size and time of day in which a class occurs may impact classes that may or may not be mandatory (Hallinan, 2011, p. 348; Riehl, Natrielo, & Pallas, 1992). Hallinan provides the following points that clarifies how tracking is employed in the school setting:

- Track assignments are dependent upon both academic and non-academic factors (e.g. grades, test scores, teacher and counselor recommendations versus course conflicts, teacher workload, and curriculum resources).
- Track assignments are dependent upon the school students attend.

- Track assignments tend to be less permanent than commonly believed ... the flexibility of track assignments varies by school, by subject, and by grade level.
- A greater number of minority and low-income students are assigned to a lower track. When academic achievement is controlled; the race, ethnicity and income effect on track placements decreases but does not disappear.
- Higher social status is associated with higher track placements which differs across schools.

#### Tracking effects

- The quantity and quality of instruction increases with the level of track. The curriculum and related instructional materials are more interesting and engaging, the amount of time spent on instruction is greater in higher tracks. The relationship between track level and institutionalized characteristics differ among schools.
- Students in higher tracks learn more and at a faster pace than those in lower-ability tracks.
- Tracking provides no advantage over heterogeneous grouping with respect to the achievement of students in the middle ability range. (Hallinan, 2011, p. 348)

Anyon (1980, 2006), along with Darling-Hammond (2010), highlight that many minority and low-income students do not have the access to knowledge that middle-class and affluent students have in their curriculum. Darling-Hammond (2010) contends that minority access to knowledge is limited and organized in “subtle and not so subtle ways” (p. 51). This limitation is done through the planning of various school curriculum in which the sorting of students can begin as early as kindergarten. Darling-Hammond further affirms that wealthy school districts implement curriculum rich with foreign languages, music, art, dance, and theater along with elaborate

science and technology resources, whereas low-income communities “offer stripped down rote and drill approaches to learning” (p.52). Darling-Hammond reminds us that access to high quality curriculum has always been uncommon in the United States and that the disparity in curriculum between disadvantaged and affluent students is greater in the United States than any other westernized country (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The knowledge that is disseminated in school is based upon social status and the communities where schools exist (Anyon, 2006). Anyon explains the previous statement by asserting that schools in working-class communities promote rote behavior in their curriculum, highlighting and rewarding obedience while the curriculum in middle-class and affluent communities prepare students for high status occupations like doctors, lawyers, and architects (Anyon, 2006). Apple (2009) similarly argues that schools covertly endorse inequality through the unequal distribution of knowledge. Apple theorizes that because the sorting and selection of people to specified positions in society is necessitated first by economic needs, schools preserve the sociopolitical domination of the managing class (Apple, 2009).

Gramsci (1971) predicates that the political governance of one class of people over less powerful groups is through the transmission of knowledge. The transmission of knowledge is a crucial element in the ideology of those in power. From this perspective, schools demonstrate a prominent position in selecting, protecting, and promulgating established norms and values within the hidden curriculum of schools (Gramsci, 1971). Saltman (2000), citing Larabee (1997), imparts to us that schools are seen in the light of two perspectives. The first, based on a social efficiency model, focuses on the belief that skilled and capable workers are made through schooling. The underlying expectation of this perspective is that such students will better fit within the established social order. In contrast, the second perspective promotes democratic

schooling in which students are enabled to transform society in becoming equitable through collective forethought and discourse (Saltman, 2000).

### **Institutional Policies**

**Discipline.** While tracking is the major player in educational stratification, other more furtive means to stratify African-American and other minority students have been manifested in educational reforms. These reforms are ignited by neo-liberal politicians espousing meritocracy. Policies like NCLB sustain the premise of securing a well-educated workforce to maintain the economic stability of this nation and to be globally competitive. Yet these policies inadvertently have severe consequences for poor, low-performing minority schools where financial and human capital resources are scarce. In addition, the school environment can be inflexible to the cultural needs of students. This inflexibility often becomes the breeding ground for punitive measures that puts emphasis on maintaining control. These measures do not facilitate development of more suitable alternative methods that enable teachers to educate. Considering the cultural and social hardships that African-Americans have experienced, the punitive measures demonstrated by schools indicate that there exists a connection between academic performance and the cultural difficulties that African-American students (males especially) must withstand. Noguera (2003c) states that in numerous instances, the school setting is not nurturing or supportive of the African-American male student (Noguera, 2003c). African-American males are particularly vulnerable to punitive school policies that may intensify the school to prison pipeline.<sup>4</sup> Noguera highlights the many points made by many scholars concerning how Black males are suspended and expelled from school more than any other ethnic group. What researchers must investigate is the role that

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<sup>4</sup> The widespread pattern of punitive measures directed toward disadvantaged students which alienates them from the school environment and thrust them into the criminal justice system. Institutions such as schools are frequently negligent or understaffed in addressing the emotional needs of some individual students resulting in mass incarcerations (Christensen, 2012)

cultural and environmental forces play in African-American males' perception of schooling and how these perceptions influence their academic performance (Noguera, 2003c, pp. 432-433).

Noguera continues by proclaiming through the studies of other scholars that children in poverty receive substandard services from the schools they attend, especially schools in low-income communities. Many children suffer disabilities that are the result of poverty. African-American children (males more so) have been over-represented in special education settings leaving them ostracized, branded as behavior problems, and labeled as cognitively deficient. In many school settings, African-American males are more likely to receive harsh disciplinary measures for minor offenses in the name of zero tolerance policies (Noguera, 2003c, p. 436). Currently, we have enacted zero tolerance policies designed to provide and preserve a safe environment for students and teachers. Although zero tolerance policies are designed to prevent violent activities and promote school safety, they also create confusion and disparities, not only with disciplinary issues, but also in other policies where educational opportunities are concerned. The need for safe, secure schools is without question an essential pre-requisite for learning and development, but there are unintended costs to current disciplinary practices.

McCorkle and Miethe (1998) assert that media coverage on gang activity has caused many communities to frequently focus on African-American and Hispanic gang membership (McCorkle & Miethe, 1998). Waldman and Reba (2008) describe how stereotypes of African-American males frequently depict them as aggressive, hostile, and dangerous. The practice of disparity directed toward African-American male students is acutely engrained in hidden racial codes (Waldman & Reba, 2008). Nevertheless, the central issue is that many teachers and policy reformers in our society lay blame on what they believe are unstable home environments and lack of intellectual capacity for black, Latino, and poor students' failure to achieve (Thompson,

Warren, & Carter, 2004; Thompson, 2008). Additionally, the school environment may be inflexible because of its inability to address various learning styles of African-American and Hispanic students.

**Students with special needs.** We must additionally address closely how students with learning disabilities fit into the context of school where sorting methods make distinctions between alleged inferior and superior intellects. Dunn (1968) asserted that the practice of placing minority students in special education programs brings forth serious educational and civil rights issues. He ardently argues that the placement of minority students in special education was a tool to legally segregate students of color from white students (Dunn, 1968). Kemp (2006) cite both Sinclair (1994) and Wagner (1991) who affirm that the dropout rates for students with emotional and behavioral disorders is between 50% and 59 %, and students with learning disabilities drop out of school at a rate between 32% and 36 % (Kemp, 2006, p. 236).

McNally (2003) maintains that nation-wide, African-Americans have three times the probability of being labeled as intellectually disabled than white students and nearly twice the probability to be labeled as emotionally disturbed (McNally, 2003). The McNally report has verified Fine's (2001) previous work, which uncovered through the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, how black students are labeled as special education students more frequently than whites, and are less likely, once they are identified as having learning disabilities, to be placed in mainstream classrooms (Fine, 2001, para. 2). Samuels' (2004) report documents the Schott Foundation's research on black males which revealed that 72% of these students have been classified as having intellectual and developmental disabilities here in Chicago's public schools. However, the total black student enrollment is only 52% of the general student population (Samuels, 2004).



Harry and Klingner (2007) state that learning disability categories for minority students “have become a way for schools to dodge their responsibility to provide high quality general education” (p. 20). Harry and Klingner further argue how the special education programs into which these students are mainstreamed lack quality in the curriculum, instruction, and employ an improper ratio of teachers to students (Harry & Klingner, 2007). The Findings of Krezmien, Leone, and Achilles (2006) indicate that African-American youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities are suspended at three times the rate of White, Hispanics, and Asian Americans (Krezmien, Leone & Achilles, 2006). Furthermore, Losen and Orfield (2002) divulge how minority children in special education programs are habitually jeopardized in their educational attainment because they are not receiving the appropriate services and instruction that is specified in their Individual Education Programs (IEP). These services and instructions are mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Losen & Orfield, 2002, p. xv). These students are sacrificed to low expectations expressed in both the school context and the larger society (Heubert, 2002). Those concerned with equity should question policy makers about where the students with special needs fit in the quest for equal and accessible educational opportunity. We can no longer complacently tolerate students counseled and tracked into curriculums that predetermine their futures with messages of inferiority and no chance for upward mobility.

Duffrin (2002) has illuminated that selective enrollment schools such as Northside College Preparatory high school, Whitney Young, Lane, and Jones are not necessarily inviting special education students with open-arms. Even those who manage to score well on entrance exams may not get the invitation to apply, and with that, applying does not mean acceptance. While it is a federal mandate to include special education students in the enrollment process,

these schools have neglected to follow through on this mandate (Duffrin, 2002). Lipman (2011) calls attention to how these schools are expected to preserve the reproduction of socio-cultural values of the dominant class by consistently reproducing inequality within the school context through selective educational strategies. This is done in two ways; first by allowing poor and minority parents and students to believe that they have agency in the selection process. Second, by further perpetuating the dominant class' myth of meritocracy through their economic ability to buy homes in areas where the best schools in the city are located (Lipman, 2011, pp. 137-138). Friedrich, Jaastad, and Popkewitz (2010) declare that the achievement gap systematically draws upon categorizing students according to test scores that quantify intelligence and skills. This quantification widens the difference in achievement and equality between the elite and lower class and defines who is included and excluded on either side of the achievement gap (Friedrich, Jaastad, & Popkewitz, 2010).

### **Reproducing Position and Advantage**

**Opportunity hoarding.** The research of Lewis and Diamond (2015) demonstrates how the political processes that occur within schools affect educational attainment. Their research also reveals to us that much of the literature portrays blacks as one large monolithic group with no variants as to their intellectual abilities and their social class status. Their essential argument is that structural racism within schools hinders the achievement of minority students and it is used in subtle ways to benefit the white population through favoritism that whites displayed to one another. Lewis and Diamond pinpoint how white parents were the main source of hindrance to equal distribution of opportunities. Some, in the dominant culture, may seem to be altruistic concerning the issue of race and opportunity, at least superficially. However, they protect the educational quality for their children, even if it means providing an unfair advantage for their

children over minority families. This is what Lewis and Diamond acknowledged as opportunity hoarding<sup>5</sup> (Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

The Holme (2002) study demonstrates how high economic status parents' access to good schools is not only linked to the ability to purchase property in exclusive areas but is also linked to the high status ideologies that this group embraces about themselves, thus assisting them in making decisions about the schools their children will attend. Holme mentions the studies of Collins (1985, 1994) and Oakes, Wells, Jones, and Datnow (1997) when analyzing how white and high SES parents' beliefs are rooted in an ideology that low-income and minority groups' lack of achievement is not a result of race and discrimination. This is the foundation for the ideological premise of meritocracy, where everyone is afforded the opportunity to succeed (Holme, 2002). This viewpoint enables the dominant culture to continue to refute the role racism and discrimination has played and continues to play in socioeconomic inequities.

The deficit perspective, as Holme cites from Solórzano and Solórzano (1995), is further upheld and validated because, in the eyes of those in the dominant culture, the failure of low-income and minorities to succeed is linked to the cultural flaws of their group and their failure to assimilate to dominant norms (Holme, 2002). Saporito (2003), in conjunction with Holme, emphasized that people with high SES avoid associating with those they perceived as low SES. Holme (2002) states that surveys given indicated parents advocating for more integrated settings. Other studies, according to Holme, demonstrate that a great percentage of parents (White and non-white) deemed racial and ethnic make-up of the schools as salient in their choices, showing incongruity between what they do and what they espouse (Saporito, 2003; Holme, 2002).

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<sup>5</sup> The term *opportunity hoarding* was originally conceptualized by Charles Tilly (1998), which he defines as the procedures where groups create restricted systems to control access to desired resources. These procedures are often demonstrated through residential sorting, how schools assign attendance boundaries, and school choice. This term addresses racial segregation but is not solely based on race (Tilly, 1998).

Henig (1996) found that parents of color look for schools in which their children will experience racial inclusion, but Saporito and Lareau (1999) assert that white parents tend to avoid schools with large populations of African-American students (Henig, 1996; Saporito & Lareau, 1999). Diamond and Gomez (2004) found that middle-class African-American parents were better able to navigate within educational bureaucracies because of their resources such as social circles, financial, and educational background. They could easily depict the quality of schools, could question school personnel on curriculum, and could wield some political influence. But in contrast to their middle-class counterparts, working-class and low-income African-American parents did not exercise much influence with the schools their children attended. They were also critical of the quality of education they perceived their children were receiving. Additionally, these parents focused more on the proposed changes that school reform is said to bring forth. This focus was based upon their past educational experiences that may have been negative. The fear that their children will experience the same negativity was foremost behind much of their advocacy. Additionally, working-class and low-income African-American parents face difficulty in negotiating within political and educational bureaucracies because their concerns are not necessarily shared with their middle-class African-American counterparts (Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

Now with school choice supposedly an option, Many African-American parents and students have fallen victim to this masked process of sifting and sorting. Lipman and Haines' (2007) exposé on Renaissance 2010 illuminates how children of color are excluded from educational opportunities through school privatization. Lipman and Haines assess that Chicago's Renaissance 2010 is the model that typifies how educational policy serves the educated professional class over the poor and minorities. In the hands of politicians, who seek to uplift

their cities by attracting middle-class taxpayers, gentrification is the result along with alienation and isolation of the poor and minorities, creating educational deserts in their communities (Lipman & Haines, 2007). In addition to the assessment of Renaissance 2010 by Lipman and Haines, Lipman and Hursh (2007) discuss the opinions of Whitty, Power, and Halpin (1999), Tomlinson (2001), and Hursh (2005); all who infer that implementing Renaissance 2010 will not improve schools for the majority of children from working-class and low-income minority families. It will only proliferate further social segregation through schools that commodify students and pick those deemed desirable by society and cast off those deemed undesirable (Lipman & Haines, 2007, p. 492; Lipman & Hursh, 2007, p. 167).

**School funding: vying for economic resources.** Johnson and Kritsonis (2006) noted that the discourse in the United States promotes equity in education attainment. However, the inequity of education experienced by African-American and other minority students remains to this day due to the ongoing disparities in educational resources and opportunities (Johnson & Kritsonis, 2006). The lack of adequate funding impedes the ability of school districts in urban areas to offer competitive salaries for qualified teachers as well as providing the equipment and instructional materials needed by students to learn. Due to the shortage of qualified teachers, school districts will “assign the least able individuals to the students with the least political clout” (Johnson & Kritsonis, 2006, p. 6). Condron and Roscigno (2003) emphasize that educational spending disparities are linked to greater social conditions that magnify stratification of a society. They, along with Johnson and Kristonis, point to Kozol’s (1991) depiction of the racial and class inequities within schools, where the lack of appropriate school funding only underscores the fact that run down building facilities are synonymous to what being a low-income and minority student means in our present educational system. The communities where

these schools are located may be perilous to their well-being due to a high level of violence and overcrowded classrooms as well (Condrón & Roscigno, 2003).

Ladson-Billings (2006) questions why the achievement gap between minorities and Whites has required such intense analysis. Ladson-Billings espouses that the nation has an obligation to examine what has influenced the achievement gap (e.g., economic, moral, sociopolitical components) which she terms as an educational debt. She explains that different funding formulas are the result of separate and unequal school environments and the achievement gap between Whites and minorities is explicatory of how America values diverse groups in society. Historically, America has never disseminated educational opportunities with equity. The achievement gap does not just concern academic performance of minorities on standardized tests, but how “*race, class, and gender*”[emphasis added] have been shaped by the face of inequity in all sectors of this country (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5).

Darling-Hammond (2010) has shown that cities spend considerably smaller amounts of dollars compared to the wealthier suburbs. The wealthier communities can demand smaller class size, pay higher teacher salaries, offer a varied curriculum enriched with fine arts and specialty courses along with a myriad selection of extra-curriculum activities and sports (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Banks and Banks (2009) echoes the sentiments of Condrón and Roscigno (2003) and Darling-Hammond (2010) by highlighting how the lack of appropriate funding for education harshly affects class size, the ability to hire certified teachers, maintain school building infrastructures, equip schools with libraries and computer labs, and to vary curriculum offerings. Due to the housing segregation in many urban areas that stratifies the population by race and social class, students who live in economically challenged areas are more likely to attend failing schools (Banks & Banks, 2009, pp. 88-89).

Lipman (2011) citing Weber (2002, 2003), states that Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is one of numerous formidable tactics used by local governments to encourage the development of blighted urban areas. The use of TIFs has significant consequences for schools due to their ability to divert investment away from low-income communities (Lipman, 2011). Specifically, here in Chicago, the questionable application of TIFs demonstrates to schools in low-income communities, a deep-seated lack of respect for equity. The research of Farmer and Poulos (2013), in combination with Quiroz and Lindsay (2015), suggest that TIFs were used to facilitate the closing of neighborhood schools. The debate among some researchers centers around whether the use of TIFs in this manner was a ploy by Mayors Daley and Emmanuel to close schools and replace them with schools that target the elite population of the city (Farmer & Poulos, 2013; Quiroz & Lindsay, 2015, p. 381). Lipman (2011) in conjunction with Quiroz and Lindsay (2015) has enlightened us to the realization that the shaping of school policy has been influenced through gentrification because the use of TIF funding in building new selective schools feeds the mission of transforming the city (Lipman, 2011; Quiroz & Lindsay, 2015). Quiroz and Lindsay also point to how TIFs insinuates that school choice in gentrifying areas will be guaranteed. They found from a recent study that there was a disproportionate distribution of TIFs allocated to selective enrollment schools. Although selective enrollment has become both the consequence and benefit of community gentrification, there is little systematic improvement for neighborhood schools (Quiroz & Lindsay, 2015).

Educational choice for black and brown students has become an issue of ethnicity and location. Upper middle-class and white students benefit from TIFs primarily because their parents possess sufficient political astuteness to protect the access to educational opportunities for their children. The benefits they enjoy, coupled with the emergent role of TIFs in structuring

school policy, results in educational advantage for white and middle-class families at the expense of poor, black, and Latino children. Farmer and Poulos (2013) unveiled that selective enrollment schools are only 1% of the city's schools, but they lay claim to 50 % of TIFs allocated for the construction of new buildings. While neighborhood schools are 69 % of the total schools in the city, they, must share in the 48% of all TIF funding that is left (Farmer & Poulos, 2012). Farmer (2012) and Farmer and Poulos (2013) apprise us that 78% of schools receiving TIFs are located on the northside of the city, where a majority of economically developed neighborhoods are situated. The blighted communities on the south and west side of the city lack the help that TIFs could provide for capital development. Thirty-six percent of schools receiving TIFs sit in tier four communities, where the average yearly income exceeds one hundred thousand dollars. These are the communities where low poverty rates, higher property taxes, and home ownership provide advantageous conditions for the placement of selective enrollment schools. Since there is a propensity for black and Hispanic schools to be situated in areas where economic development is lacking, these schools should receive proportionately more share in the allocation of TIFs (Farmer, 2012; Farmer & Poulos, 2013).

### **The State's Role in Education**

DeMarrais and LeCompte (1990) state that the government has a complicated role in the educational system, and the school serving as an agent of the state, reflects its ideologies and governing principles. The government sees its role as preserving autonomy over curriculum, funding, teacher credentialing, and the various methods of assessing and evaluating student progress. DeMarrais and LeCompte explain that those who uphold the cultural and economic reproduction models fail to recognize the control wielded by the government when administering policies that demonstrate its authority over the reproductive purposes of education (DeMarrais &



LeCompte, 1990, p. 18). Au (2009) illuminates that NCLB and high-stakes testing are among the many means by which the government, through the evaluation and assessment processes, implements the regulation of curriculum. Mandates for testing and the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) are measurements to evaluate the proficiency of students, and teachers and thus places a burden upon them that is often unrealistic (Au, 2009).

**Reform policies: No Child Left Behind.** Klima (2008) outlines how NCLB has been a contentious educational reform effort in the presidency of George W. Bush in 2000. During his tenure, testing became the foundation for accountability. Corporate America and the government became partners in creating a new reform policy for education, which was to ensure both educational attainment and accountability. NCLB policies brought with it some complexities that encouraged high dropout rates for minority and special education students due to high-stakes tests being used as exit exams. The goal of NCLB is to eliminate the achievement gap between whites and minorities. While NCLB policies highlight the disparity between minority and white students in educational opportunity distribution, it also encourages and contributes to the inequity of opportunity (Klima, 2008). Knaus' (2007) analysis of NCLB policies provides a thorough critique of its implementation and the impact it has on African-American and other minority students. Knaus explains in his critique that NCLB ignores the reasons that African-Americans are failing because it favors one-dimensional evaluation methods to explain and validate achievement, matriculation rates, and the credentialing of teachers. It does not consider the social context that hinders accessing opportunities and this deflects away from the discourse concerning numerous critical issues. Knaus emphasizes how across the country, low-income urban schools lack innovative and adaptable curriculums that will allow students to express their intellectual talents beyond the constraints of a standardized test (Knaus, 2007, p. 3).

Knaus further attests to how NCLB stratifies minority students within their school communities by implementing policies that force school closures, the reorganization of schools, or the privatization of schools. NCLB policies promise parents with children in poor performing schools the opportunity to transfer to better performing schools within their district. Nonetheless, parents who are unable to transport their children to these schools are again thwarted because there is no guarantee of transportation. High performing schools do not have to enroll extra students due to their own pre-existing high enrollment (Knaus, 2007, p. 4). Sleeter and Grant (2009) assert that there is enormous pressure on schools and educators to meet the mandates of NCLB. This pressure has encouraged negative effects on students who have not experienced school in a positive context historically. It has removed from educators the ability to make decisions which has resulted in their becoming increasingly ineffective (Sleeter & Grant, 2009).

One last note regarding current education reform policies: most target African-American and Hispanic citizens. Jenkins (2013), Lipman (2011), and Lutton and Vevea (2013) noticed that in Chicago, the vast majority of school closings take place in low-income black and Hispanic schools, on the west and south side of the city, which further intensifies the concerns of parents whose children must travel through neighborhoods that are dominated by violence. Of all the recent school closings here in Chicago, only one has been made in a white community, even when many more schools in white communities met the same criteria for closure (Jenkins, 2013; Lipman, 2011; Lutton & Vevea, 2013).

### **The Power of Testing**

**Shaping of societal beliefs concerning intellectual ability.** Madaus, Russell, and Higgins (2009) corroborate with other scholars that tests exist, 1) to determine particular bodies of knowledge and skills known to us as a domain, 2) to infer about one's individual performance

or a group's performance relative to a particular domain, and 3) allow the examiner(s) to make decisions regarding individuals and groups on whether to provide more instruction (Madaus, Russell, & Higgins, 2009, pp. 37-47). Awad (2007) citing Samuda (1998), states that high-stakes testing has been fixed as the principal vehicle in our country to determine college admission with the premise that these tests are accurate measures of knowledge and ability (Awad, 2007). Therefore, testing has become a means to provide and limit opportunities, to grant admission into organizations, and to fit individuals to their strengths and talents. Those students who can demonstrate appropriate dominant cultural standards are placed in curriculum tracks guaranteeing success after high school. Those categorized as lazy or ambivalent are given remedial classes; not because they lacked intellectual ability, but because we cannot find more innovative ways within the curriculum to reach them. Biesta (2009) shares another concern regarding the measurement of knowledge; this concern is focused on the validity of the methods used. Pertinent questions surface as to whether 1) are we measuring what we have intended to measure? and 2) is what we intend to measure what we really value? Measurement of knowledge has become a means to an end where the indicators of quality are determined through technicization (Biesta, 2009).

McNeil (2000), provides a riveting depiction of how standardization negatively impacts the curriculum and creates inequities between low-income minority, and middle-class students. The evidence of this negative influence was more prevalent for students who steadily scored low on standardized assessments. These reforms functioned in weakening the students' critical thinking skills. McNeil acknowledges that test scores were used to delineate and define students within the structure of the school system, and to determine where they will fit in society's structure upon finishing school. The insecurities of teachers and school administrators were fed

by fears of being labeled as incompetent or ineffective in executing mandated curriculums due to poor student test performance. These delineations and definitions, now masked in accountability rhetoric, assigned blame for lack of achievement to teachers and administrators, and more vehemently, to students (McNeil, 2000). From Au's (2009) viewpoint, standardized and high-stakes tests "sort human populations along socially, culturally, and economically determined lines ... high-stakes test are incredibly efficient at sorting for race and class in the United States" (Au, 2009, p. 139). With Value-Added methodologies employed in the teacher evaluation and accountability process, many teachers feel the burden to perform well. The avoidance of punitive measures from local and district school administrators' may force teachers to alter their instructional content to fit test norms (Au, 2009). In conjunction with the altering of instruction, there can be the reduction of course offerings to impose more time and concentration on tests.

Nichols and Berliner (2004) conclude that high-stakes and standardized testing eases the mindset of many Americans, mainly corporations and government officials. These officials believe that a highly trained workforce in science and engineering would better serve the future economy of this country by being competitive in the global marketplace (Nichols & Berliner, 2004). Jones, Jones, and Hargrove (2003) highlight that schools are ranked in accordance with how well students have performed. These rankings enormously influence teacher retention and property values (Jones, Jones & Hargrove, 2003). Au (2009) and McNeil (2000) suggest that we become cognizant that testing, as a form of bureaucratic surveillance, ensures that teachers as well as students are relegated to categories in which rewards and sanctions can be easily applied. Categories such as high performer or low performer (assigned to teachers and students) can influence the ability to attain the next teaching position, school administrative appointment, or entrance into college (Au, 2009; McNeil, 2000).

Au (2009) offers the following insight on the ranking of schools, teachers, and students through testing:

When low-test scores come to mean that you, as an individual, are a 'bad' teacher (and by extension maybe even a 'bad' person) then the social and cultural pressures to teach to the test are piled on top of the political, professional, and economic pressures as well. (Au, 2009, p. 95)

In the end, the negative consequences of high-stakes testing today are insufficient opportunities for African-American students to receive equitable resources such as curriculum and school choice. Furthermore, high-stakes testing discourages highly qualified teachers from working in poor communities. It promotes the disengagement from and the dropping out of school, it encourages the overuse of tracking placements, and ultimately, it reinforces anxiety over stereotypes and stigmas that African-American students have about their intellectual abilities (Aronson, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Jones, Jones & Hargrove, 2003; Madaus, Russell, & Higgins, 2009). What is really at the heart of the discussion on testing is recognizing how the culture of students is frequently negated in order for them to adapt to dominant cultural norms. Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995), Noguera (2003), and Valenzuela (1999) concur that to exclude the cultural identities and knowledge of students sends the message that their culture and knowledge is not relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Noguera, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). McNeil (2000), referencing observations from her research of several schools in Houston, reports the following:

Standardization ... falls hardest on those who historically have not done well on standardized tests. As a result, centralized standardization creates inequities, widening the gap between the educations provided to poor and minority youth, and that to which middle-class children have access. In addition, standardization

is used to support management systems that in fact mask persistent inequities.

(McNeil, 2000, p. 231)

**School environment.** At the center of the discussion regarding selective enrollment schools and the exclusion of African-American students, there is a need to recognize that there exists a caveat that accompanies those teachers and educational leaders selected for employment, as well as the students and parents these schools serve. Blume's (2011) report is an example of how teachers in low-performing schools are frequently pre-judged and stigmatized "as bad teachers that come from a failed school" (Blume, 2011, para. 3). Payne (2010) cites the argument of Peske and Haycock (2006) that schools in high poverty communities display the proclivity to place novice teachers in areas not of their specialty. Schools falling in the bottom tier have difficulty attracting highly qualified teachers and keeping them if they do indeed hire them. Teachers who leave these schools cite low pay, unsupportive school administrators, and student discipline as the principle reason for exiting the schools. Additionally, Payne contends that the low expectations of students are entrenched in the culture of the school with negative perceptions framed by "place" or where students may live rather than on race (Payne, 2008).

In support of Payne's contention is the early research of Persell (1977) who found that social class was more of a factor in shaping teachers' expectations of students. Teachers held higher expectations for middle-class students, notwithstanding the high IQ's of lower-class students. Those teachers who believed their students were capable of high-quality work were more willing to engage in meaningful ways with them (Persell, 1977). According to Berry, Daughtrey, and Wilder (2010) educators assigned to high needs areas require extra support from ancillary education and social services to help students achieve (Berry Daughtrey & Wilder, 2010). According to Bryk, Easton, Sebring Allensworth, and Luppescu (2010), these students

may fall victim to numerous family, health, and personal problems or what is termed as extraordinary circumstances (Bryk, Easton, Sebring, Allensworth, & Luppescu, 2010). Lipman's (2011) study of Chicago school reform relates how accountability measures are employed disparately within the school system, which shapes the identities of both teachers and students. Lipman has described how the shaping of student and teacher identities through accountability measures defines who is either good or bad:

The separation of 'good' and 'bad' schools that is accomplished through testing, sorting, and ordering processes of standardized tests, distribution of stanine scores, retention of students, and determination of probation lists, constructs categories of functionality and dysfunctionality, normalcy, and deviance that label students, schools, neighborhoods, and their teachers. Deficiency is made visible, individual, easily measured, highly stigmatized, and punishable as test scores are published in the newspaper and teachers experience the public shaming of their school being put on probation. (Lipman, 2011, p. 129)

Accountability measures in the perspective of Lipman (2011) strengthens the standpoint of Au (2009) and McNeil (2000) when they both depict how identities of "bad and good" are assigned to teachers and students due to historical and cultural assumptions amplified by standardized testing. Our school system is shrouded with the blanket of failure that also creates the division of people as either educated and literate or uneducated and poor.

## **Chapter Two Conclusion**

Bowles & Gintis (1976) asserted that educational and political reformers should not ignore that while we have mitigated some inequalities of the past, we cannot negate that new inequalities have consistently arisen to replace pre-existing ones in an effort to ensure equitable educational opportunities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 33). Public policy, while purporting to do what is in the best interest of students, has been a major instrument by which populations are marginalized and segregated into various categories. Students within our school systems observe the unequal treatment of minorities not only in schools, but outside the academic environment. They witness their communities and their family members suffering through social programs that are designed to offer assistance for upward mobility, but in actuality, hinder social class mobility and educational attainment. May (2009) asserts that much of the discourse concerning democracy is from an elitist perspective. We all demonstrate elitism and it lies in the definition of equality. Thus far, May asks us to question how we can envision equality without hierarchizing people into categories of those who give it and those who receive it (May, 2009). Teachers, students, parents, and administrators as well as political reformers must speak out against the inequities that continue to occur in our educational system. All of us, according to May (2009), should ask what democracy looks like and if we are up to the challenge of creating it (May, 2009).

## **Chapter Two Summary**

I have focused on Critical Race Theory as the broader theoretical framework for this study. However, employing an examination of stratification in education offers an in-depth analysis of the structural, political, and social methods used to hinder African-American achievement. I have discussed 1) how track placements are influenced by social class, and race; 2) how NCLB stratifies African-American students by closing schools in their communities; 3)



how more inequalities have resulted from the creation of more selective schools; and 4) how unequal distribution of city funding has resulted in a loss of opportunities that shape social hierarchies. I have also described how selective enrollment, through initiatives such as testing, provides and limits opportunity, thus encouraging more segregation and polarization. In addition, I have revealed how the methods mentioned ultimately facilitates the dominant culture laying claim to educational advantage. Chapter three will discuss the origins of selective enrollment and the current options available under the banner of school choice. Under this banner, the options are represented by magnet, college preparatory, and charter schools, accompanied with military academies.

## **Chapter Three: Literature Review of Selective School Practices**

### **Chapter Overview**

This section includes a discussion on the development of selective enrollment schools and their historical significance to current practices that are tied to the voucher system advocated by Milton Friedman. I illuminate how the initial school choice movement originated in response to the 1954 desegregation ruling of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, which incited the creation of white independent and private schools. I examined how school choice methods have benefited primarily white and middle-class families in which the elimination of the federal consent decree in 2009 made race a non-factor for coveted seats in selective schools. The economic tier system as a replacement of the consent decree was examined as well. Also, in this chapter is a discussion of the disadvantages of other alternatives in the school choice movement (charters and military academies) that promote privatization and competition, which have emerged alongside selective enrollment schools.

### **Beginnings of Selective School Practices**

Abdulkadiroğlu and Sonmez (2003) and Saporito (2003) both assert school choice has become a term associated with a variety of venues in which to educate the American youth and is one of the most extensively deliberated topics in education reform (Abdulkadiroğlu & Sonmez, 2003; Saporito, 2003). The basic premise of school choice is providing parents the opportunity to choose the school their child will attend. By tradition, children attend schools located in the community in which they live. Parents with financial means have access to better schools be they public or private because they have either the ability to move to an area where quality schools exist, or they can afford tuition costs. In the past parents without ample financial resources were limited in choice of schools in which to send their children and usually settled for the schools in

their community (Abdulkadiroglu & Sonmez, 2003; Saporito, 2003). In chapter one, I spoke of Milton Friedman, who advocated for the concept of school choice and the use of vouchers to promote competitiveness between schools. Friedman's theories are still prevailing in educational reform efforts to eradicate the academic achievement gap between black and white students.

In helping us understand the historical significance of school choice, Stulberg (2008) references the work of Katznelson and Wier (1985) and Newby and Tyack (1971), both of whom point to race as an important factor in the struggle for equity, which has a fundamental role in the development of the voucher system. The voucher system begins with the efforts to eliminate the racial polarization that existed within American schools. The idea was to provide equal access to educational facilities and provide opportunities to African-Americans before the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s (Stulberg, 2008). The Brown ruling was considered essential in the strategies for combating not only the inequities in public schooling between blacks and whites, it placed education at the center of racial discourses that addressed all social and racial disparities (Stulberg, 2008, p. 23; Katzenlson & Wier, 1985; Newby & Tyack, 1971).

Stulberg also recounts through Anderson (1997), and Newby and Tyack (1971) that division existed among many African-American activists concerning whether desegregation was an appropriate tool for achieving racial justice and equity. Numerous minorities, through Friedman's inference, held the expectation of being shareholders of power and control over their local schools and resisted the efforts to bus their children into all-white communities. This resistance was rooted in the perspective that subordination to white authority would continue, but also eliminating some government oversight. White conservatives in opposition viewed desegregation as a failure and burden on society because it imposed racial equality (Stulberg, 2008, pp.23; 78-79).

To Carnoy (2000), marketization of school choice had been advantageous to whites escaping desegregation policies, with choice intensifying educational disparities through social class and racial categories (Carnoy, 2000). Ravitch (2010) tells how southern states created private schools as a form of resistance to desegregation. The southern states would fund the tuition costs of private schools with grants raised from tax dollars. This move enabled white students to continue to attend all white schools, which garnered a wide range of supporters (Ravitch, 2010).

Hess (2010) reports that it was not until 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), were provisions made for all children to have an “equal and significant opportunity” at attaining a quality education. President Johnson, recognizing the impact of poverty on the nation’s minority children, provided the means to remedy the unequal distribution of resources through Title I funding. Nevertheless, along with the ESEA, Johnson also embraced vouchers through his Office of Economic Opportunity. Through this office, various social scientists contemplated whether vouchers would be a “politically viable and promising alternative to school busing” (Hess, 2010, p. 37).

Carlson (1997) argues that the consumer ideology that Friedman (1962) supported in education would encourage society to neglect the broader and more important goals of education. Also, Carlson points out that the discourse on school choice by its advocates is contradictory. Although school choice advocates argue against centralization, school choice and vouchers have promoted more centralization through standardized and high-stakes tests (Carlson, 1997, p. 30). Today, while selective enrollment is dressed as school choice for many middle and upper middle-class families, school choice for low-income families may result in no real choice at all. Families in low-income communities may exchange one poor performing school for a slightly better one – with only a few more resources, but not enough to demonstrate equality.

## **Types of Selective Enrollment Schools**

**Magnet schools and college preparatory schools.** I have spoken earlier in this manuscript regarding school choice as the beginning of selective enrollment practices as a reaction to the 1954 Brown ruling, and later the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. However, I now cite Rossell (1990), who reminds us that magnet schools were created as a voluntary action on the part of both black and white parents to promote racial and cultural diversity. Whites and Blacks alike transferred to and from their familiar neighborhood surroundings to experience schools in the opposite racial setting. This was done under government guidelines that may have provided incentives for the receiving and sending schools. In the early implementation, the magnet school design was introduced by connecting neighboring school attendance zones. Now, magnet schools are not subject to a fixed attendance area and can accept students from the entire city (Rossell, 1990).

Goldring (2009) relates that magnet schools, because of the United States Supreme Court rulings of the 1970s, became popular as a means for the desegregation of schools. Parents could realize school choice options rather than face forced bussing and complacently accepting attendance assignments from school districts (Goldring, 2009). Blank and Archbald (1992) claim that magnet schools have provided incentives to parents, students, and teachers to strengthen the academic performance of students (Blank & Archbald, 1992). Blank (1989) cites the research of Fleming, Blank, Dentler, and Baltzell (1982) that in the early years of their implementation, magnet schools could have the following characteristics:

- a special Curriculum theme or method of instruction,
- a role in voluntary desegregation within a district,
- the choice by student and parent, and
- access to students beyond a regular attendance zone. (Blank, 1989, p. 1)

Specialty schools such as Lane Technical High School in Chicago served as models as to how to develop and maintain advanced curriculum for a selective population of students. These schools used examinations as a means of measuring student giftedness, which negated the initial goal of recruiting students based on their interest (Blank & Archbald, 1992). Magnet schools came to be the vehicle in which the aim to achieve racial balance would be realized (CPS, 2009). The early magnet choice program came in two versions; one, which was optional, and the other in which choice was controlled through racial quotas. In the first version, due to racial quotas, parents had little say about choice of schools because of geographic parameters. The second version was more to discourage white flight from the community (Goldring, 2009; Rossell, 1990).

According to Allensworth and Rosenkranz (2000), Chicago magnet schools were to establish an educational environment where the student population “was 15% to 35 % white and 65% to 85 % non-white” (p.7). This composition is based on a government consent decree of 1980 (Allensworth & Rosenkranz, 2000)<sup>6</sup>. United States District Judge Charles Kocoras abandoned the CPS desegregation consent decree of 1980 in 2009. His ruling enabled the Chicago Public Schools to disregard race as a factor for selective enrollment and magnet school admission policies. Minority children are most affected by this abandonment of the decree. Officials from Chicago Public Schools have argued that being free of the consent decree would allow money allocated for transportation of magnet and selective enrollment students to be used in other areas with a much higher need for financial support. Allensworth and Rosenkranz (2000) have pointed out that the composition of 35% white and 65 % to 85 % non-white is difficult to enforce because of the school

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<sup>6</sup> A consent decree is where a Federal Court orders injunctive relief against one party while maintaining authority over a case to make sure that a settlement is followed. The court orders one party to take or not take some action with failure in complying with the court order resulting in contempt and other punitive measures. The Chicago Board of Education entered a consent decree with the United States Department of Justice in 1980 to remedy segregation in the schools. This decree mandated that the Chicago Public Schools would voluntarily seek strategies to create and preserve as many racially balanced schools as possible.

systems' demographics. In response to this, regional college preparatory programs were created to accommodate students who were not selected to attend magnets and to circumvent ethnic and racial criteria of the consent decree (Allensworth & Rosenkranz, 2000). Since this decree, Goldring (2009) citing Allensworth and Rosenkranz (2000) has noted that students in high socio-economic status communities have better access to more magnet schools, and few white students have been enrolled in traditionally Black schools, even when classified as magnet schools (Goldring, 2009).

Lipman and Haines (2007) emphatically underscored that new selective enrollment magnet schools have been established here in Chicago to attract middle-class families, thereby boosting the city's economic structure (Lipman & Haines, 2007). Lutton (2012) explains that in Chicago, parents with high incomes are more concerned than ever about acquiring a place for their children in the eleven highly selective enrollment schools. The criterion for selection to these schools has high and low-income families looking for various ways to acquire an advantage that strengthens their educational privilege, even if it means using test prep and private tutoring services (Lutton, 2012). There is a psychological as well as a financial cost to maintaining selective enrollment schools. Hochschild (1984, as cited in Rossell, 1990) made the argument over thirty years ago that magnet schools and now college preps drain the resources of the school system because they affect teacher and student morale. Rossell is quick to critique that Hochschild's argument did not consider that voluntary magnet programs still perceived neighborhood schools as viable educational institutions (Rossell, 1990). However, the tide has turned, and today, neighborhood schools may be looked down upon and ostracized. Politicians, education reformers, and those who work in the "better" schools may possess an elitist view regarding neighborhood schools because of the resources that neighborhood schools cannot access (Rossell, 1990). Their perspective of neighborhood schools may demonstrate denunciation of

them and the communities in which these schools exist, and in addition, demonstrate little empathy for the students and staff who are placed in them. Wells and Crain's (1997) research reported how the magnet schools in St. Louis, Missouri received extra resources to sustain their programs. Along with these extra resources came complaints from those who worked in non-magnet schools that magnet schools "cream the highest achieving or most motivated students" (Wells & Crain, 1997, p.147).

Banchero (2008) has brought to light how the selective enrollment process allows students to access educational opportunities comparable to those in wealthy suburbs and exclusive private schools. Placed in various areas throughout Chicago, these schools are considered leading in curriculum and instruction with the best facilities and instructional resources not found in most neighborhood schools (Banchero, 2008). What working-class and low-income parents may not always understand is that their belief in a democratic process in school choice does not negate the intricate barriers that have been placed to encumber access to these schools. This stiffens the competition even more. When we examine Chicago after the initiation of Renaissance 2010, we find that while half of the student population in Chicago Public Schools is African-American, only 29% of those students were enrolled in selective schools. This number decreased from 37% in 1995. Schools like Whitney Young, Gwendolyn Brooks, Walter Payton, and Northside Prep have witnessed a 10% drop in African-American enrollment (Karp, 2007). Table one on page 74 displays the demographics of the eleven selective enrollment public high schools in Chicago. Northside College prep has only 6% African-American student enrollment; Whitney Young has 25%, Lane Tech has a little over 8% of African-American students, and Walter Payton has 25% African-American student enrollment.



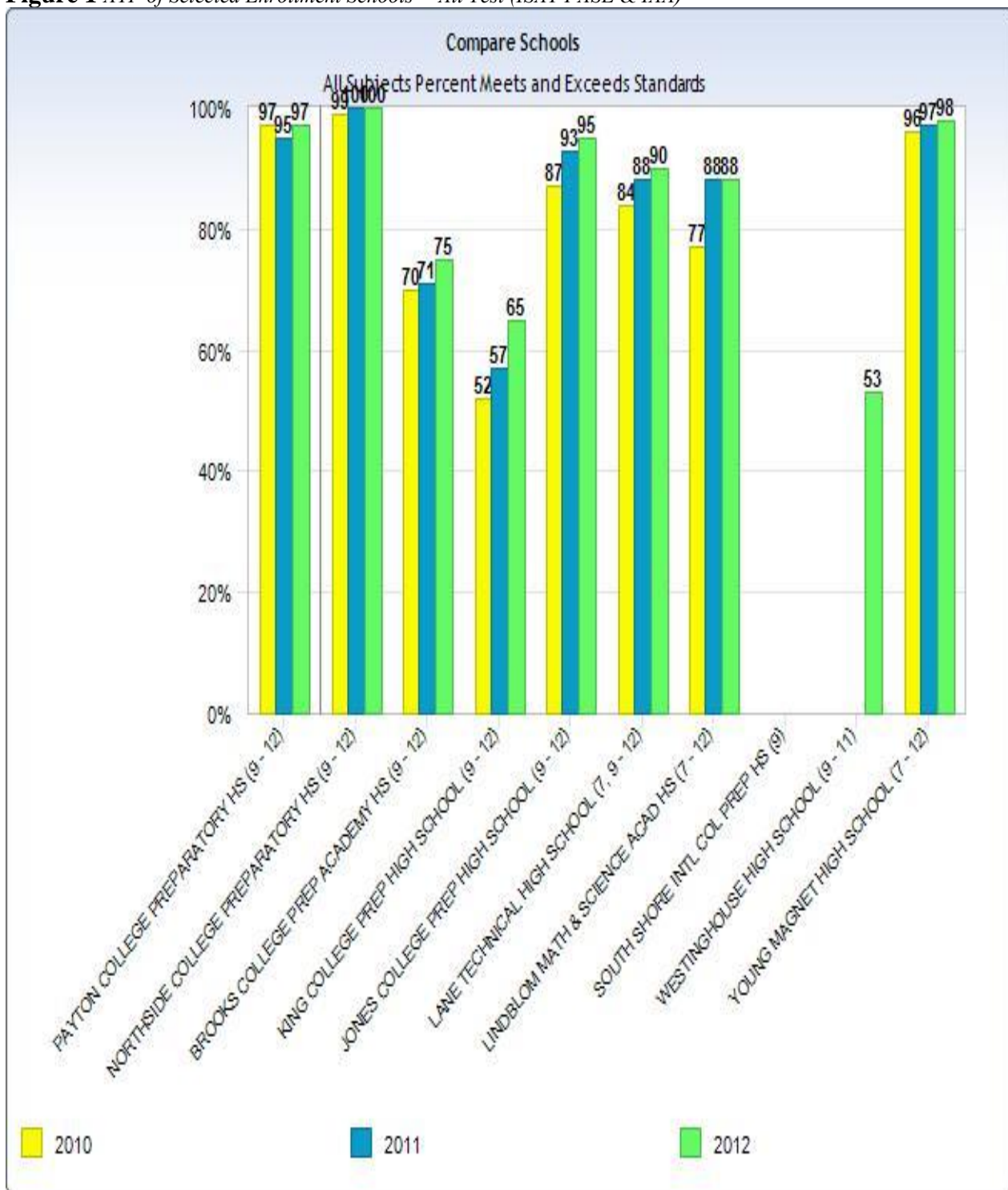
**Table 1***Compare Schools: Student Demographics & Characteristics - Race/Ethnicity*

School Name	White (%)	Black (%)	Hispanic (%)	Asian (%)	Native American (%)	Multiracial Ethnicity (%)
Brooks College Prep Academy HS	1.6	86	11.3	0	0.7	0.5
King College Prep High School	0.5	94.4	3.6	0.7	0.1	0.7
Jones College Prep High School	28.9	23.9	31.3	11	0.8	3.8
Lindbloom Math & Science Acad.	1.6	71.6	24.6	0.7	0.5	0.8
Northside College Preparatory HS	42.6	6.3	22.6	24.4	0.7	3.1
Hancock College Preparatory HS	2.1	1	94.9	0.9	0.7	0.3
Payton College Preparatory HS	34.7	24.7	24.2	7.8	0.3	8.1
Lane Technical High School	30.1	8.4	47.6	10.6	0.5	2.7
Westinghouse High School	1.1	68.5	25.4	3.5	0.2	1.2
South Shore International College Prep	0.3	96.8	2.3	0	0	0.3
Young Magnet High School	30.2	25.7	21.4	17.9	0.5	4.3

**Illinois Interactive Report Card -The percentage of students for each racial-ethnic group** (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian-Pacific Islander, American Indian-Alaskan Native, and Multiracial) is the count of students belonging to a particular racial/ethnic group, divided by the total fall enrollment, multiplied by 100.

Figure one on page 75 displays Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) ratings (2010, 2011, 2012) for nine of the eleven selective enrollment high schools. South Shore International Prep and Westinghouse are two new college prep high schools added in 2011, but South Shore International had no ranking as of this writing. Although Brooks, Lindbloom, Westinghouse and King College preps have a large enrollment of Black students, we must consider that these schools are in predominately Black communities with the likelihood of not being able to draw a sizeable white population due to what Goldring (2009) mentioned earlier on page 72, that few whites enroll in black magnet schools. One must note as well, that all but one of the selective enrollment high schools placed either on the west or south side of Chicago did not meet the state of Illinois' benchmarks for Annual Yearly Progress.

**Figure 1** AYP of Selected Enrollment Schools – All Test (ISAT PASE & IAA)



2012 Illinois Interactive Report Card, Northern Illinois University, with support from the Illinois State Board of Education.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Annual Yearly Progress Benchmarks to meet reading and math scores for 2010, 2011 and 2012 are 77%, 85%, and 92% respectively. See [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ayp/htmls/ayp\\_factors.htm](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ayp/htmls/ayp_factors.htm)

While fourteen thousand parents and students now scramble for three thousand seats in selective enrollment high schools, the quest has been made more difficult by the discontinuation of the federal government's 2009 desegregation consent decree. The consideration of race in the selection of students to magnet schools was an essential benchmark in the application and admission process for many years. The discontinuation of the consent decree's extra caveat for school administrators was the saving of millions of dollars allocated for transportation, which was previously stated on page 71 (Karp, 2009). Ahmed (2010) disclosed how the issues concerning diversity in magnet and college prep enrollment reveal that 75% of the selective enrollment schools are now primarily composed of white students and will continue more racial segregation. The rising enrollment rate of white students in selective enrollment schools can be attributed to the fact that most high-quality magnet and selective enrollment schools are located in predominately white communities (Ahmed, 2010).

Even though white students in Chicago are 9% of the school population, they are entitled to 35% of magnet and selective enrollment school seats. What is replacing the consent decree in Chicago is a complex concept called a tiered system (see Table two, page 77), which is based on socioeconomic integration. The tiered method separates students into four groups according to United States Census data, where many variables determine to what tier they belong. According to the Chicago Public Schools' Office of Access and Enrollment, the process involves looking at the following characteristics which table two demonstrates as income and non-income variables:

1. median family income,
2. percentage of single-family homes,
3. percentage of homes where English is not the primary language,
4. level of adult educational attainment,

5. percentage of homes occupied by the homeowner, and
6. the achievement scores of the schools in the attendance area. (CPSMagnet.org, 2012)

**Table 2**

<b>Tier</b>	<b>Average median family income</b>	<b>Single parent families</b>	<b>Language other than English</b>	<b>Home ownership</b>	<b>Adults without high school degree</b>	<b>Adults with high school degree</b>	<b>Adults with some post-high school education</b>	<b>Adults with a bachelor's degree or higher</b>
<b>Tier 1</b>	\$29,928	63.4%	32.5%	28.3%	31.2%	33.9%	30.1%	4.8%
<b>Tier 2</b>	\$39,446	53.7%	32.4%	39.0%	27.3%	34.2%	30.9%	7.6%
<b>Tier 3</b>	\$55,529	41.3%	37.4%	53.1%	19.0%	29.1%	37.5%	14.4%
<b>Tier 4</b>	\$104,434	22.0%	27.1%	59.8%	8.9%	19.7%	38.0%	33.4%

*Chicago Socio-Economic Tiers* from 2010 American Community Survey

There is also a system based on a small portion of seventh grade math and reading tests that can be nationally normed.<sup>8</sup> Banchemo (2009) reports that parents have been unaware of the hidden details surrounding the point system. In combination with the math and reading tests, students are also penalized for days absent. A great number of parents have declared penalizing for days absent as unfair because it allows for only three absences for the entire school year and puts undue pressure on children for circumstances they cannot prevent (Banchemo, 2009). Students need a maximum of 900 points on their application score. Chicago Public Schools are now transparent regarding the distribution of points which are shown in table three on page 78. This table describes how seats are dependent upon the change in the admission scores and the points students receive. Some schools added more seats and dropped points to accommodate students in tiers 1 and 2.

1. 300 points for selective enrollment entrance exam

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<sup>8</sup> The Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test is a norm-reference test that is common core aligned. It has replaced the ISAT. Seventh grade percentiles are used in determining selective enrollment entrance.. <https://cps.edu/AccessAndEnrollment/Pages/PointCalculationTool.aspx>

2. 300 points for grades and attendance, and
3. 300 points for seventh grade standardized test scores from the Northwestern Evaluation

Association Measures of Academic Progress: Total = 900 points. (CPS.Magnet.org, 2012)

**Table 3**

**MAP Impact on Admissions Scores**

	<b>2016-2017 average admissions scores (with MAP)</b>	<b>2014-2015 average admissions scores (pre- MAP)</b>	<b>change in points</b>
Payton	875	888	-13
Northside	871	881	-10
Jones	867	871	-4
Young	855	872	-17
Lane	820	833	-13
Hancock	752	NA	NA
Brooks	748	779	-31
Lindblom	726	765	-39
Westinghouse	718	759	-41
South Shore	663	696	-33
King	658	700	-45

Source: Selective Prep

In addition, siblings of those already admitted can qualify for 30% of the seats, but all selective enrollment schools administer an entrance exam. The Chicago Public Schools has allowed principals of the eleven selective enrollment schools to have discretion in filling seats in conjunction with the point system. This practice has garnered much criticism and scrutiny as principals of these highly selective schools have been accused of showing favoritism to students whose parent(s) have political influence. According to Forte (2009), though it has not been proven that discretionary practices by principals were unlawful, it does encourage a conception that political privilege is more important than equity (Forte, 2009). Nonetheless, Chicago Public Schools expresses its stance on exam and admission policies in the following statement:

Admissions exams are based on the student's ISAT national percentile rank in reading and math or the 2010-2011 percentile rank in reading and math on a different nationally normed, standardized achievement test. To be eligible for testing, students

must have a minimum stanine of 5 in reading comprehension and 5 in math. Students with an IEP or 504 Plan must have stanines in reading comprehension and math that total at least 10 (e.g., 3 in reading, 7 in math; 9 in reading, 1 in math). (CPS Magnet. Org., 2012)

### **Difficulty With The Tier Methodology**

The tier methodology is disconcerting in that it inadvertently punishes those in lower tiers. There are many arguments and complaints from parents from both the low and high tiers that the system is unfair to families. Those in the high tiers believe that their children deserve seats in the highly selective enrollment schools based on their academic merit alone. Thus, the concept of meritocracy is a tool by education reformers to hammer the perspective that low-income and minority families are not willing to work hard enough for coveted spaces in elite public schools. Parents in low-income areas feel alienated from the process of selective enrollment school selection due to its highly complicated steps to gain points for admission and its punitive effect for circumstances they cannot control (e.g., illness). In a 2009 interview with Catalyst staff reporter Rebecca Harris, Richard Kahlenberg, then senior fellow at The Century Foundation, argues the following in support of the tier system:

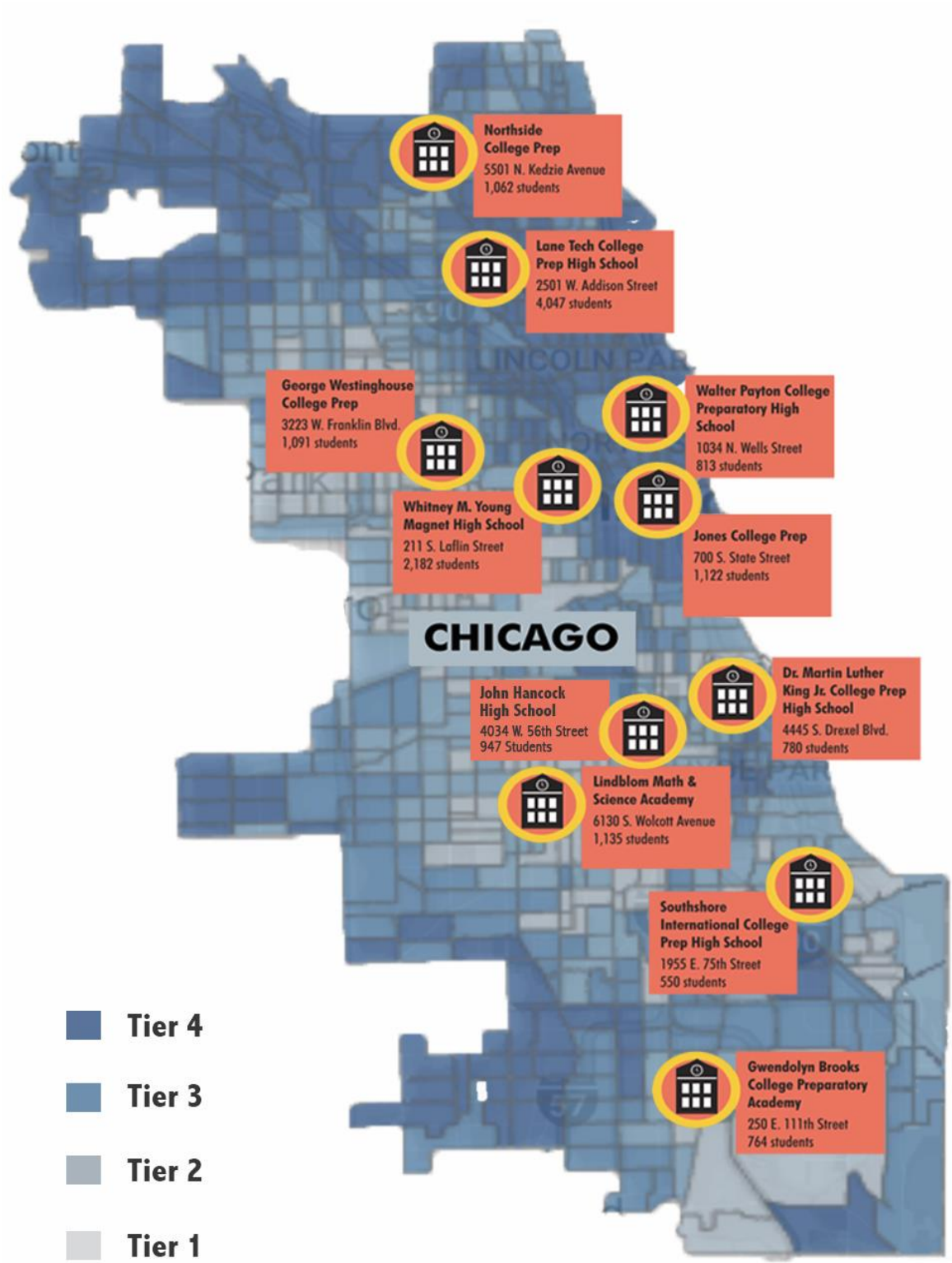
Socioeconomic status is a better approximation of merit for selective enrollment schools. A [higher]-scoring student from a low-income tier probably has at least as much promise as a higher-scoring student who did not have to overcome any obstacles. Another rationale is to avoid concentrations of poverty. Failing to consider socioeconomic status makes this much harder. (Kahlenberg2009, para.11)

In a 2012 interview with WBEZ reporter Linda Lutton, past Chicago Chief Education Officer, Jean-Claude Brizard stated that Chicago Public Schools would attempt to open more selective

enrollment schools as the result of parent demands for this type of school experience for their children. Lutton (2012) contends that private grammar schools play a significant role in the lack of available seats in public magnet and college prep schools. Twenty-nine percent of incoming freshman from private schools enrolled into Walter Payton College Prep alone (Lutton, 2012). But we must first question that if private grammar schools have that much of a monopoly on selective enrollment seats, where does that leave the less elite and prestigious public schools that have students vying for admission? Second, why is the application process so intricate that many minority parents need a great deal of assistance in completing the application?

Figure two on page 81 is the census tract map, which distinguishes the four different socioeconomic tiers in Chicago. The tiers are coded in gradations of blue with tiers one and two located primarily in the center of the city. Tier three is located mostly near the borders of neighboring suburbs while tier four is located primarily on the far and near north side of Chicago. There are also some tier three and four schools on the far south and neighboring south suburban areas. According to the Chicago Public Schools Office of Access and Enrollment, scores are given to each census tract. Golab (2012) reports 30 % of unfilled selective enrollment seats are given strictly to the highest performing students throughout the city. The other 70 % of seats are distributed equally among the four tiers according to the highest scores in each economic tier. The tract system since 2011 has included more tier one schools which means that there is less chance for low-income and minority students to attend highly selective schools in high socioeconomic status communities. Gentrifying communities, such as Logan Square and West Town on the near north and northwest sides, have benefitted from this change. Track changes also occurred in the wealthy communities of Lincoln Park and Hyde Park; these communities dropped from tier four to tier three (Golab, 2012).

Figure 2



From Chicago Public School Tiers Open City App



Greenberg and Lerner (2012) reveal how tier changes have caused alarm due to a six-factor model (displayed on page 77, table 2) that includes income and five non-income factors.

Income benchmarks for tiers are as follows:

- a. Tier 1: 36,000.00 or less
- b. Tier 2: 36,000.00–47,000.00
- c. Tier 3: 47,000.00–60,000.00
- d. Tier 4: 60,000.00 +

The use of the non-income factors has resulted in the distortion of closely related variables which are counted more than once and given arbitrary weights. The weighting of these non-income factors randomly gives and takes away advantages and disadvantages. Parents and students may be punished for non-homeownership, regardless if income meets the tier four benchmark. Also, students in tiers three and four must score substantially more points than students in tiers one and two to gain admittance into at least five of the eleven selective enrollment high schools on a 900-point admission scale. The use of the multi-factor model is considered unsound, especially when other school districts only use income to accomplish diversity (Greenberg & Lerner, 2012). Xu (2017) makes clear that the chief weakness in the tier system is that it relies solely on census tract level data that does not thoroughly calculate the socioeconomic and minority status of applicants. It increases racial segregation by decreasing the number of low-income students (Xu, 2017). Kahlenberg (2014) argues that the tier track led to increased racial and ethnic diversity in Chicago, but one could ask where he finds the racial and ethnic diversity since there is a decrease in the black population in selective enrollment schools on the north side of the city, and whites do not enroll in majority black selective enrollment schools on the south side. Loury (2017) notes that 39% of white students attend a selective

enrollment high school against 3% of African-American high school students. The population of African-American students attending selective enrollment reached its lowest point in the school year 2016 (Loury, 2017). The following graphs (figures 3, 4, and 5) demonstrate Loury's (2017) explanation of the decrease in black student enrollment in the five elite selective public high schools. Figure three displays the increase or decrease in four ethnic racial groups in the five highly selective Chicago public high schools. Figure four shows specifically the decrease in Black student enrollment against Hispanic students, and figure five shows the increase in white student enrollment since the year 2000.

**Figure 3**

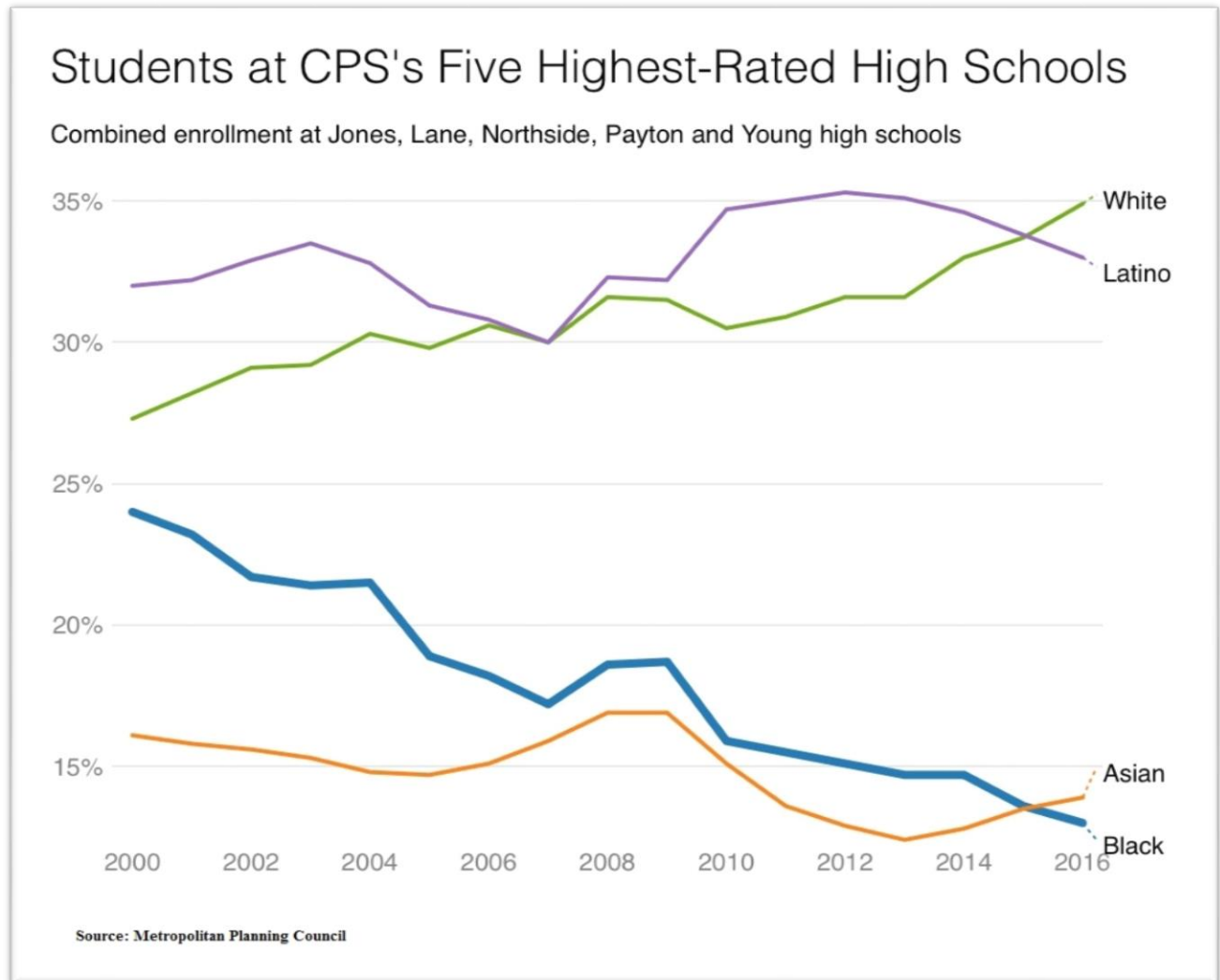


Figure 4

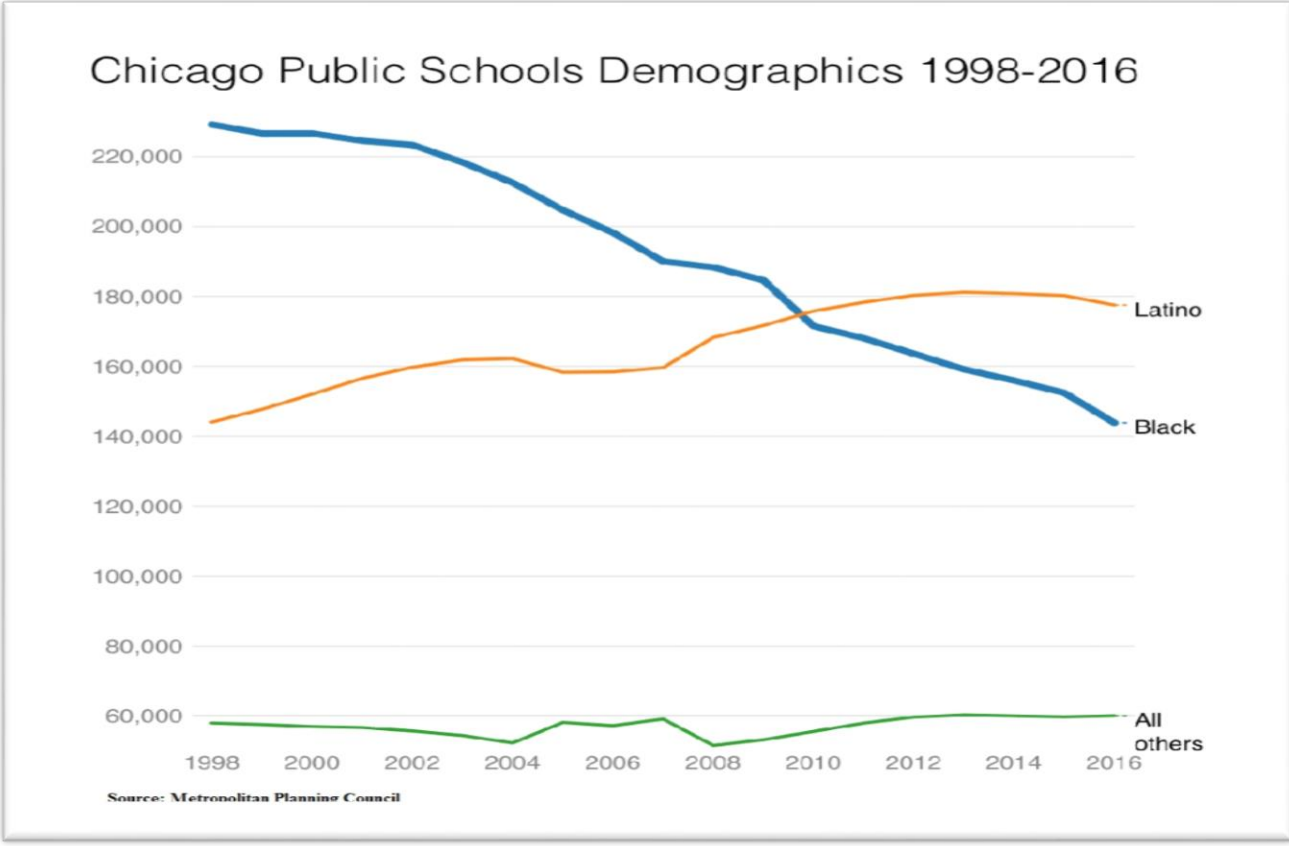
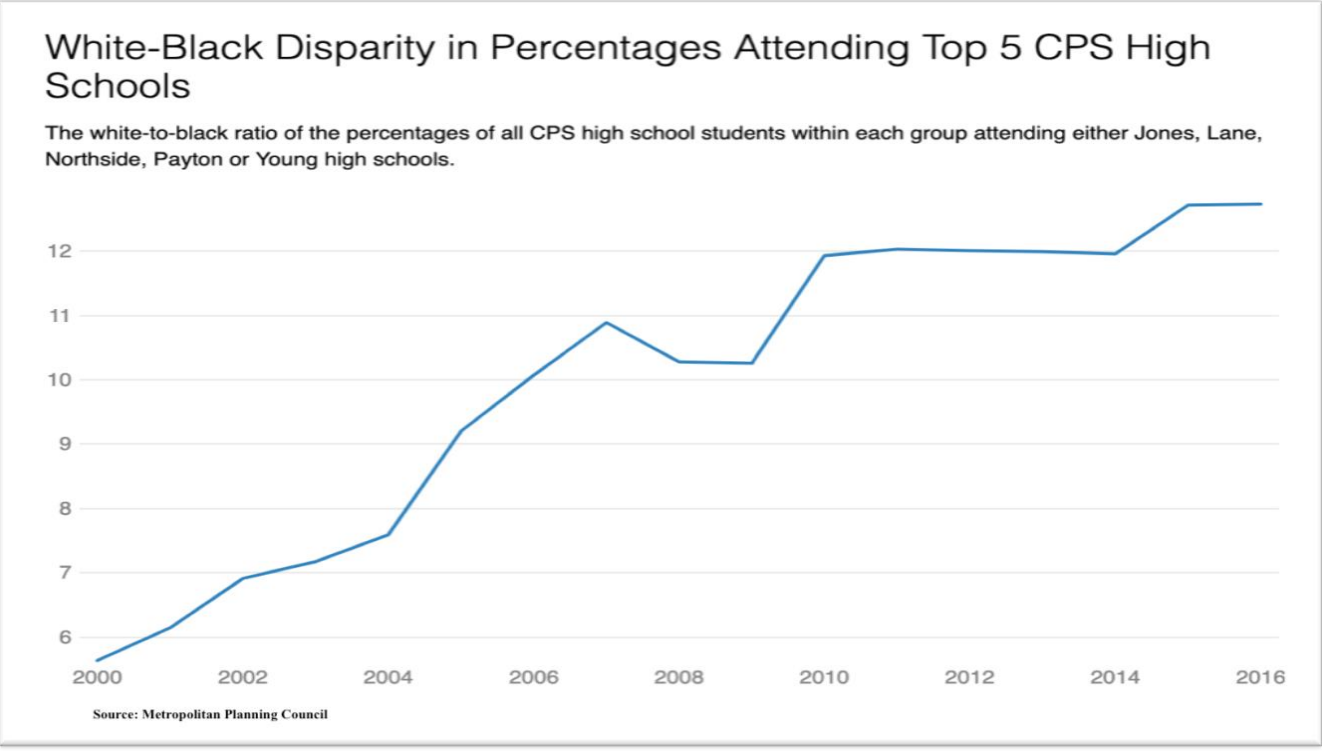


Figure 5



## **More Choice Options**

The rationale for including charters and military academies in the discussion of selective educational practices is to emphasize that the efforts to increase competition and school choice options have been intensified through new types of educative settings. The foundation for African-Americans seeking a variety in school choice options is what Stulberg's (2008) analysis described as a strategy for African-American citizens to be part of the rebuilding of America through school reforms (Stulberg, 2008). In conjunction with Stulberg's analysis, is the opinion of Pattillo (2015) that African-American families are seeking control and agency, while not necessarily embracing the ideology of privatization and marketization of education (Pattillo, 2015). Barrow and Sartain (2017) report that there has been much opposition against expanding school choice and more advocacy for expanding neighborhood school opportunities in Chicago due to the high financial cost of implementing choice options. Some believe that more choice options will intensify racial polarization and segregation in the schools. However, charter schools and military academies have attracted more students from disadvantaged and low-income communities. School choice elimination that includes charters and military academies would, in some perspectives, impact those students living in low-income communities, especially those who choose not to attend their neighborhood school (Barrow & Sartain, 2017).

**Charter schools.** Charters are now deeply entrenched in the ideology of school choice with parents often believing that they have full decision-making input concerning what schools their children will attend. Zimmer and Buddin (2005) report that since their launch in 1991, charter schools have demonstrated marked increase with the passing of charter legislation in the District of Columbia and forty other states (Zimmer & Buddin, 2005). Barrow and Sartain's (2017) recent study also points out that the desire for more school choice options has grown

vastly in the past fifteen years with the expectation that achievement would increase. Barrow and Sartain report that students not wishing to attend their neighborhood school are often African-American residing in the poorest communities. These students and their parents believe that charters are their best educative option (Barrow & Sartain, 2017).

Zimmer and Buddin also disclose that the discourse underscoring the charter school movement has incited a fierce debate from both advocates and opponents as to whether charters are more effective educative settings (Zimmer & Buddin, 2005). Advocates for charter schools believe this is a way to allow parents to execute preference. For those who have a history of marginalization within the educational system, charter schools seem to be the best option in exercising school choice. According to Frankenberg and Lee's (2003) study, their aggregation of data revealed that more than 57% of charter enrollment is non-white in comparison to 43% non-white enrollment in traditional public schools (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003). Gill, Timpane, Brewer, and Ross (2001) citing several studies concede that there is little to confirm that throughout the United States, minority enrollment in charter schools is distributed in the manner of traditional public schools (Gill, Timpane, Brewer, & Ross, 2001). Although charters are not overtly selective in attaining their student population, they have implemented practices which can appear as selective and exclusionary. Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, and Rothstein (2005) along with Frankenberg and Lee (2003) confirm that charters frequently ignore significant guidelines and protections that are put in place to guarantee that racial and socioeconomic inequities are eliminated (Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, & Rothstein, 2005; Frankenberg & Lee, 2003).

**Military academies.** Alongside charter schools is the public-school military academy or Junior Reserved Officer's Training Course (JROTC). Berlowitz and Long (2003) bring attention to neoliberal policies in the United States that force many minority students to face unfavorable

conditions. These conditions often result in ominous economic realities with either restricted or no educational opportunities. Considering this, the United States recruits disparate numbers of racially oppressed groups into the U.S. military (Berlowitz & Long, 2003). Swadener (1990) claims that the current JROTC programs state publicly that discipline is an essential remedy for *at risk* students. However, the term *at risk* is considered by many educational personnel as being part of a covert racialized discourse that is meant to further perpetuate the deficit model for minority students, thus condoning the tracking and segregation of these students even more (Swadener, 1990).

Lipman (2004) contends that schools in low-income/poverty-stricken communities frequently consent to or willingly invite partnership with the United States Army with the expectation of acquiring more resources. Lipman further argues that “Military schools are one element in an ensemble of policies that regulate and sort youth of color.” The ending result of these policies is “the criminalization of some, while promoting others as exemplars of the positive effects of self-discipline” (Lipman, 2004, pp. 57-58). Galaviz, Palafox, Meiners, and Quinn (2011) report how, in Chicago, advocates for the military training in public high schools continually cite that military academies are a prevalent choice for parents who are increasingly calling for their existence (Galaviz Palafox, Meiners, & Quinn, 2011). Conversely, Tugend’s (2005) research relates that opponents of public military academies rationalize that the sole purpose for these schools is to encourage poor and minority students to enlist in the armed forces, rather than providing equal access to the college track (Tugend, 2005). African and Hispanic American students are the largest populations attending military academies. Most of the military academies are located on the west and south side of the city with only one located north.

**Benefits of school choice: Studies on Academic Achievement.**

With a myriad of school choice options now available, how do we determine 1) the academic benefits of the various options and 2) if there is measurable academic achievement being made? Most studies indicate higher graduation rates for students attending magnet schools compared to traditional public schools with career academies leading to this phenomenon. Gamoran's (1996) investigation of magnet schools found higher rates of student achievement in reading, social studies, and science than for those students enrolled in a traditional public-school setting. Magnet school students achieved their academic gains much faster in all subjects but mathematics (Gamoran, 1996). Blank, Dentler, Baltzell, and Chabotar (1983) and Blank (1989) report that 80% of magnet schools examined had higher achievement scores than the district average (Blank, Dentler, Baltzell, & Chabotar.,1983; Blank, 1989).

A thorough study performed by Silver, Saunders, and Zarate (2008), which utilized a longitudinal data set and controlled for a variety of demographics in the Los Angeles United School District (including gender and ethnicity) supported findings of higher graduation rates for magnet school students (Silver, Saunders, & Zarate, 2008). Before researchers can make the conclusion that these statistics are the result of the magnet school curriculum, one must consider other important factors. These factors are 1) magnet schools have fewer low-income students in attendance, and 2) the differences in graduation rates are not so profound when demographics and initial performance are considered (McDade County Public Schools, 2012). Goldring (2009) cautions that the success of magnet schools is mixed. Goldring, citing the research of Smrekar and Goldring (1999), Gamoran (1996) and Metz (1986/2003) that magnets draw off the most academically talented and inspired students as well as those who are from different ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds whose interest may be related.

Magnets attract high quality teaching professionals who are innovative and creative, and who teach in a manner that promotes higher order thinking skills. Magnet schools also offer them more options for the implementation of technology as an instructional tool and autonomy in making curriculum decisions (Goldring, 2009). Blank and Archbald (1992) suggest we examine whether students learn more in magnet schools than in a regular or neighborhood school setting. Many can argue that students in magnet schools have already achieved great strides in being selected alone. As Blank and Archbald (1992) have related, magnet schools' success may be attributed to getting the better students who are easier to teach, better prepared, and motivated. But this is not all to the explanation; there seems to be more administrative support and one must examine the organizational structure of these schools (Blank & Archbald, 1992).

The research of Blank et al. (1983) unearthed three significant themes that are essential for the success of magnet schools: (1) effective (district) administrative leadership, (2) district level support and community involvement, and (3) raising teacher morale and improving community responses to desegregation (Blank, et al., 1983, p. 145). According to Metz (1986 / 2003, cited in Blank and Archibald, 1992) some magnet schools demonstrate a "top down" or hierarchical mentality, where teacher input is not considered viable in improving faculty morale or student academic performance (Blank & Archibald, 1992, p. 85). In comparison to magnet schools, several studies show contradictory evidence of charter schools' effects on academic achievement. In 2005, a report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) evaluating the effectiveness of charter schools, found traditional public schools outperformed charter schools in meeting performance standards put in place by various states. This report raised some questions as to whether prior student achievement or other mediating factors are responsible for the performance (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005).



Braun, Jenkins, and Grigg (2006), reporting for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), released findings that stated charter students performed some points worse on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests (NAEP), in reading and math than their counterparts who attended traditional public schools (Braun, Jenkins, & Grigg, 2006). Raymond (2009) alerts us to a study conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, which found in its analysis of students attending charter schools that only 17 % of charter schools performed significantly better in math than their traditional public-school counterparts. Nearly 37% performed worse, but overall, nearly 50% demonstrated no difference nationwide (Raymond, 2009, p.44). Bifulco and Ladd's (2006) study asserted, "students make considerably smaller achievement gains in charter schools than they would have in traditional public schools" (p. 52). They conclude that "the large negative estimates of the effects of attending a charter school are neither substantially biased, nor substantially offset by the positive impacts of charter schools on traditional public schools" (p.52). Furthermore, Bifulco & Ladd contend that charter schools are affected adversely by a 30 % attrition rate (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006). Catalyst-in-Brief (2010) states the following regarding studies on charter school performance:

The most sophisticated studies done in Illinois, including the one by RAND, indicate that elementary students, on average, initially suffer in charter schools but then do at least as well as they did in regular schools or as well as similar students do in regular schools. The RAND study compared the growth of students in charters to the growth of these same students when they attended regular schools. (Catalyst-in-brief, Feb. 2010)

For charter schools, the empirical evidence of academic achievement is often conflicting and confusing. Teacher union organizations like the National Education Association (NEA) cite the studies previously mentioned in this paper and that there is no real accountability or steady government oversight in evaluating charter school performance. On the opposite side, advocates of charter schools, like the Center for Education Reform (CER), state emphatically that charter schools are showing small gains in academic achievement, but the statistical methodologies and interpretations of data acquired by charter school opponents are biased. CER alleges that there is a strong relationship between successful charter schools and laws that require accountability. Sixty-five percent of states with laws that enforce accountability demonstrated positive achievement gains in 2012-2013 (CER Website, 2011).

ROTC programs, having become more popular in the venue of choice options for parents and students, raise questions regarding the academic benefits of a militarized curriculum. Elizabeth Brackett's (2007) report for PBS News Hour related that in Chicago, minorities comprise 92 % of the cadet population against 4 % of white students enrolled. Only 4% of all students enrolled in ROTC programs enlist in the armed services after high school, and 78 % go on to enter college. The assertion by Military academies in Chicago of high attendance, high graduation rates, and lower dropout rates than the rest of Chicago Public Schools, are compelling statistics to parents and students looking for a competitive edge for college. Retired Lieutenant Colonel Rick Mills and University of Illinois Professor Pauline Lipman were both interviewed in this report. Rick Mills declared that the primary purpose for military academies was to provide their students and their parents with not only choice in educational settings, but to also provide them with a combination of college prep and military curriculum. Marine Academy principal Rick Mills stated adamantly "We're trying to produce a student who is prepared for post-

secondary education and who will eventually become a leader in their community, in the city or the state, or even at the national level” (Brackett, 2007).

Conversely, Pauline Lipman questioned in the same interview why there are no military academies in wealthy suburbs and upper middle-class white communities. The covert message delivered is that military academies are only good for the poor African and Hispanic American communities. It is assumed that African and Hispanic students need a different type of educative experience from their white and middle-class counterparts. Additionally, Lipman posits that with the exorbitant amounts of money poured into military academies, it is unlikely that the ulterior motive of recruitment does not exist due to the short supply of enlisted men and women (Brackett, 2007). Galaviz et al. (2011) referencing Lipman (2004), points out that while military schools are technically open to any student regardless of race and social status, it is not of interest to those in a higher social class status to attend these schools. These schools are intended for those youth of poor and minority status with few academic and economic options at hand (Galaviz et al., 2011).

Anderson (2009) argues that while there are staunch opponents of the militarization of public high schools, there is more cause for concern among them because lower income students frequently are wanting for an assortment of post-secondary options that will provide them with opportunities to leave behind the pessimism of their communities. Furthermore, these opponents of the militarization of public schools believe that recruiters are functioning under pressure to meet quotas, and thus are not forthcoming with information regarding the risk and proposed post-secondary opportunities (Anderson, 2009). While JROTC programs cite their ability to decrease the high school dropout rates, branches of the armed forces do not endeavor to collect empirical evidence to support this statement (Bailey, Hodak, Sheppard, & Hassen, 1992).

For JROTC opponents, the armed forces hesitance to provide even miniscule empirical evidence that JROTC participation lessens the dropout rate of minorities allows for a more persuasive argument that can dismiss claims of academic achievement for JROTC students. Those who advocate for JROTC can look to Pema and Mehay's (2010) study, which found that ROTC program effects depended on the amount of time and commitment. Those students who were programmed early in their high school career were more likely to garner better standardized test scores and achieve graduation rates higher than those students who enter in the last two years of high school (Pema & Mehay, 2010).

### **Chapter Three Conclusion**

Neighborhood schools with basic curriculums, which serve the working-class and poor, are not a viable option for the middle-class. Belfield and Levin (2013) advise examining the consequences for failing to provide an adequate education to all in our society. They appeal to us to question how we can allow the future of some to be lessened through policies that do not consider that a variety of individual circumstances can impact their futures (Belfield & Levin, 2013). Moses and Rogers (2013) ask us to investigate how the dissemination of learning opportunities and the quality of education influences the promotion of democratic values where inequity can be eradicated. In accordance with Moses and Rogers, all of us must advocate for public education that prepares and inspires young people to "participate in existing democratic structures and to challenge an unequal, segregated social context" (Moses & Rogers, 2013, p. 207). Most importantly, we must, in agreement with Welner and Carter (2013), conclude that "denying children equitable educational opportunities is bad policy and is inconsistent with basic American values" (Welner & Carter, 2013, p. 4). Scholars must engage in a discourse that will uncover the reasons why there is disparity between the resources bestowed upon magnet and

college prep schools when their neighborhood schools bear the burden of servicing the entire community. Minority and low-income parents have been forced to accept the disparity in resources provided to magnet and college prep high schools, while poor performing high schools must accept blame and disparagement. The lack of agency and increased anxiety allows for further educational and societal stratification. We must also eliminate the sense of helplessness and frustration that teachers and administrators experience trying to educate students in low-performing high schools.

### **Chapter Three Summary**

Chapter three, the review of literature, discussed how selective enrollment schools developed from the concept of school choice with a history woven in desegregation and racial polarization. Specific focus was devoted to 1) how the essential ideas behind school choice encouraged competitiveness through marketization strategies and less government oversight, 2) the elimination of the consent decree which allowed the advantage of white and middle-class families for seats in selective schools, 3) how the use of the tier methodology disadvantages minority students competing for admission to highly selective schools, and 4) how the school choice concept enabled the emergence of charters and military academies as alternative educative options for minorities. This chapter also revealed the contradictions of academic achievement data for the three-choice option of magnet, charters, and military academies. Chapter four discusses the research methodology and paradigm for the study as well as the researcher's method in the collection and analysis of data.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

### **Chapter Overview**

This chapter explains the research methodology of my investigation into how African-American students in selective enrollment and neighborhood high schools perceived each other and their viewpoints on current education policies. This study employed a qualitative critical ethnography design that incorporated a snowball sampling technique. This was done to locate participants who were considered a hard to reach population. The methodological rationale for this study is that it is an appropriate approach in examining the issues of dominance and control that result in the marginalization of groups of people. This chapter also explains the rationale for the sample, data collection methods, data analysis strategies, and researcher's positionality.

### **Qualitative Research Paradigm**

My worldview for this study is one embedded in advocacy. I believe, in agreement with Creswell (2009), that advocacy research affords a voice for those marginalized individuals who are left believing they are estranged from the discussion about the implementation of various education policies. Creswell (2007) notes how the qualitative research process is initiated through assumptions, the adoption of a particular philosophy of the world, and the application of a theory through which one can view, analyze, and interpret the significance given by individuals and groups to various social and/or human problems (Creswell, 2007, p. 37).

Cook (2008) defines marginalized groups as those discounted from conventional societal, economic, cultural, and political life due to race, age, religious conviction, affiliations with political groups, and financial status. Cook asserts that "research that aims to emancipate marginalized populations must be qualitative in nature" (p. 495) and that when conducting qualitative research with marginalized populations, one must acknowledge the existing imbalance

of power between groups (Cook, 2008, p. 495). As the researcher I am cognizant that some emancipation among marginalized groups can come about through the use of a qualitative research technique that allows for marginalized groups “to tell their stories” (Cook, 2008, p. 496). The imbalance of power in relationships should be examined and confronted through a critical paradigm that highlights and exposes inequities while simultaneously advocating for the marginalized. Cook offers the following statement to justify the use of a critical paradigm in researching marginalized groups:

Researchers working with marginalized populations should be acutely aware of the political nature of their research and seek to minimize the power differentials. Action and participatory research methods have been identified as offering the most promise to dissolve traditional research hierarchies. (Cook, 2008, p. 496)

Madison (2012) posits that the critical paradigm requires a persuasive moral obligation to address unfairness and injustice that some groups experience. This obligation is based on beliefs that are embedded in the ideology of human freedom. Furthermore, this obligation demonstrates empathy for those in distress. The critical ethnographer calls attention to the existing state of affairs. He or she probes into certain conditions in order to interrupt impartiality and “taken-for-granted assumptions” so that it brings to the surface the fundamental yet vague machinations of power and control. This paradigm attempts to change conditions that hinder freedom (Madison, 2012, p. 5). A closer examination of the logic behind the critical paradigm is articulated in the following passage. A critical paradigm investigates the driving forces of power, especially with respect to “who has the power, how it is negotiated, and what structures of society reinforce the current distribution of power” (Merriam, 2009, p. 35). Second, in this study, a critical paradigm will question who benefits most by current education policies. Finally, a critical paradigm will

investigate the construction of various education policies, while simultaneously exposing the anticipated effect on those oppressed by the construction of such policies (Merriam, 2009). This study offers opportunities to marginalized students, silenced by education policies and practices, to engage in a dialogue that will assist them in finding their voice (Creswell, 2007, 2009). This will allow them to become partners in developing educational policies, thus enhancing their chances for post-secondary success.

### **Qualitative Methods**

**Design of study.** The research design for this study is a qualitatively framed critical ethnography. Critical ethnographies are a form of ethnographic research that advocates for marginalized populations in our society (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Thomas, 1993). Creswell (2007) draws on the insights of Carspecken and Apple (1992) when noting that critical ethnographers are “politically minded individuals who seek to advocate against domination and inequality through research” (Creswell, 2007, p. 70; see Carspecken & Apple, 1992, p. 512). Creswell (2009) also asserts that a critical ethnography is rooted in both a participatory and advocacy worldview, which encourages and endorses the integration of politics and qualitative inquiry. Therefore, the purpose of a critical ethnography is to provide a venue for the transformation of the participants, the institutions in which they work, and/or the environments in which participants live. Ethnographies with a critical emphasis typically address specific social issues surrounding empowerment, domination, inequality, and marginalization (Creswell, 2009, p. 9). Creswell (2007) also relays how Carspecken & Apple (1992) and Thomas (1993) additionally add that critical ethnographies confront the status quo by asking why it may remain unchallenged, thus attempting to change the perspective of the larger society (Creswell, 2007). Thomas (1993) details further what the role of the critical ethnographer is with the following assessment:



Critical ethnographers describe, analyze, and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress, and constrain. ...

Critical scholarship requires that commonsense assumptions be questioned ....

Critical ethnographers use their work to aid emancipatory goals or to negate the repressive influences that lead to unnecessary social domination of all groups.

(Thomas, 1993, pp. 2-4)

By seeking student perspectives on current political and education policies that impact their education, I can focus on the needs of those African-American high school students who may be disenfranchised by said policies. My goal is to reveal and address policies that demonstrate domination and inequality and replace them with strategies for empowerment.

**The researcher's role.** I am an African-American whose parents, grounded by a firm belief in God, were active in Civil Rights work. I began my career teaching music in the public schools in 1980 after receiving a B.A. in music education. Five years into my career I started to notice the sorting of students based on their test scores and academic ability. I was in fact, an involuntary participant in this process. Fine arts was used by the administration as a mechanism for excluding certain populations of students. Specifically, my program only catered to the “gifted” students within the school. After being involved in school reform efforts that placed heavy emphasis on testing, I begin to formulate ideas on how to help students get past the stigma of poor test performance and find ways to define their identities outside the school context. There exist many issues associated with our current education policies that awakened my concern for equity. This concern has brought forth a renewed effort towards ensuring that others hear the voices of the silenced. As they now stand, selective enrollment practices are exclusionary procedures in our education system; as a result, some children feel alienation.

I recognize some students (those who attend elite selective educative environments) may not feel the brunt of educational marginalization, or even believe it exists, but instead hold close to the premise of meritocracy. On the other hand, there are some, while experiencing the privilege of an elite selective educative setting, realize its impact on their counterparts who do not share the same privilege. These students can take a stand for justice, accentuating the real meaning of democracy. Therefore, we should not assume that all who have the privilege of an elite selective enrollment education are in complete agreement with current policies that segregate students into hierarchies. Neither should we assume that those not in an elite selective environment believe they have experienced marginalization and are not a part of the democratic process.

I deliberated long and hard about my role in this research, mainly because this study has been a constant evolution of plans and strategies over a span of six years. The primary concern was and still is how I can make a difference in the larger society through this work. As an educator, I witnessed the scrutiny and the marginalization that African-American students have experienced in the school setting from their peers, their teachers, and their communities regarding their choice of school, their test scores, and their overall academic performance. It has, on occasion, been difficult for me not to bring preconceived notions based on my own upbringing to the research process. Although I grew up in poverty, there was a resilience cultivated within me by my parents that allowed me to attain a college education. My parents taught me that my skin color and economic status should not define me in life. Unfortunately, this resilience has fed my own biases, with these biases favoring the dominant culture's policies and practices that constrain minorities, and biases that bring outrage that minority cultures have not fought back hard enough.

I came up during the Civil Rights era where people both here in the United States and in other countries watched the plight of African-Americans play out through television and the newspapers. Our fight was just, and the wounds of segregation, discrimination, inadequate housing, inequitable education resources, and scarce employment opportunities were laid open for quite some time. Now these wounds, while not fresh, are still painful. For many poor and minority people, the ideology of meritocracy has become a band-aid mantra of “no excuses” and “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” – mantras that hide behind reformist policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Opportunities to achieve do exist today but are harder to find than most realize and may not be of the same quality as they were in my youth.

As I prepared for this dissertation, I reflected on my role as an educator over the past thirty years and what this research means regarding my worldview of advocacy. Often, people who advocate for equity, justice, and democracy sometimes forget that true advocacy encourages those silenced to raise their voices. Sometimes, those we advocate for have been silenced for so long that the responsibility falls to others who can articulate more coherently the injustices suffered. Repeatedly this has resulted in those who have been silenced remaining so. We must be mindful, in our eagerness to advocate for others marginalized and silenced, not to suppress their ability or desire to advocate for themselves, thus making advocacy an objectifying endeavor.

School reformers frequently observe low-income minority students (particularly African-American) through an objectified lens. The lens is split into two entities which we can reference through Frère's (1972) interpretation of Buber's (1958) I– thou and I – It concept. Frère would view education reformers as the ‘I,’ selective enrollment students become the ‘thou,’ and low-income students are the objectified ‘It’. Using Frère's analogy, one can see how education reformers use their political authority in creating policy that disregards low-income students

(Rule, 2011, pp. 928-929; Frère, 1972, p. 167). Their 'I' objectifies the relationship with the community (where the students and community become an 'It') and preserves the privilege and dominance that reformers exercise over it.

There is no I–Thou relationship in our current education reform policies because the 'I–Thou' infers that 'Thou' has received respect and value; arrogance has replaced humility, trust, and faith (Frère, 1972; Rule, 2011, p. 929). We can avow through Frère's interpretation of the I–Thou concept, that policies that exclude certain populations from quality schools by ignoring the voices of the community perpetuate an 'I–It' position. The consciousness of those who make these policies are habitually absent, and the result is an apartheid education system that focuses on profit and privatization, rather than democratic participation (Rule, 2011, p. 926).

My interaction with the study participants interviewed had to become an "I–Thou" relationship that transformed into a "we relationship." The participants and I became partners in the investigative process where the interview is not just a question and answer session, but an opportunity to emerge into a critical conversation. Here, I demonstrated responsiveness, yet allowed the participants to frame their responses in an autonomous manner that arose into a thoughtful dialogue (Seidman, 2006). My role as a researcher required that I remember not to objectify the participants and to acknowledge that they possess independence, lived experiences where they can construct meaning, and a distinctive authority of their story (Madison, 2012). This was my opportunity as an educator and researcher to encourage and create a secure environment for dialogue; a dialogue that results in a holistic change in education policies, but most significantly, a change within the African-American community where we do not objectify one another.

## **Rationale for Sample**

This critical ethnography examined the perspectives of African-American high school students who attend both public selective enrollment and neighborhood schools. Specifically, the current study examined the following questions:

1. How does each group of African-American students perceive each other in the school and social context?
2. To what extent do expectations of success differ between African-American students who attend selective enrollment schools and those who attend low-income neighborhood high schools?

The rationale for the selected methodological approach is based on the lack of research that addresses within-group variations. Connell, Spencer, and Aber (1994) note the abundance of documentation surrounding the weak level of educational attainment for low-income, inner-city African-American youth. Connell, et al. (1994) state most of the existing research has called attention to the differences between African-American children and middle-class White children. Scarcely any attempt has been demonstrated in understanding the variation within the African-American group (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994). Ford and Harris (1996) agree with Connell, et al. (1994) as they note that much of the research concerning African-American students to date have used two comparative approaches. The first approach compares African-American and white academic achievement, while the second approach compares the academic achievement of African-American students against other minority groups (Ford & Harris, 1996). Connell et al. (1994), Ford and Harris (1996), and Smalls, White, Chavous, and Sellers, (2007) all point out that research does not adequately address within-group variations of African-American students' academic performance to date (Connell et al., 1994; Ford & Harris, 1996; Smalls, White,

Chavous, & Sellers, 2007). Ramirez and Carpenter (2005) emphasize that examining the within-group differences is essential to narrowing the achievement gap as it pertains to race and student achievement (Ramirez & Carpenter, 2005). Since there is a paucity of research that investigates within-group variation on this topic, the study investigates the differences of experiences between those African-American students attending selective enrollment and those attending neighborhood high schools.

### **Participant Selection**

**Sampling techniques.** I employed a combination of snowball and judgmental sampling techniques for this study. Snowball (or chain referral) and judgmental approaches are both purposive sampling techniques (Merriam, 2009; Neuman, 2014). This research required the study participants not only have race in common but must also possess other characteristics, such as attending one of the elite selective enrollment public high schools or a low-income neighborhood school in Chicago. This was necessary to address the research questions that focus on African-American high school students' perception of each other in a social context, and different school environment. The rationale for this sampling combination is supported by Creswell's (2007) contention that due to the research questions formulated by ethnographers, they rely on their discernment of recruiting potential participants from various subcultures (Creswell, 2007). It is the ability and experience of the researcher that is vital in selecting populations that serve a specific purpose (Neuman, 2014). As Patton (2002) stresses, the reasoning and strength of purposeful sampling have in its foundation the ability to find participants who provide "information-rich cases for the study depth" (p. 230). Information-rich cases are crucial when one seeks to understand issues of immense importance to the investigation (Patton, 2002). Merriam (2009) maintains that snowball sampling is a method of asking a few significant participants to

recommend others who might be suitable for the study (Merriam, 2009). Neuman (2014) equates this technique to that of a snowball that starts small but continues to grow while being rolled in the snow. Snowball sampling has several stages where one begins with one or two cases and progresses through links and associations to other referred cases (Neuman, 2014). Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) and Faugier and Sargeant (1997) contend that the advantage of the snowball sampling technique is that it is appropriate for a wide variety of research studies, especially those in which issues are of sensitive natures or finding hard-to-track populations. Although the snowball method is exercised widely, not much has been written that addresses some of the difficulties of this method (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997, p. 792). The specific problem areas are

1. finding respondents and starting referral chains,
2. verifying the eligibility of potential respondents,
3. engaging respondents as research assistants,
4. controlling the types of chains and number of cases in any chain, and
5. pacing and monitoring referral chains and data quality. (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 144)

Whereas most studies do not consider African-American high school students a hard to reach or hidden population, the school system's reluctance to allow access to them on school property was an indication that there could be political consequences that could negatively impact the complete investigation. Snowball sampling is a practical method for recruiting these types of participants. I employed the assistance of two gatekeepers<sup>9</sup> from community organizations in

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<sup>9</sup> The gatekeeper, according to Hammersley & Atkinson (cited in Creswell, 2007, p.178) is "the initial contact for the researcher who will assist in the recruitment of participants. The researcher must gain permission to have access to participants. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (2nd ed.) (p.243). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

which some of the participants were involved. I also relied upon the children of church members, and friends with whom I established ongoing relationships. The high school level was chosen because, in accordance with the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2011), adolescents possess the following abilities:

- intellectual interests expand and gain in importance,
- capacity for abstract thinking increases,
- increased concern for the future and life beyond high school,
- increased emphasis on personal dignity and self-esteem,
- greater capacity for setting goals,
- more importance is placed on one's role in life,
- work habits become more defined—planning capability expands,
- ability to think ideas through, and
- examination of inner experiences becomes more important. (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Part I and II, 2011)

The total number of participants for this study was nineteen; 10 selective enrollment students and nine neighborhood students. All participants were between the ages of 15 to 20.

**School characteristics.** Academic characteristics of selective enrollment schools include several criteria for the years 2010 to 2015. This criteria included a) all classes are honors with options for advanced placement, b) have met or exceeded NCLB Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmarks on reading, math, and participation in state assessments, c) graduation rate above 90 percent, d) PSAT scores above 174 points, and e) average stanine between seven and ten points. Characteristics of low-income neighborhood schools included a) having no more than three advanced placement or honors classes, b) unable to meet NCLB-AYP benchmarks in reading,



math, and state assessment participation, resulting in academic watch or warning, c) average stanine 4 and below, d) low graduation rates for the years 2010 to 2015, and e) PSAT scores below 131 points.

### **Ethics**

Before the recruitment and selection of study participants began, I sought permission from the DePaul University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to proceed with the research investigation. I received human subjects and ethics training through the university prior to obtaining the review board's consent. It was important that participants know that the researcher had respect for their well-being and would not put them at risk for emotional and physical harm during the interview process. Participants and their guardians were aware of the purpose of the study according to IRB regulations. Consent forms were given to participants and their parent/legal guardian to sign. This form apprised both the participants and their guardians that their legal rights were protected during the data collection process. The form detailed the following:

1. the purpose of the study,
2. the requirements of research participants,
3. the amount of time required for participation,
4. the expected psychological and social risks and benefits,
5. participation was voluntary and that withdrawal at any time would suffer no negative repercussions,
6. the identity of the participant would be protected,
7. the contact information of investigator for questions or problems related to the research, and
8. contact information of an appropriate person for questions about participant rights.

I explained to the participants and their parents the goal of the study and why their participation was important. I also encouraged participants to ask for clarification regarding the study at any time. Participants had the assurance of the right to choose not to participate and could terminate their participation at any point. Audiotaped interviews were backed up and kept in a secure place where only I had access. I deleted audiotapes after transcription occurred. I am the only one who had access to the verbatim transcriptions; all identifying information was stripped out of the transcribed interviews. The collection of all the consent forms was my responsibility, with consent forms signed and collected before starting the interviews.

### **Human Rights Protections**

I employed a Culturally Sensitive Research Approach (CSRA) when collecting the narratives of participants. Tillman (2002) explains the justification for adopting this approach as one that is a suitable, crucial, and authentic technique that is essential to comprehending the experiences of African-Americans, most importantly within the educational setting. Tillman asserts that CSRA is vital in understanding and interpreting those collective experiences that encompass various social values and worldviews which comprise cultural knowledge (Tillman, 2002). Tillman continues to justify the CSRA by emphasizing how it can divulge the inequities that exist in relationships where power is the main commodity, and where dominance and isolation of minorities is the reward for possessing that power. The researcher, according to Tillman, has made a commitment to acknowledging his accountability in upholding the cultural authenticity of the participants while being prudent in taking his own cultural knowledge into account (Tillman, 2002). The question was how I would accomplish this while doing qualitative research. First, as the researcher, I had to be mindful of the cultural similarities and differences that exist between the participants and myself. Second, it was necessary that I demonstrated

empathy, along with an understanding of the historical events that have negatively impacted the participants. Third, I acknowledged other social factors that could create biases between myself and the participants that would hinder the collection of valuable data. Fourth, as the researcher, I understood the responsibility of doing no harm. I was aware that there were some potential risks and it was my responsibility to maintain sensitivity to potential risk factors. Students may have found it difficult to verbalize their perceptions regarding the issues of equity, curriculum, school choice, race, testing, and social relationships in the context of the school environment. My research subjects might have experienced anger or frustration over no promotion to the next grade level, or no access to a school program because of poor grades and test scores. Also, the students I interviewed could resent how other students and teachers treat them for lack of academic achievement. Other issues which could play a significant role in achievement, such as the home environment, would have made it difficult for students to express their feelings to a stranger, mainly because students could feel a sense of embarrassment. My past experiences as a teacher have given me the ability to handle all the situations that could incur risk with sensitivity and empathy for participants' feelings and perspectives. I took safety measures in interviewing and transcribing so that participants' meanings are not misconstrued, that they had anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study as stated in the consent form. Pseudonyms were used for participant names to increase the protection of respondent identities.

### **Data Collection**

As the researcher, I was the primary instrument for investigation (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Merriam, 2009). I was responsible for the creation of protocols and the gathering of data from multiple sources that facilitated a comprehensive understanding of all data. It was my duty, as Creswell (2009) describes, to emphasize learning how participants construct the meaning of an

issue or problem and not place focus on what has been written in the research literature or what researchers believe about the issues or problems (Creswell, 2009). The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. Patton (2002) advises preparing an interview protocol to assist in addressing topics where the interviewer has the freedom “to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject” (Patton, 2002, p. 343).

Although I was unable to interview students in their natural setting (school-wide and individual classrooms), I examined documents such as class syllabi, school policy handbooks, as well as information on various schools through the Illinois Interactive Report Card (IIRC) website. Carspecken (1996) asserts that the collection of such documents, in conjunction with interviews and field notes, is essential in forming a monological record (or solo discourse) that the researcher creates from his perspective (Carspecken, 1996). The collection of interview data was eighteen months. The initial time projection for data collection was twenty weeks to accommodate various individual and school schedules. However, due to the difficulty of the snowball sampling method, there was a slow start of getting the initial participants. I enlisted the aid of two gatekeepers, one of which decided not to participate due to unwillingness to abide with federal guidelines that mandate privacy of participants’ statements. I divided the interviews into three stages. The first stage was to introduce myself as the investigator to all the potential participants. This was done to explain the purpose of the study and address any concerns.

The second stage was the one-on-one interview where I asked participants wide-ranging questions about their school environment. The one on one interview process permitted study participants to answer questions privately without apprehension. This allowed them to speak honestly about how they perceived their place in the school environment, how they perceived other students within their school of attendance, students who attend other schools, and if they

perceived disparate treatment in school. The questioning techniques varied from asking students to describe a normal school day, favorite class, activity, or teacher, and their relationships with peers, to more specific issues, such as high-stakes testing, school reform, school closings, and whether they believed there exist ample educational opportunities. Patton (2002) recommends six distinct types of questions he considers viable in the interview process. These questions are

- experience and behavior questions which illuminate what a person does;
- opinion and values questions which center on participants' beliefs;
- feeling questions which highlight the emotions;
- knowledge questions concerning facts;
- sensory questions where participants describe their experiences,
- background and demographics which are to elicit information regarding the participant, and
- distinguishing questions (Patton, 2002, pp. 348-351)

The final stage of this process was making sure that I interpreted interviews that were consistent with the perceptions of students. By interviewing students who attend both selective enrollment and neighborhood schools, I tried to gain an understanding which exposed conflicting yet reflective perspectives. These perspectives mostly demonstrated students' understanding of the larger social issues we are currently confronting. Under the tenets of Critical Race Theory, the participants' stories permitted me to comprehend how each participant perceived his or her own 'lived experiences' within the context of their school environment. All interviews took place after the school day was over or on weekends. Each interview was between 50 to 60 minutes in duration. I audio-recorded interviews and immediately created transcriptions. There were no financial incentives for participating in this study.

**Data analysis.** A constant comparative approach was used in analyzing the collected data. Constant comparison is the process where information is organized into categories in which one piece of data is compared with subsequent data (interviews, statements) to identify parallels or differences (Creswell, 2009). Marshall and Rossman (2006) specify the steps in the analysis process as such:

1. organizing data,
2. immersion in data,
3. generating categories and themes,
4. coding the data,
5. offering interpretation through analytic memos,
6. searching for alternative understandings, and
7. writing up the report. (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 156)

There are several phases in organizing and preparing data for analysis. The first phase was transcribing the interviews, typing up field notes, and sorting data into categories (Merriam, 2009). I read through all the data to gain a broad sense of the information to reflect on its overall meaning (Creswell, 2009). I also kept a log of the different types of data such as names, dates, places, and times in which the data was gathered, all persons interviewed, and when and where the interviews took place, as well as their duration. This first phase, better known as open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Merriam, 2009), was to read the transcript line by line and to split several pages of text into convenient fragments that can be connected together to facilitate analysis in subsequent stages. Neuman (2014) depicts open coding as creating ideas to bring to the forefront. These ideas are buried within the data that emerge from the researcher's initial research questions, social interactions, or existing literature (Neuman, 2014).

Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest that the second phase, called the axial or focused coding phase, be the immersion or the re-reading of the data as a means for the researcher to become closely at ease with the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). During the immersion (or re-reading of transcripts) I carefully noted ideas as they came to mind while reading through each interview and questioned myself on what this was about (Creswell, 2009). Here is where I merged the initial set of established codes with new codes or emerging ideas. In this process I looked for similarities and differences from the first case and in every subsequent interview. The third phase (known as selective coding), is when I re-organized themes identified in the earlier stages of coding and detailed more than one major theme (Neuman, 2014). As suggested by Merriam (2009) and Willis (2007), I kept a journal or audit trail to keep track of evolving concepts and theories when they occurred, to note how the data could substantiate these concepts and theories, and how they developed and were expanded (Merriam, 2009; Willis, 2007).

The fourth phase in data analysis is an interpretation of the data. Analytical memoing assisted in interpreting the data. This technique assists, as Bailey (2007) asserts, “in creating, defining, and refining conceptual categories” (Bailey, 2007, p. 133). Creswell (2008) argues that memoing can help in discovering additional sources of data and making decisions on what concepts to develop (Creswell, 2008). Patton (2002) contends that “interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of the findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world” (Patton, 2002, p. 480). The interpretation of the data relied on meanings and definitions from the participants. Because this study is embedded in a critical paradigm, meanings derived were critical to answering theoretical and political questions of what actors benefit from policies currently enacted, as well as how

students perceived each other in the school and social context.

LeCompte and Schensul (2013) suggest several strategies to interpret data. The strategies I implemented were

- reviewing research questions to identify initial ideas about study significance and connection to other bodies of work;
- reviewing relevant theories proposed by other researchers who have worked on the same issues;
- repeating the analytic strategies that produced research results;
- consider what the audience should hear;
- described the data in the manner of the participants; and
- looked for policy relevance. (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013, pp. 301-314)

I also employed strategies from The National Science Foundation (1997) which suggests that qualitative researchers reflect on the following questions while analyzing data:

1. What patterns/common themes emerge around specific items in the data?
2. How do these patterns (or lack thereof) help to shed light on the broader study question(s)?
3. Are there any deviations from these patterns?
4. If, yes, what factors could explain these atypical responses?
5. What interesting stories emerge from the data?
6. How can these stories help to shed light on the broader study questions?
7. Do any of the patterns/emergent themes suggest that additional data needs to be collected?
8. Do any of the study questions need to be revised?



9. Do the patterns that emerge support the findings of other corresponding qualitative analyses that have been conducted? (National Science Foundation, 1997)

**Quality and trustworthiness.** Issues of ethical behavior are significant to data collection and analysis as well as to participant recruitment. Givens and Saumure (2008) argue that trustworthiness is one of many strategies qualitative researchers put in place to guarantee transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness allows qualitative researchers independence from the quantitative model but still enables them to establish rigor (Givens & Saumure, 2008, p. 895). I used several strategies of establishing the trustworthiness of the study. The first strategy is triangulation, in which I used multiple data sources and perspectives to test for consistency. Patton (2002) describes this as first, comparing observations with interviews; second, comparing what people say in public with what they say in private; third, comparing the varying perspectives of people; fourth, checking interviews against documents that can substantiate what the participants report in interviews; and five, checking for the consistency of what people say about the same thing over time (Patton, 2002, p. 559).

The second strategy, member checking, is a process in which I went back to individual student participants to clarify aspects of previous interviews and got feedback on the accuracies of my interpretations (Creswell, 2009). This process was immediately employed once I had the opportunity to transcribe each interview. The third strategy I employed is peer debriefing or analytic triangulation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe peer-debriefing as “(a) the process of analytical probing in which the debriefers can assist in uncovering biases, perspectives, and assumptions on the researcher's part; (b) help the researcher become aware of his/her posture toward data and analysis, and (c) provide an opportunity to test and defend emergent hypotheses and see if they seem reasonable and plausible” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308).

I solicited the expertise of Dr. Christopher Bradley as a peer-debriefer. Dr. Bradley received both his master's and Ph.D. in Sociology from Bowling Green State University. He is currently working as a dissertation consultant, statistician, and methodologist with The Dissertation Coach. He previously held an appointment as an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) and served as the Director of the Center for Social Research while at IPFW. Dr. Bradley has written one book and several articles for refereed journals on the topic of self-efficacy. In accordance with Creswell's (2009) recommendation, I made sure that I executed the following:

- that there are no mistakes made during transcription;
- that codes are consistent with the definition assigned to them;
- employed triangulation where I could substantiate the information from participants by examining each source of information;
- provided rich, thick descriptions that deliver details about the setting of the study;
- presented any information that may run counter to categories established in study – this allows the study to be seen in a more realistic manner; and
- clarified any biases that I may have brought to the research. (Creswell, 2009, pp. 191-192)

The fourth strategy for establishing trustworthiness was creating an audit trail where I detailed how “data was collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, 2009, p. 223).

## **Positionality**

Few things are more difficult than to see outside the bounds of your own perspective –to be able to identify assumptions that you take as universal truths but which, instead, have been crafted by your own unique identity and experiences in the world. (Takacs, 2003, p. 27)

Being an African-American educator, who has taught African-American and other minority students, I have the experience of observing how our current educational practices and policies are deeply rooted in the cloud of inequity. This perspective intensely influences my positionality for this study. For many years, I remained silent, unable to negotiate what was morally and ethically right within the realities of the unfairness that exists in our current education system. I saw minority students shepherded back and forth under the guise of accountability without much thought given to their intellectual needs or capabilities. As Moore and Owens (2009) indicate, African-American and other minority students are experiencing even more challenges toward academic success, despite NCLB accountability measures which are expected to guarantee educational achievement (Moore & Owens, 2009).

From my own individual experiences in school, I can recall the feeling of marginalization as a student who did not test well on measures such as the ACT and SAT. It was difficult not to react to the limitations forced upon me by others' misconceptions based on race and economics. Often in these situations, minorities adopt an attitude of indifference, for the pressure of being viewed as intellectually unfit is overwhelming. From an educator's perspective, witnessing many students' disappointment over poor academic performance gives me the incentive to engage in a dialogue with students silenced and ignored regarding testing, school closings, and opportunities to attend various educative settings.

On the other side of my positionality as an educator is a person, who despite experiencing adversity and marginalization, is one who came up in a different era, one in which social and cultural values were strict and deeply embedded in the Civil Rights movement. I have held the stance of “No Excuse.” I consider myself well-educated, having pursued a B.A. and an M.M. in music education. As a researcher, I am aware that because of the generational divide that exists between the student participants and myself, and because of my educational achievements, they could view me as part of the establishment that they could not trust. They could believe that because I am an educator with many years of experience and have been successful in the education system, I would not be able to understand their perspectives of the school setting, not to mention their generational and cultural values.

As many of the momentous events of the Civil Rights Movement occurred when I was still quite young, its impact on my worldview was more indirect until I attended a state university in Chicago to complete my undergraduate studies. This is when I experienced disparate treatment due to race and gender. The most influential effects came through my parents, both of whom migrated from the racially segregated south as youths to seek better opportunities in Chicago. Even with our meager economic circumstances, they instilled in me the feeling that I could attain success regardless of how others viewed me. In high school, my teachers and parents worked closely together to ensure that I had the best chance for success. These were the principle influences that fostered my desire to become an educator. Having taught for over thirty years, I witnessed a notable change in attitude over time. Some minority students exhibit a sense of hopelessness, a sense that no one cares if they succeed, that the agenda of the system is more to support the system itself rather than the students in their care, and that their education would not foster change in their future status in society.

As an instructor I believe we need to account for these feelings. We need to provide more consistency in helping these students take ownership of their successes as well as their failures. We can only do this by exposing and honoring their truths in a non-judgmental manner. We cannot hold our own truths as the only ones legitimate. Often, adults have a propensity to denote the concerns of students as insignificant. In my experience, African-American educators have held beliefs that strict discipline is essential to prepare their students to be successful beyond the classroom. Educators in general sometimes overlook that in order to address poor academic performance in minority students, it is crucial to understand that their perspectives are an essential component for remediating the issues.

According to Milner (2007), “a researcher’s responsibility is to listen to the voices and perspectives of those under study” (Milner, 2007, p. 396). I tried to accomplish this by engaging students as one who wishes to advocate for their concerns. As a student and teacher in the community, I identified many issues not apparent to outside observers such as students’ feelings that poor performance on standardized test would lock them into a life of limited opportunities, and schools place more importance on success in standardized testing than their academic progress. In addition, proponents of a deficit model tend to assume that both students and teachers in these communities are of low quality. These proponents of a deficit ideology fail to address community and social issues that negatively affect achievement. Henry (2001) emphasizes the importance of researchers being considerate of both the similarities and differences between themselves and the research participants as to not hinder the participants understandings of who they are (Henry, 2001). Foster (1997) points out that when the researcher is a member of the same community of the participants, an “insider-outsider dilemma” may call into question the researcher’s ability to conduct research due to other salient characteristics that

go beyond cultural similarities (Foster, 1997). In many ways, my background is not that different from the students interviewed in this study. Nevertheless, the student participants could have viewed me as one in a position of authority, and it fell upon me to impart our similarities that allowed them to be comfortable engaging in a dialogue. I believe I achieved this by sharing some of my experiences as a student, as a teacher, and engaging them in questions that could help them find ways to improve their school.

#### **Chapter Four Conclusion**

I have come to see this work as a journey, and through this journey, I strived to reveal the inequities in the education of minorities. I also want to empower those students who feel oppressed by current education policies. This is also a collective endeavor, one in which those who have been silenced are afforded an opportunity to rise. For Willis (2007) “emancipation is the ultimate goal of critical research” (Willis, 2007, p. 277). I experienced a certain freedom engaging in this type of advocacy work that became a reward in trying to effect change, and I hope that the participants experienced the same freedom. My interviews with the participants, hopefully, provides not only a window for others to investigate their struggles but inspires others to become courageous enough to join them in removing the barriers to their success. My goal in this study is to assist reformers in recognizing and putting in place policies that are fair, ethical, and moral. These policies will consider the student as a unique individual and will not use quantification methods to assess with has value in society or who is deserving. By examining students’ perspectives about selective enrollment practices, I desire to speak of more than the politicization of schooling. I want others to learn from the students’ experiences in this study and see their hearts.

## **Chapter Four Summary**

In Chapter four, I outlined my role as the researcher and my goal for the study. I discussed the methodology and research paradigm for this dissertation. I explained my positionality and role as the researcher along with the rationale for the participant sample and research paradigm. I described the research design as a qualitatively framed critical ethnography and the process and techniques associated with it. I discussed the university rules concerning protecting the participants and the process of recruitment. I was the primary investigator responsible for the creation of protocols that enabled a comprehensive understanding of all data and for gathering data from multiple sources. Additionally, I described the techniques for interpreting data and explained the coding process where various triangulation techniques were necessary for validity and reliability. The next section of this chapter is a description of the 19 participants and the two activist groups in which 13 of the participants belong.

### **Introduction to Participants**

The description of participants is necessary for the reader to understand the unique narratives of their individual school experiences. All the participants were cognizant of the battle for power that hinders their opportunities for educational equity. Most of the participants readily acknowledge the disparities in educational resources and appear able to address them. As they reflect on their school environments and their beliefs regarding school policies, we find that most students are struggling to negotiate their place in the world. Some have suffered severe hardships due to the institutionalized school environment that leaves no room for their individuality. The first nine participants are students who attend neighborhood high schools. The following ten participants attend selective enrollment high schools.

## Neighborhood Students

I first met **Danielle** at the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) offices which is one of the locations for the organization called Voices of Youth for Chicago Education (VOYCE). I was introduced to her by one of the gatekeepers of VOYCE. She is petite with long hair and was very nervous initially but became very animated later when talking about her participation in VOYCE and her school experiences. She entered the foster system at a very young age of five along with her younger brother and sister and none of them are in the same home. Her mother's alcoholism and drug use played a significant role in her placement in foster homes and she has a strained relationship with her father. Her experience in the foster system has left her with some feelings of insecurity and abandonment. Danielle especially feels abandoned by her mother's family who did not take her and her younger siblings. She profoundly believes in the value of education and wants to be a good role model for her younger brother and sister. She finds herself constantly fighting the stereotypical image that her biological family and present foster family have of her because of her mother's addictions, so she is willing to fight hard to prove that she can succeed. Danielle acknowledges that she has not gotten the education that she feels she deserves. She recognizes the disparity of resources between her school she now attends as a senior, and other schools publicized as the best in the city. Her grades are average to poor with her having to attend Saturday school. Her school environment was often boring where no one had any enthusiasm, and this has inspired her activism. Gang violence in the community has had a profound effect on her schooling experience. Frequently Danielle has been shifted to and from various classes to fulfill academic requirements, with the result being that she gets further behind academically. When I last spoke with her, her dreams for college were on hold due to poor test scores and lack of financial aid resources.



I met **Charles** through Danielle and interviewed him at the SWOP offices as well. He is a senior, a father of two boys, and is concerned about providing a decent living for his sons and his girlfriend. Charles is of daunting stature; 6' 2" and 275 pounds (his description of himself), with dread locks down his back. One could easily assume that he is on the school's football team. He smiles easily and was very relaxed in the interview. He has been a victim of severe disciplinary practices for minor offenses that initially caused his expulsion from school. He states that his school and his neighborhood has gotten a bad reputation. He does not like to admit that he lives in his south west side community because of the stories of violence. He "is ashamed of the *senseless* [emphasis added] things that go on in the neighborhood."

Like Danielle, Charles longs for indications of school spirit and enthusiasm from students and teachers alike. His introduction to the VOYCE organization came through a teacher in his school and He takes his role in social activism and advocacy seriously. He was instrumental in starting the boycotting of high-stakes testing at his school and has used his community activism to help halt the expansion of charter schools in his neighborhood. Charles and other VOYCE members have fought hard to introduce restorative justice measures in the Illinois State Legislature and to halt budget cuts. He is one of the few students I have interviewed that understands how schools are funded. He is acutely aware of the racial dynamics that accentuates educational reform policies in this city. Charles is proud of the work he is doing with VOYCE. He hopes to start his own community service organization and he credits VOYCE with helping him to develop his vision of starting a dance school. Additionally, Charles works on immigration reform with a variety of groups. At the time of this interview, Charles was trying to navigate through the admission process of community college.

**Quinton** is a student leader for VOYCE. I interviewed him in the SWOP office also and at the time of the interview, he was interning at SWOP. He and his sister were adopted at an early age by an elderly couple. He considers himself conscientious about his academics and is fun loving, willing to make his peers laugh. He likes to engage in typical teenage activities like going to movies, skating, and sports. He is small in physical stature and smiles a lot. His adoptive parents were strict, but not that supportive when it came to his day to day school experiences. They did not know how to help him and his sister with a lot of school issues such as choosing a high school. Quinton described them initially as not caring, but in a follow up interview, He was more accepting of the generational differences that exists between him and his adoptive parents. After I met with him to clarify some things said in the first interview, he acknowledged how his adoptive parents may have seen things differently because of the era in which they were born.

Quinton is proud of his work with VOYCE and enjoyed several leadership roles during his Junior year of high school. He also had a seat on the Local School Council (LSC) where he began to come to grips with the political nature of the school system, often having run-ins with the principal over local school policies concerning finances and high-stakes testing. He is highly critical of high-stakes testing, believing that it labels minority students unfairly. He is also critical of the police presence in his school. Quinton was a major author in the House Bill SB 100 for restorative justice. His goal after high school and college is to become either a physician assistant or a social worker. He intends to establish a non-profit organization after college and continue the work he is doing with VOYCE. Quinton received a five-thousand-dollar scholarship by SWOP to coincide with the four-thousand-dollar scholarship given to him by Harold Washington college, in which he will be attending fall 2017.

**LaShay** comes from a large family of nine sisters and brothers with her mom being a single parent most of LaShay's life. Her father died when she was eight and she is the eighth child. She is a senior and the first in her family to graduate from high school. She lives on the south-east side of the city and attends a high school on the far south side of the city. When I interviewed her, she was working at a social service agency associated with SWOP. She was referred to me by Danielle in becoming a participant for this study. LaShay came to VOYCE in her junior year and is still learning from more seasoned members about political activism. She prides herself as being someone who never got into "real trouble" when describing her current relationships with her teachers. Before she enrolled in her current situation, she attended an Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) high school in the near downtown area of the city, where she met capricious disciplinary actions for trivial infractions of rules. Upon transferring from the AUSL school, she began to enjoy her high school experiences. She likes studying forensic science, but her main objective is to "just graduate." Her biggest concern was high-stakes testing, knowing the magnitude of their importance for college acceptance.

LaShay equates not doing well on the ACT and SATs as the prophesy of not getting the chance for a better life. She does not want to be a "statistic," but she worries that her test scores will hinder her. This year her school took part in a walkout over high-stakes testing: this was her first encounter with political activism. She has experienced some academic difficulties and like many minority students struggling to make their way in the world, credentials mean more than the intrinsic value of learning – it is documentation that "you have put forth the effort and that you are deserving." She has often felt she was not good enough in her academic endeavors. However, she has observed at her school that "teachers will not fail you if they see you trying." She plans to attend community college in the fall and wants to pursue a career in social work.

**Laura** comes from a two-parent home in the same community that Danielle lives in but attends the same school as Albert and LeShay. She is the only girl with three brothers, one of which has had struggles with the law. She was also an award winner at the 2015 Chicago Public Schools' science fair and traveled downstate to present her project on facial illusions. She joined the VOYCE organization at the beginning of her sophomore year. In her interview, she was friendly and very talkative. Her membership on the debate and cheerleading teams, tech crew, and science club keep her very busy in school. Laura has a 3.8 grade point average and joined the National Honor Society this year. She describes her neighborhood as a close-knit group of people, mostly full of older people and not that many children.

Laura reports having a good relationship with most of her teachers, although most of them at her school did not know her before her success at the 2015 Chicago Public Schools science fair. Laura firmly expresses her opinions on the issues of school reform and how it affects black students. Nonetheless, she has also expressed a perspective that her school should be selective of students that do not live in the neighborhood. She also believes that race is the primary motivation behind the disparities in education resources here in Chicago. The shutting down of schools, in her mind, reflects the school board's belief that black students do not want to put forth effort. Laura thrives on competition, but she also believes that teachers are not pushing students to do better. She finds it disturbing that some teachers and students at her school did not know what was really going on in the school or system-wide. After graduation, she wants to attend college and study psychology and civil engineering.

**Kendra**, at the time of her interview, was a junior at a far south west side high school in a quiet middle-class neighborhood. Although it was not a selective enrollment high school, it did have an International Baccalaureate program, which she was part of. I met her through my niece

who is her next-door neighbor. She comes from a two-parent family with a younger brother and sister. Kendra considers her neighborhood as quiet with a lot of “good kids” to associate with. She is active in her high school’s volleyball and softball teams with a grade point average of 3.0. Her school is diverse, and she has formed a variety of friendships. Her school is open to everyone even though it is a neighborhood school. She is bright, curious, and seems to have direction in her life with lots of familial support. She was friendly and eager to talk at first about her school experiences.

She recalls being uncomfortable in her elementary school because of racial differences between her and other children who were white and Hispanic. Kendra believes that black students are unfairly stereotyped and should stand up against it. She also believes that her high school has unfairly garnered a negative reputation. When talking about issues surrounding schools, Kendra does not seem to be fully in touch with issues surrounding school closings and selective enrollment environments. This was somewhat of a challenge for me as the interviewer because she was sometimes contradictory in her answers. For some questions, she was not able to offer a critical evaluation on some of the broader issues concerning schools; issues like school closings, saying that on those things she had not given them too much thought. She does not belong to VOYCE or Chicago Student Union (CSU). Her goal is to be a role model for her younger brother and sister and to attend college to become a teacher.

I met **Eunice** through a social agency on the near southeast side of Chicago. She was referred by a minister who runs the agency. Eunice is a young woman who has had several run-ins with the law. At the time of the interview, she was a senior with a one-year old son. She is an only child and lives with her mom, grandmother, aunt, and two uncles in a family building on the southeast side of the city. Her neighborhood has been plagued with violence and community

disinvestment. Upon our initial meeting, she was not eager to talk to me about her school experiences at first but did so with a little persuading from the site director where she worked.

Eunice was in a neighborhood high school near the lake until the end of her junior year when placed on probation for an assault. Her probation officer transferred her to an alternative school to finish her senior year. The alternative school has been hard for her; mainly because of the attitudes that some teachers have about students like her. Since attending the alternative school, she has failed five classes and has been reminded constantly that she and others like her do not “fit in the traditional high school” because of her past behavioral issues. She admits to “hanging with the wrong crowd” – those students “who never went to class” as part of the beginning of her problems in high school. Her grade point average currently is slightly below 2.0. Eunice finds parenthood constraining at times and must rely on her elderly grandmother to babysit her son. She is, however, committed to giving him a better life than what she is currently experiencing. She is worried about her future, considering the difficulty she is experiencing getting enrolled in a community college. Eunice’s ACT scores were very low, and she cannot seem to pass the entrance exam now required of students for community colleges. She wants to study cosmetology and have a career as an executive chef. She does not belong to VOYCE or CSU.

**Albert** is from the same south side high school that LaShay and Laura attend. He is tall, very muscular, and wears long dreadlocks in his hair. He is an all-around athlete who plays football and baseball. Things come naturally to him where learning is concerned. He understands quantitative inquiry and has an interest in science and engineering. Albert was in the 2015 Chicago Public Schools science fair at the Museum of Science and Industry and received an award for his project on the four best ways to throw a baseball. His mom is a single parent and

they live on the far south east side of the city. His mom works as a pre-school teacher aid. He has three siblings; an older brother and a younger brother and sister. His father lives on the west side of the city but does not have much contact with Albert. At the time of this interview he ranked number eight in his junior class and has a 3.8 grade point average. While the community he lives in is known for its violence, he does not consider it to be as bad as the media has portrayed. This is a major point of consternation for him because he believes that his neighborhood and school receive bad press.

Even though he attends a neighborhood school, Albert has taken AP biology, honors English, and honors world history. He also takes courses at a community college on Saturdays. While Albert acknowledges the existence of racial and social class biases in the school system, he believes that students must want to learn; it is their responsibility to learn as much as they can. Although Albert has experienced cultural biases due to the dread locks in his hair, he does not seem affected by it. Albert is very sure of himself and seems at times disconnected from the political aspects of schooling. His goal is to study civil engineering, but laments that his high school offers no engineering classes. Laura introduced him to me at the 2015 Chicago Public Schools science fair. He does not belong to either VOYCE or CSU.

**James** was referred to me by a minister and political activist on the west side of Chicago. Of all the participants I had interviewed, James was the most difficult. He was a little resistant to interviewing and seemed bored with the process. He lives on the far west side of the city and attends an AUSL high school where he is a senior. He has had a few issues with the police, but nothing that would inhibit him finishing high school and go on to college. However, like many young black males, his male role models have had to negotiate within a judicial system that is biased and unfair. His father and uncles have been to jail and that is his primary motivation to do

well in school. James is a star athlete for the school, having participated in football for the past four years. He is not unlike many black youths who have dreams of sports stardom. His goal after college is to make it in the NFL. He is adamant that he will not end up like his father and uncles who never finished school.

Like Albert, and a few others in this study, James believes that it is the students responsibility to succeed in school. He loves everything about mathematics and believes that if you want to make it, you will do what is necessary. James has been on the honor roll all through high school with a 3.5 grade point average. James equates educational achievement and attainment in terms of deservingness. School for him is the answer to everything. He does have a few friends that he relies on, but he stays away from those who engage in “foolishness.” James describes his neighborhood as violent and states that elements in his community force some students to skip school; elements such as bullying and gang activity. He is cognizant of racial stereotypes used to describe black students and the communities in which they live. He has no connection with either CSU or VOYCE.

### **Selective Enrollment Students**

**Allison** lives in an upper-middle-class community near the lake on the south side of the city and attends a selective enrollment high school in the downtown area. At the time of this interview she was a junior maintaining a 3.8 grade point average but admits that math is a challenge. Allison is tall with long hair; somewhat of a model’s physique. Her parents are divorced, but she has a large extended family on both sides with everyone being supportive of her. She is accustomed to diversity and has a large multi-ethnic group of friends. She likes theater and was once a member of the Chicago Childrens’ choir and sings soprano. Allison is very sensitive and articulate about race, class, and gender issues. Incidents in Ferguson, MO. and



here in Chicago with Laquan Macdonald have heightened her awareness of the racial divide in this city and throughout the country. She recognizes that her school has a plethora of resources and that neighborhood schools are often without educational resources for students to succeed.

She believes too much pressure is associated with high-stakes tests and grades and that testing is a way to give privilege to a certain group of people. Yet she enjoys the privilege of attending her school and is fully aware of the prestige that comes with being a student in a selective enrollment high school. She is disturbed by stereotypes played up in the media that often characterizes African-Americans and their communities. She is frequently angered by the accusation of both blacks and whites that as an African-American, she is not authentically black. Allison has a few white friends who do not understand the constraints that she has experienced due to her race. She has observed that the clash between the two activism groups CSU and VOYCE is mainly because those involved with selective enrollment schools (teachers, students, and policy makers) look down on neighborhood schools. She has admitted to feeling that way at one point before she joined CSU. Her goal is to go into business for herself after college.

**Amberia** is best friends with Allison and is a student at the same selective enrollment high school in the downtown area. She lives in the same community as Allison with her mom, who is a small business owner. Like Allison, her parents are divorced, and she has a younger brother who is in a selective enrollment grammar school. Amberia has attended selective enrollment schools all her life. She plays tennis and is in the theater club with Allison. She likes the community atmosphere of her school and believes that neighborhood schools should receive more resources. Amberia enjoys interacting with her school peers who share the same drive and passion about politics. Her parents push her to do well in school and are supportive of her involvement in CSU. She and her peers often discuss what is happening in neighborhood schools

and the privilege that she and others have in attending an elite selective school like hers. While Amberia sympathizes with the plight of many students who attend neighborhood high schools, she has no friendships with students in these schools. Most of her friends are students who attend other selective enrollment or private schools.

Nevertheless, Amberia is unwavering in her criticism of the political system here in Chicago and how it has affected education. In her opinion and others like her in CSU, the mayor of Chicago and the governor of Illinois are too eager to sacrifice the education of students. Like Allison, she has confronted racism from both whites and blacks who feel she is not authentically black enough, or that she somehow slipped through the cracks to gain admittance to her school. In Amberia's perspective, CSU as a political activist group has confronted those who infiltrate the organization for the wrong reasons, which makes it difficult for them to be taken seriously at times. Amberia does not like that the black population at her school has decreased while there has been an increase in the White and Hispanic population. She and her peers at CSU and along with VOYCE have called for an elected school board. She maintains a 4.0 grade point average and seeks a degree in marketing after graduation.

**Nathan** is a student at a near north selective enrollment high school. Nathan was an extremely bright and well-mannered young man. For our interview, we met at the Culture Center in downtown Chicago where he was leaving a dance practice for a school project. He does track and cross country as well as dance. He resides with his mother and older sister on the far south side of the city. His father died when he was ten years old. Nathan describes his community as riddled with violence and his neighborhood high school is the one in which Derrion Albert was murdered. Nathan has no relationship with other students in his community due to his being physically assaulted and robbed when he was in grammar school. He has always considered

himself a good student and admits he is very hard on himself academically. He has a 4.0 grade point average but admits to struggling some in math. Nathan describes his school environment as one in which he feels comfortable with his peers and his teachers. He considers himself lucky that he attends such a prestigious high school.

He prides himself on being an aware citizen of the world, citing incidents such as the racial slurring that occurred at MIZZOU and what recently happened in Paris in response to cartoons mocking Muslims in the Charlie Hebdo magazine. He joined the CSU upon hearing about budget issues at his school. His initial perspective was protecting his own school, but later recognized that other students throughout the city would be impacted as well. Especially those not having the privilege of attending a well-resourced school such as the one he is attending now. Nathan has expressed that in becoming more racially aware since joining CSU, that Chicago Public School policies are biased in favor of white students and that black students are still subjected to culturally biased identities. His mom is very supportive of his efforts in political activism which makes him proud. He wants to pursue a Master's in Business administration before entering the hospitality industry and set up a foundation to feed and shelter the homeless after college.

**Ariana** is a sophomore at a near west side selective enrollment school. I met her and her sister Tina through a neighbor. She is shy but personable. She has won awards at the Chicago Public Schools 2015 science fair. Her mother works for the Chicago Police department and her father is a lieutenant for the Chicago Fire department. She has four siblings, one of which is an older brother who graduated from college in 2015. She has an older sister who is a senior at the same school and a younger brother and sister still in elementary school. Arianna plays soccer and volleyball with her older sister on the varsity teams. She is in ROTC at her school and has taken

several trips to Washington, D.C. where she met and talked with congressional representative Luis Gutierrez at length. She has AP chemistry, AP world history, and AP human geography class. She has maintained a 3.5 grade point average.

At the time of her interview Arianna was a little uncomfortable that she was the only African-American female in her AP human geography class. Frequently, she perceives her school as being culturally insensitive, believing that school favors the White and Hispanic population of students over black students. She joined CSU because of her sister Tina but her participation in CSU is limited because she has recently had the same surgery for scoliosis that her sister Tina had four years ago. However, she is concerned that many good teachers are forced out of the classroom because of budget cuts. She is also exasperated by the stereotypes that plague black students. She believes that they do not offer as many opportunities for black students as they would a public school with mostly White students. She wants to go to college and study pediatrics.

**Tina** is the sister to Ariana and is older by one year. She is a senior and attends the same school. Tina has won many awards for her writing and has participated in many poetry jams. She and her sister live in a middle-class neighborhood that is diverse with Lithuanian, Hispanic, Polish, and black. She is very athletic, playing on the girls' basketball, volleyball, and soccer teams despite having had back surgery to correct scoliosis. Tina has spent three summers in Minnesota participating in a language immersion program. Her attending a selective enrollment school has given her many opportunities that she may not have gotten attending a neighborhood school. Her teachers have had a huge influence in her life alongside of family members. Tina loves history and learning about other cultures. She and her sister Arianna, have both been to Washington D.C. She has interacted with Senator Dick Durbin, Congresswoman Tammy

Duckworth, and Congressman Danny Davis. Her freshman year was a little rocky where her grades were concerned, but her senior year has been very promising with acceptances to thirteen colleges (DePaul being one of them).

She joined CSU because of a Hispanic friend who was involved in helping to save Dyett High school on the south side of the city. She is on her school's student council but is often irritated because she says, "nobody listens." Tina is more concerned about the pressure students feel having to be in an environment that is fiercely competitive. She has seen a few of her friends break down emotionally from the pressure of the competition or what she calls ranking. Tina is often frustrated by some of her black peers telling her that she does not talk "black" – that she acts white. Tina is editor and chief of her school's journalism program and uses it as a platform to bring up issues in her school and throughout the school system. She is cognizant that she must be careful what she says and how she says it for the fear of censorship. Upon graduation, she will attend Monmouth college where she has a scholarship. Her career goals are to study political science and journalism.

**Norma** attends a selective enrollment high school on the far northside of the city. The building infrastructure is on a large campus with state-of-the-art facilities inside. Her school ranks as number 15 in the entire country and number two in the state. Norma is a child of Nigerian immigrants and lives in a multi-ethnic community called Little India. Her parents left Nigeria because they wanted a better education for her. She attended catholic elementary school before entering high school. She is an athlete playing volleyball and tennis. She is also on the school debate team. Norma's describes her school environments as one in which everyone is friendly and helpful. Norma was new to the CSU organization at the time of the interview. She is concerned primarily over budget cuts which negatively affect all kinds of instructional resources,

especially the hiring and firing of teachers. Additionally, she adds that the teachers in her school are encouraging students toward political activism. Yet, she does not see race as a motivating factor in the disparities that have evolved through school budget cuts. Her career goals are to complete medical school and become a pediatrician.

**Audrey** lives with her father and grandparents in a middle-class community on the far south-west side of the city where the houses are large with sprawling trimmed lawns. Her parents are divorced and her mother lives in Arizona. She has two older siblings; one sister and a brother who live with her mother. The east border of her neighborhood is known for its violence. It is this neighborhood where Laura, LaShay, and Albert attend high school, but she attends a selective enrollment school on the far south east side of the city. Even though her school is a selective enrollment high school, it has garnered a bad reputation because of the neighborhood location. Her academic interest lies in band, tennis, and writing. Audrey likes the competitive atmosphere at her school and has a pragmatic approach concerning it. She believes it is necessary to set herself apart from other students and she works hard to maintain a 4.0 grade point average. Unlike some of the other students interviewed who expressed openly that racism has played a significant part in the inequities in our current educational system, Audrey does not believe that race is an obvious element to the disparities that black students are experiencing. She does not perceive neighborhood school lacking resources because they have black students but because of the area where they exist. She sees no difference in her selective school and other neighborhood schools, other than you must test to attend her school. Her viewpoint is much like Albert's; that students must want to succeed. She does not belong to VOYCE or CSU. I met her and her grandmother through a church member, who happens to teach at the school Audrey attends. She has ambitions of becoming a psychologist and wants to attend Stanford University.

**Katie** is a student at a newly built selective enrollment high school on the south-east side of the city. She lives near the school and comes from a single parent home. Katie is the youngest of three children. She is a straight 'A' student who also writes for *True Star Magazine*, enjoys modeling and acting, belongs to her school's student council, and enjoys rank as a platoon leader in JROTC. Katie considers herself a survivor because she has had some unfortunate incidents in her community (being robbed by gun point), and she has witnessed acts of violence against two of her closest friends, which has made her somewhat distrustful of people her own age. She also has been scarred emotionally by her parents' divorce and does not have a relaxed relationship with her father. I met her at a youth convention sponsored by the Peace Hub organization, where she is also on the advisory council as well as being part of CSU. Katie has been a member of the Peace Hub organization since 2012 and has just recently joined CSU. Katie's activism with CSU started with the "opting out" movement against so much standardized testing. Her mother has encouraged her activities with Peace Hub and CSU. She and her peers in the Peace Hub are seeking ways to prevent violence and are calling attention to the lack of programs that employ young adults in various low-income communities. She also believes that school closings have exacerbated the violence for students because they must go into unfamiliar neighborhoods. She hopes that being part of CSU and the Peace Hub organization will bring about positive changes for black students. At the time of this interview she was finishing her freshman year.

**Kerry** is a junior at a near west side selective enrollment high school. He is the only male child and comes from a single parent home. He lives in a middle-class neighborhood on the south side of the city. His mom teaches nursing at one of the city colleges. He depicts his school as being very diverse. He appreciates that he can talk to people of different races, ethnicities, and different social classes. Along with being a member of CSU, he is also a member of *Jack & Jill*,

known as the prestigious club for the elite African-Americans where he serves as secretary to his chapter. This organization was founded with the purpose of assisting blacks in assimilating to dominant culture norms. This group does different educational and community service activities to help black youth become more well-rounded people. Historically, it was meant for those African-Americans thought to be the best and the brightest of the race. Kerry is well read in African-American history and his commitment to political activism was inspired by his mother and grandparents, who were active in the civil rights movement of the sixties. Kerry believes that grades and test scores are used too much to evaluate intellect. He was also privy to some of his school's admittance practices, which he described as racially discriminatory and based totally on zip codes. He would not divulge how he came upon this knowledge, but this knowledge somehow influenced his becoming a member of CSU. His goal after high school is to study acting and film making in college.

**Regina** comes from a two-parent home. She is sixteen and the oldest of two children with a brother as a younger sibling. Her father works for the city and her mother works as an admissions counselor for a private university. She and her brother have attended catholic elementary school for most of her life and she is now attending a selective enrollment high school on the north side of the city. She has studied dance and likes art. Regina is in a program at her high school where she takes college courses in the afternoon. It is important to her father for her and her brother to finish college since he did not. Her school environment is extremely competitive and rigorous. Her days are long, and she often does not get home before six in the evening. Regina's parents are very strict and want her to have "a good work ethic." This perspective is dominant in the entire interview; especially where grades and testing are concerned. She believes that the environment plays a role in whether a person will make the



effort to succeed. She has unconsciously justified a perspective of deservingness. Regina does understand the complications of racial stereotypes but does not always relate it to the politicization of the school system here in Chicago. When she graduates, she will not only have a high school diploma but an Associate degree in web graphics design. She wants to continue her study in web design at a four-year institution. She is not part of any social activist group.

### **Description Of The Two Advocacy Groups**

**Voices Of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE)** is a coalition of students of color from across various communities in Chicago and the state of Illinois who focus on racial injustice and educational inequity. The group was founded in 2007 and has spearheaded efforts to decrease dropout rates, the elimination of harsh discipline practices, limit high-stakes testing, and creating healthy learning environments that are supported with mental and behavioral health initiatives. VOYCE has been recognized in 2008 by The Nation magazine as one of the top ten activism groups. It has partnered with other activist groups such as Mothers Opposed to Violence Everywhere (MOVE), Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), and Communities United.

**The Chicago Student Union (CSU)** was founded in 2013 and is the first union of students in Chicago Public Schools history. It formed in response to Chicago Board of Education closing forty-nine elementary, middle, and high schools and was once part of Chicago Students Organizing to Save Our Schools (CSOSOS). Its primary mission is to provide opportunities to represent and unite the voices of students. While members of VOYCE have partner organizations that help facilitate their efforts toward social justice and education inequality, CSU is student led by its members from all over the city of Chicago. They have not partnered with other organizations, preferring to maintain its independence from adult influence.

### **Summary Of Key Findings**

Students (in both groups) are stigmatized by testing policies and believe they garner too much emphasis. Some equated high performance with better life outcomes. Students attending neighborhood schools address their low performance on high-stakes tests as poor alignment of the curriculum. What they were learning in class had no relevance to test items. Selective enrollment students often experienced severe anxiety over expectations of parents, teachers and school administrators. All students demonstrated concern over inequity in financial and curriculum resources. Nearly all students acknowledged that neighborhood schools in minority communities are often viewed as failures. Most of the neighborhood students believed that resource distribution was contingent upon test scores and grades. Selective enrollment students felt constant pressure to perform well on test and to get high grades. Racial stereotypes affected both groups of students with neighborhood students internalizing negative feelings or adopting a respectability stance with their peers. Some selective enrollment students confronted micro-racial aggressive behaviors from whites or were deemed not black enough from their family and peers. Neighborhood students had the tendency to attribute their academic achievement to being persistent and willing to work hard. Some selective enrollment students believed that neighborhood students were not willing to work hard. All espoused a meritocratic work ethic. Neighborhood students want schools to better relate to their real-life situations that better prepare them for post-secondary schooling and employment. Students are looking for schools to be an environment that is caring, nurturing, and that implement learning strategies that address a variety of individual needs. Neighborhood students spoke of receiving disparaging comments from teachers or being ignored altogether whereas selective enrollment students were highly complementary of their instructors, saying they were consistently supportive and encouraging.

## **Chapter Five: Testing, Grades, Power, and Racial Inequality**

The purpose of this study was to uncover how African-American high school students in selective enrollment and neighborhood schools perceived each other in their respective educational settings, what were their ideas about success and the quality of life after high school, and how the two groups' perspectives differ. I hypothesized that students in selective enrollment schools would hold a negative opinion of students attending neighborhood schools and view them as intellectually incapable. I also hypothesized that neighborhood students would hold a negative opinion of selective enrollment students, viewing them as arrogant and conceited. I expected this because, from my own experiences of teaching in both types of educative settings, I observed students in advanced placement classes, along with a few teachers, marginalize students in regular or remedial tracks. I have also observed marginalized students become resentful and hostile toward teachers and their more academically equipped peers.

What emerged from the interviews was unexpected; that there was a resurgence of activism in Chicago which heightened the role of the student voice that both groups shared. The students in both neighborhood and selective enrollment schools were concerned with raising awareness regarding current education policies. Political activism, consequently, became a powerful theme on its own for this work in which its role was the reshaping of identities of students within and outside the school environment. The other emergent themes centered on the political policies that impact education reform and academic achievement. These themes concern the following issues:

- the role of testing in determining students' futures;
- fiscal responsibility of the city and state in the distribution of resources;
- the importance of education and how class status influences their aspirations and

- perceptions of success; and
- self-perception of academic success or failure with race: internalization of self-doubt through stereotypes.

I did not specifically seek out student activists; however, dealing with individual gatekeepers I have known through the years, who were involved in social services, and the type of methodology I was using, made them more of an accessible population than I anticipated. Most of the students were eager to express their dissatisfaction with school as an institution. Issues of testing, race, school funding, and lack of equity in curriculum resources, all play a prominent role in the discussions on how black students see themselves and counterparts in different educative settings. While responses to questions concerning their interactions with family members and peers in their school settings was varied, it was not until the issues of high-stakes testing, school environment, and budget woes were discussed that some students became more vocal about the political nature of education in this city. Those with a political activist agenda were adamant about how they want the local and state elected officials to address the inequities within city schools. Nonetheless, they were also straightforward about how they believe others perceive them regarding their school type.

### **How Testing Relates to Power**

It is important to understand how the dynamics of power disguises education opportunity. The I-thou relationship and the process of othering is a strategy executed in education reform policies to maintain dominance and is prevalent in high-stakes and standardized testing. Gramsci (1971, cited in Brantlinger, 2004) affirms that through such reform efforts, the many forms of dominance reveal the creation of social hierarchies that reinforce and justify subordination (Brantlinger, 2004). The readers of this study may ask why testing became one of the major

themes and why I addressed it first. Testing was addressed first because, as stated in chapter one, it is the gatekeeper for deciding the worthiness of those seeking various educative opportunities (Delpit,1995/2005). Testing is the vehicle that provides opportunities to attend elite selective enrollment schools, future college admittance, and employment. It denies opportunities by facilitating the dismantling of neighborhood schools because of their inability to meet benchmarks for academic yearly progress in the name of NCLB. Second, Brantlinger (2004) has confirmed how education policies, which are meant to enhance and provide equity in educational opportunities, categorize testers as either winners or losers. Through the social technique of othering, the accountability for not meeting standards created by those in power falls on the shoulders of black students. Labels such as failure, at risk, and disabled are frequently used to describe the students who are unable to meet dominant standard norms (Brantlinger, 2004, p.79). Additionally, Kailin (2000, also cited in Brantlinger, 2004) argued that the use of high-stakes tests (having demonstrated bias in their construction) and other accountability efforts have resulted in the construction of new ways to define failure that hold back some populations (Kailin, 2000).

Still, the question remains why testing is so problematic for black students particularly. One probable answer cited by Brantlinger (2004) is that others gain in numerous ways for black students' failures. Due to the various inequities in their communities regarding education resources, testing becomes a tool that disenfranchises or disqualifies black students from attaining an equal foothold to opportunities for upward mobility. By affording middle-class children the opportunities to do well on various high-stakes tests, they are able to emphasize their alleged intellectual superiority and capitalize on the inferiority of minorities, denoting this capitalization as merit (Brantlinger, 2004). Another answer provided by scholars Knoester and Au (2017), referencing Gillborn (2005), describes the issue of testing as not just a tool for

intellectual and ability measurement, but as a primary pivot for segregation and racializing policies concerning children and schools. Conversely, the vast scholarship on the misuse and flaws of standardized and high-stakes tests does not connect it to how the concept of white supremacy fuels the misuse of high-stakes and standardized testing (Knoester & Au, 2017). Au (2015) explicitly frames high-stakes testing as essentially disguising “the structural nature of racial inequality within the ideology of individual meritocracy” (p. 40). Through this disguise, neoliberals hide behind a false post-racial ideology by reconstructing racial identities in such a way as to not acknowledge the social atrocities that are suffered from racial disparities (Au, 2015).

The aforementioned reasons alone are greatly responsible for the perceptions of black students as failures and losers. Lipman (2011) has pointed out that these students and their parents are frequently the scapegoat for policies that influence economic disinvestment in neighborhoods, closing of schools, loss of human capital, and neighborhood gentrification (Lipman, 2011, p. 98). In many conversations with participants, nearly all object to the amount of pressure that comes with high-stakes and standardized testing. While some participants saw it as a necessary exercise for college admittance, the majority saw a statistical significance attached to their school existence and identity, believing that who they are as people, has no value. If doing well on high-stakes tests is the only thing that brings value to students, then we should understand that some, if not most, African-American students may view school and testing with suspicion.

### **The Education Dogfight: Neighborhood Students’ View of Testing**

**A setup for failure.** In the conversations with the study participants, the idea of “becoming a number” is a shared theme among students in both groups, but more so among the

neighborhood students who have not performed well on the ACT and SAT. However, there are subtle differences in the two groups perspectives on testing. High-stakes testing for the students attending neighborhood schools brought added anxiety because low performance resulted in harsh consequences for them individually and for their school. Through standardization and high-stakes tests, we judge individuals and continue the various means of controlling ideologies that exclude other valid ideas and perspectives. As stated earlier in this paper, our education system has employed testing as a gatekeeper for the powerful in the education realm. It is legitimized as an efficient means of promoting obedience and excludes those who threaten the mission of those in power to maintain control. The education system consistently depicts a merit system which rewards hard work and effort. This, of course, may be true in some instances, but it is becoming more evident that our education system is protecting and promoting the elite few.

The Walpole et al. (2005) study examined the beliefs of African-American and Latino high school juniors and seniors on the fairness of standardized and high-stakes testing. While these students acknowledge the importance of these tests, they felt they had not been afforded the proper and timely information and preparation to do well. Students reported that preparation for testing was inadequate and most were left to find resources that the school did not provide. None of the students interviewed could afford private tutoring services such as Princeton Review or Kaplan. Some faced technological challenges because of no access to computers in their homes. Students admitted to being afraid of the tests and that they were unfair to students of color because college admission policies are biased (Walpole et al., 2005). There is a stigma that some students experienced when attending schools where standardized test scores are low, and the overall academic performance rating is below average. Academic probation or remediation is usually a contingency because of low ratings.

The students from neighborhood schools view testing with distrust and associate it with determining their destiny. In contrast, the selective enrollment students feel the burden from the expectations of others to do well. The struggle for power and control over education becomes as salient as the issue of race, where their color has made many assume they are inherently inferior. Testing has become a stressful undertaking for African-American students in school, and most believe there are academic benefits of doing well and negative consequences of performing poorly. Neighborhood students like Danielle for example, associate “good” test scores with getting more out of life and having a better future:

Only thing that I worried about with my ACT scores was getting into college.

With testing, like ... the outside world doesn't really ... they don't go off on how they know you personally ... they go by what paper show and what numbers show, and what GPA shows and what ACTs are, so I think that ranking high on that will get you very far.

She goes further by stating the following: “I don't think a test should prove how smart you are.”

For some students like LaShay and Danielle, there is an interjection of fear of not doing well. It reflects on the student primarily, but also on teachers' performance evaluations. LaShay's feelings were deeply rooted in her belief concerning her life chances for success:

The pressure was on when, you know ... when I felt like we may not get into college, we got a low score like this (*she scored a 14*), we might not get a chance in life to do better.

Nonetheless, some students believed that testing is a set-up for failure, especially for minority students. Charles and Danielle believe that their classroom instruction did not prepare them for taking the ACT or the SAT. To Charles, high-stakes tests have become predictors of the future:



I believe it's a set up for failure because some of the things that are on the tests are not being taught at all, so when you get this test, it's nothing that you've ever seen before. I don't like it because I feel like they using it statistic wise to determine, you know, what these students are gonna be or what they're gonna end up doing just up to your test scores, so you goin' off this piece a paper that determines what I'm going to be and if I'll end up in jail or not in the next couple of years.

Laura also believes that testing is a set up for failure. She expresses her thoughts on the issue concerning instruction and neighborhood students not getting what they need:

I go to a neighborhood school, our neighborhood elementary schools - they're not learning at the level they should be either, and they're testing them on stuff they should know and somebody from a majority school, maybe they would know more because they're getting what they need ... for their grade level and we don't learn in most schools that have a majority of black students.

Therefore, the question becomes is this a purposeful design to make sure those students in elite schools do not have much competition from non-elite public school students? In answering the above question, the works of Anyon (1980, 2006) and Darling-Hammond (2010) speak to the deliberate lack of access to knowledge that low-income minority students experience in the schools today, and that students' class status influences the implementation of the curriculum.

Anyon's (1980, 2006) work accentuates the differentiated curriculum for upper middle-class, middle-class, and low-income schools. The curriculum designed for upper middle-class was "high status," meaning their preparation for later life was imaginative and self-governing, and that would ensure high paying, high status employment. In stark contrast, schools in working-class communities employed curriculums that emphasized rote learning. In this

environment, classes which foster development of reasoning skills were non-existent, thus preparing for an adult life of labor (Anyon, 1980, 2006). Darling-Hammond (2010) further emphasized this point by stating many low-income minority students are placed in curriculum tracks geared to rote or remedial instruction. Darling-Hammond also reminds us that the access to knowledge is two-dimensional; the first being the disparity between what students with social class advantage possess and what disadvantaged students do not. The second is what advantaged students are getting as opposed to what every student needs to know to function in this new global society (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 54).

Quinton adds that a school's rank is important and doing poorly means fewer resources for the school. Students are reminded frequently that these tests mean more financial investment in the school. Ultimately, test strategies are what is important, not content. After listening to Quinton, I speculated on what kinds of preparation teachers have for administering these tests. Are the teachers in the elite schools better prepared to assist their students in scoring higher? Do they all understand that it is not content, but strategies or analytical skills that matter? What about pre-service teachers – is there any preparation given to them regarding strategies for test taking before leaving their post-secondary training? One could assume that because they have not been out of school long enough, that they would not have forgotten what taking high-stakes and standardized tests demand. Regardless of the previous queries, test prep is becoming an issue in both selective and neighborhood schools alike because of consistently shrinking school budgets. Where test prep in some schools was free or a small fee, with the school picking up most of the tab, it has now become costly, and only a few with the economic resources can afford the expense. Eunice complains of not having adequate preparation, but additionally, untimely notification of when the ACT would be administered. She explains the school administered a

practice test for every class in one day and distributed a study guide the day before:

No; we didn't even find out about the ACT until the day before it started – they never told us, and then they gave us a guide like ... literally the day before and told us to go study it and then come back the next day.

Eunice tells of her mother's reaction about the lack of notification concerning the test, and the school's callous response to her mother's concern:

They told my mother 'Well, we're sorry about what happened, but there's nothing we can do because she's not coming back to the school' ... I was graduating, so they couldn't say 'well maybe next time we won't do that.'

Schools such as this one get away with this behavior because many black and poor parents do not fully comprehend the mechanisms of testing, and the impact of the curriculum on college placement. Many do not inquire about dates for system-wide events, and in this situation, only a few can, or will advocate for their child.

Quinton's take on standardized tests is that it is not beneficial to students because their use is not for diagnostic purposes:

When we do a test, and then a large group of people don't understand, you don't get help on it. The teachers just move over the curriculum and stuff ... they were supposed to go back and review the test and see where everybody messed up at and teach that. I don't think it should measure smartness. I think it should measure what you know, and what you don't know, what you need help on.

Quinton goes further in explaining how taking the ACT was first denied to thirty students in his school, who did not have the proper amount of credits. The principal prohibited these students from taking the ACT because they were short on credits to become Juniors. Her story was that

ACT officials informed her that only juniors could take the test. He and other students, through the assistance of VOYCE, won back their right to take the test: “After all that prepin' and stuff ... I just wanted to take the test ... we fought, and we got all of us back on the list to take the test.” This is one instance of activism within the school, where the struggle to maintain control, and the exercise of power and silencing students met head-on. The information may not have been clearly disseminated that students must have a certain amount of credits for each year in school; they are often interpreted vaguely to give school administrators room to manipulate various situations and outcomes. It is true that students must have a certain amount of credits for each year in school. In this case, students probably associated the number of years in school with class status. On the other hand, this may have been a situation where the administration did not want poor test takers to make the school look worse academically than it already did.

There are misconceptions about the intellectual ability of students who score poorly on ACT and SATs. Quinton, LaShay, Danielle, and Charles stated that people (teachers and other students) would “think of you as dumb” if you did not score well. The anxiety and fear that one will not get a good score encourages self-doubt regarding one’s academic ability. Danielle explains this point about the practice test and the score she attained:

I don’t know if it was just me, but they pretend, like if you do the practice ACT and you get a decent score on the practice ACT that your real score will come out two points higher. I scored low on both. I was like ... is it me? So, sometimes once a person did bad on a test, it just down spirals from there.

Danielle is aware of the stereotypes associated with the intellectual abilities of black students. The fact that she is internalizing and questioning her ability to score well on practice tests is an example of the self-doubt that results from Stereotype Threat which Steele’s (1997) study

addressed. Steele also addressed Howard and Hammond's (1985) research which emphasized that within the school context, assumptions of poor academic ability of black students pervade the school setting, resulting in students experiencing intimidation and the lack of self-efficacy (Steele, 1997). When asked if they thought that testing is used against minority students, all four agreed. Danielle stated, "It's like a mind game, like, they know, like this is a way to get into students' mind because everybody is not good with tests." However, some students seem to not see testing quite as negatively as Charles, Danielle, LaShay, Eunice, and Quinton. While Laura has stated that testing is a set up for failure, she has a slightly different view of the purpose of testing. She believes that high-stakes tests at some point measure how much you have grown academically, but she acknowledges that there is sorting within the school by teachers themselves:

Some teachers only know the students who have high test scores; it's certain teachers you only see them with students that they know are smarter, and you'll never really see them with students that may need help – teachers just pay more attention to the smart ones.

Students like Kendra believe that testing is important but insist that "It also doesn't really measure the student's abilities ... cause I'm not a good test taker." Kendra does believe that her teachers do not see her and her school peers as test statistics and they will adjust their instruction to push students' scores. Her school gives practice classes after school and on Saturdays. Plus, she has at her disposal, family members that are willing to assist her with out-of-school tutoring.

Albert's perspective is more focused on taking responsibility individually. He takes classes at a community college near his home. He does not believe that testing works against minority students in general and that the curriculum at his school is not hard enough. Albert's

take is based on learning test-taking strategies that will work, not necessarily curriculum content:

We have to take it upon ourselves to learn the test-taking skills. I don't think the test really, like measures how much you actually know cause anybody can take a test with basic test-taking skills.

Albert's opinion is rooted in the ideology of meritocracy where success is the reward for effort. The benefits of the various tests students are taking are to find out "what they do not know," yet he is not necessarily in favor of using them. He finds the test prep at his school useless at times.

James is the last person from a neighborhood school I interviewed. His thoughts on testing were that it has negative consequences on the teachers and school as well as labeling students' incompetent:

I mean it can push back to the school and say you're not teaching this kid what to do or nothin or you're not preparing this kid for tests for nothin. It could label the kids not smart enough to compete with the other kids.

He shares the viewpoint of Charles by also expressing that tests are a set-up for failure:

"Because they'll just pass on something and don't know what they're doing, and they're just setting themselves up for failure." I asked James what he meant by the phrase *pass on something* and what he was referring to is that sometimes students will not answer questions on a particular section of the test because they are not familiar with the material. The neighborhood student narratives indicate that test preparation is an important component to their doing well on high-stakes test for college admittance. Extensive test prep can be of some benefit to students, but what is really important is the alignment of curriculum with adequate learning opportunities for students. How do long hours in front of a computer every Saturday benefit those students who have not been given adequate opportunities in the early stages of schooling?

Neighborhood students' assessment of their preparation for testing shows they are aware of the deficits in the curriculum they have experienced, and because of these deficits, they struggle with fear and anxiety concerning their performance. They are as Lipman (2004) observes, alienated from the school environment through monotonous drill and rote practice in the name of test preparation. This only serves to assault their self-esteem, place blame on their inability to perform well, and justify the dominant ideology of a racial discourse that continues to label black and brown students as innately deficient (Lipman, 2004).

Overall, test preparation in African-American neighborhood schools, especially those in low-income communities, is sparse if not non-existent. Here is where curriculum alignment is important because too often students have been tested on material where there has been limited instruction (Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Popham, 2006). Many students believed their class instruction had no relevance to what was on the ACT and SAT, which brings me to my earlier question of how much teachers, in general, are provided with in-service training to address test taking strategies to help their students do well. Here again, lies the difference between selective and neighborhood schools. ACT and SAT test prep are mandatory in the selective schools while neighborhood schools may or may not have test tutoring, and test preparation may be limited to only one week or one day or only on Saturdays. Preparatory classes, such as the ones facilitated by Kaplan, are expensive and only those who have financial resources can afford them.

Currently, high-stakes testing presents significant consequences for students because one measure alone (the high-stakes and standardized test score) could decide high school graduation, promotion to the next grade, or final grades for the class or school year. Peterson (2005) stresses that the choice in using high-stakes testing to make decisions regarding the future opportunities for students is unfair and biased because "all schools and classrooms are not equal" (p.3).

The fate of children should not rest solely on a test score, especially due to inequitable resources and opportunities (Peterson, 2005). Lipman (2004) deliberates how the impact of testing is often distressing for African-American students and those who teach them, primarily when used to make life-altering decisions about their promotion to the next grade level or decisions to go to college. Policy makers use of test scores to publicly assign blame and to punish, further alienates African-American students from schooling they believe to be irrelevant and underscores the disparity in resources. Making the test scores of schools publicly assessable is not necessarily promoting accountability. This system of ranking, in all practicality, exhibits their contempt for those who are unable to meet the requirements of standardization. It demeans teachers, students, and whole communities with the hidden message of inferiority (Lipman, 2004) and rewards those who meet and exceed expectations, depicting them superior and essential to a meritocratic society.

It is also, in the assessment of Gillborn (2005), one measure of many that legitimizes and perpetuates white dominance and the assumption of non-white inferiority (Gillborn, 2005, p.496). These policies are rooted in profound racial fallacies regarding the intellectual skills of African-Americans. Bonilla-Silva (2014) outlines how, through abstract liberalism, the dominant culture justifies their idea of merit and fairness with misconceptions of minorities, centering around the cultural flaws that are presumed inherent. These misconceptions allow the continuation of unequal treatment which results in inadequate instruction and preparation, minimal resources, and biased discipline policies (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). It is not hard to notice that schools having the most difficulty meeting the requirements of standardization are black and Hispanic. I again reference Lipman (2004) by citing her argument that the misconception is that blacks and Hispanics lack competency in making decisions in their own best interest. This misconception feeds into the



need for regulation championed as accountability by the dominant culture (Lipman, 2004). Education reformers and politicians have created the education dogfight of a lifetime, and the setup for failure is enormous.

### **Selective Enrollment Students View of Testing**

**The breaking point of testing.** While most of the neighborhood high school students I interviewed were adamant about the negativity that testing brings into their lives, the students from selective enrollment high schools border between being compliant to being confident in their ability to do well. Most selective enrollment students agree that testing is not fair to many for various reasons, such as test anxiety or sorting of students into social class hierarchies. However, these students are under incredible pressure to meet the expectations that they will continue to do well, after all, they tested well to get into the selective high school environment. Their lives are filled with honors and advanced placement classes as well as extra-curricular activities in the school. The culture of fear is present for them like it is for those in neighborhood schools. Most are adept at coping with the fear and the pressure, but some selective students tell a story different from what one might expect. Tina addresses this issue with this statement: “Well, it's really important for me to do well because I know like when you take a test, it's almost like it determines your destiny.” Tina describes the pressure that one of her schoolmates experienced in coping with the testing frenzy for college:

I feel like a lot of teachers over-exaggerate a lot and scare students to the point where they get into a breaking point because there were a couple of students at our school that were carrying a lot of pressure and they were hospitalized because of it. So yeah ... and there was this boy – he is a junior this year and he was in the hospital for depression because he was putting a lot of pressure on himself and

you know, I can feel how he was, to that extent ... but I know that every student in that school can like feel the pressure from all the other teachers.

Students are aware that teacher's jobs are often on the line with evaluation methods such as Value-Added Measures. Tina also recounts how another friend of hers, ranked at number one in the school for the first three years suddenly dropped to number four in her senior year:

One of my friends, she has been number one since freshman year, and she dropped to number four. When it's like number one and then number four ... it's like a rivalry. When she dropped to number four last year, she was ... you know, depressed ... people ... even the teachers were asking what happened.

The burden of meeting the expectations of success was too much. Tina sees testing as a means of creating rank and competition:

It's like the teachers and the students are egging on number one and number two to go like after each other to fight for a position that's not going to matter when you get into college. So, you know, it's like a rivalry thing going on.

Tina's statement about the creation of rank reiterates what Bernstein (1996), Hauser (1970), and Bowles & Gintis (1976) depict as the manner in which schools contribute to social reproduction concerning class hierarchies. Tina is not the only student mentioning the aspect of fear regarding high-stakes testing. Allison has described what happens with testing as a culture of fear:

There becomes a culture of fear where even if ... like I'm so good at taking tests that it's never been a problem for me, I'm still scared about it. We're all very intelligent people and probably shouldn't be freaking out about it, but we are because there's so much pressure regarding tests and grades and scores ... you feel that if you do less than above average, that's bad.

I asked her if the pressure is because she's in a selective enrollment school and that the pressure seems more than it should be. She explains that there is pressure from thinking you will not do well, that you will not meet everyone's expectation, and there is no support system within the school to help you cope:

We're put there because we're supposed to be above average and if we aren't and we're doing poorly ... I think it's a little extreme ... I think that it drives a lot of people crazy. I've known two people who've dropped out of selective enrollment high schools because of stress because they were depressed, and they had anxiety, and they were driven into therapy; I know three, no, four people in therapy right now.

Nathan has somewhat of a compliant viewpoint on testing. He believes that his school sees him as more than a test statistic, yet testing encourages stereotypes:

The way America's education system is set up, like it's based on stereotypes of testing, so if you don't do good on them, you're not likely to get into college ... I know a lot of institutions say, 'oh we don't focus so much on the ACT score,' but I don't really believe that.

Nathan equates high test scores with more financial support for the schools:

The better your test scores are, the more money you get, or, the more funding schools get ... if that's the case, it's understandable that schools would view students as a test score, but I don't think that's very like ... ethical cause like we're humans and not ways to get more money.

Nathan also describes the pressure that he experiences is more self-inflicted than any pressure his parent or the school puts on him.

Amberia describes how her whole life is marked with testing to get in one school or another since kindergarten. She described her school environment as extremely competitive and always comparing herself to other students:

It's crazy important that I do well because I think that it's more emphasized on me being that I go to a selective enrollment school. Pretty much, if you live in Chicago, and you want to go to a public school that's good, it's testing as soon as you're born.

Regina believes that testing determines your future and is important to proving one's worth:

It kind of plans out your whole future depending on like what college you can get into ... that college you want to go to, but ones that you can get into ... I want to try to do my best and prove to myself that I can do it and to other colleges why I'm a good student to come into their school.

Audrey does not feel that her school perpetuates a statistical perspective on students. She believes testing well will help her reach her goal of going to Stanford University:

It's gonna be very important that I get a very high score. We have a mandatory ACT test, like class that ... they give us in school, but I'm also gonna go outside of school and do a test myself.

Like many students in selective enrollment environments, she is motivated and has the financial resources that will meet her needs in outside help. She also understands the importance of learning test-taking strategies and does not connect them with the school curriculum.

My classes really don't prepare me because it's like on the standardized tests, it's not really information that we specifically go over ... it's basically skills mostly ... like certain math skills are gonna be found on the tests, not certain, you know,

math problems that we've went over, but the skills that we've learned in class are on the tests.

Kerry's insight on standardized and high-stakes tests shows that he does not believe they should be used:

I don't believe that standardized test should be the measurement for like, how intelligent a student is or like what kind of leadership skills they can bring to the college in general. I just ... believe that we get too stuck on numbers as far as how to evaluate the person.

Norma and Ariana also believe that these tests influence your future endeavors:

Norma: I think it's important because it kinda determines your future almost. I feel like you should prepare well for it, schools should prepare you well for it, and it determines where you go.

Ariana: It's kinda like you won't really go far in life ... cause if you don't get a good ACT score you won't get into a college and without getting a college degree you won't get a good job ... and I think it's like its more so like society's pressure on me and other kids to like ... to get a good score.

Katie's feelings about testing are what she calls becoming a statistical *whatnot*. She has seen the school using testing as a tool to control students, pushing students out if they do not reflect or conform to established dominant norms:

Personally, I'm not that fond of the standardized tests. It's not needed to fail us, but they throw in extra things that we may not even know, and that's not fair to the students. This year is our first graduating class, but they look at the seniors as test dummies, and they don't respect the seniors at my school that much. Some

teachers actually said that – that's how they feel about the seniors cause it's some seniors that got expelled from school.

The importance of reputation and statistical validation comes through testing because, as Katie puts it, her school wants to project a positive image regarding graduation rates and matriculation into post-secondary institutions. Students all over are now pushing back against so much testing that they have organized a movement called *Opt Out*. Katie and her mother have participated in this movement. I am sure that the following questions often surface concerning how opting out affect schools concerning funding. What are the academic risks for students who opt out? What is the political significance of opting out of the tests? What leverage does it hold for parents who are trying to sit at the table of education reform to participate in a critical dialogue concerning their children's future? Parents, students, and teachers are being objectified or “othered” in the education arena with no invitation to discuss, in meaningful ways, issues that concern the educational future of students targeted by misguided education reform policies.

Rado, Perez, and Richards (2015) examine the fallout from last year's opting out movement throughout the state of Illinois, reporting that thousands of students resisted the newly created Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exams. This resistance gained momentum nationwide as well as in the state of Illinois. What is even more interesting to note is that a high number of students from prestigious schools like Northside College Prep, Lindbloom Math and Science Academy, and Lane Technical high school were absent on the day the PARCC test was administered. Overall statewide, forty-four thousand students did not take the PARCC test.

Sanctions can be executed against schools where the percentage of students taking the test falls below ninety-five. Does this mean less funding? So far, the United States Department of

Education has yet to refuse to distribute funds because data has shown that the majority of schools have complied with the requirements of testing in Illinois. Does this mean teacher and administrative reprimands from the city and state? Rado, Perez, and Richards (2015) report that the political fallout here in Chicago has been that some principals and parents have organized and supported the resistance to the PARCC test. There has been at least one principal publicly chastised and eventually losing his job. Former Chief Education Officer Barbara Byrd Bennet demonstrated reticence in administering the PARCC, citing it was not in the best interest of the students (Rado, Perez, & Richards, 2015). Let us not overlook teachers and the resistance to the recent trend toward Value Added Methodologies as a means for job security. Teachers cannot help but to inadvertently look to test scores as a means for keeping their jobs. However, we must enlighten ourselves to how some school boards, parents, and high-ranking school administrators mistakenly equate high scores on standardized tests as improved learning (Popham, 2006, p. 332).

Katie's mom felt there was too much testing and opted her out of the test from a website. Katie noted that fifty percent of the freshman class opted out that year. She stated there were some harsh words exchanged between the principal and her mom regarding her opting out, but she did not say if other students experienced administrative backlash. The fire has been lit against testing in upper-middle-class suburbia when high school students in Winnetka, Rolling Meadows, Arlington Heights, and Lake Forest opted to skip exams. Will there be a political fallout for these communities? According to Rado, Perez, and Richards (2015), district officials in Winnetka called opting out of the testing as a personal decision made by parents rather than correlating it to any one particular reason. Former Chicago Board of Education Chief Executive Officer Forrest Claypool offers no definitive answers on ways to assure parents and students there will not be an overzealous approach to testing (Rado, Perez, & Richards, 2015). Does this

mean these students may not matriculate to the next grade level? Aragon, Rowland, and Wixom, (2015) express that the answer is unclear with the Illinois State Board of Education issuing a letter to parents warning them of the following:

Students may not opt out of the PARCC assessment under state and federal law.

The board also states that districts can develop a policy for those students who refuse to take assessments on testing days but emphasizes that refusal would violate state and federal laws. (Aragon, Rowland, & Wixom, 2015, p. 4)

This letter is directed at school districts which allow students to opt out, but nothing has been said concerning the consequences students may experience as a result of opting out. What state and federal laws would opt-out violate, and how would schools deal with the students and their parents who decide to opt out? Gatham and Sauder (2015) cite a letter written by Dr. Christopher Koch, former State of Illinois Superintendent of Education in addressing this issue. "Federal and state law does not provide for any opt-out provisions," he wrote, "Therefore, ISBE does not provide any guidance on how a district or school can provide an 'opt-out' because such an option would violate the law" (Gatham & Sauder, 2015, para. 5). It seems that the state of Illinois has *opted out* of using the PARCC test for high school, at least for now.

**The power of grades.** While our schools are the great equalizers for equality and meritocracy, and No Child Left Behind Policies (NCLB) espouse that all have the same opportunities to learn, it seems somewhat contradictory that so many minority schools lack the resources that will make them competitive with their white counterparts (or even their middle-class counterparts). The myth of meritocracy crops up often regarding grades. Farrington (2014) highlights that grades are another effective tool to weed out those who are consistently top performers. Grades are "at the heart of our meritocratic system of educational opportunity" (p. 36).



Their primary function is to inform post-secondary institutions of those students who are most likely to achieve success in higher education. So, those who demonstrate consistency are demonstrating their effort and therefore, who is deserving (Farrington, 2014). Deservingness was a common theme among the participants in which all advocated its importance. They all realized that along with standardized test scores, grades illustrated the commitment to the work ethic that is necessary to succeed in college and their future occupations. Those students in neighborhood schools emphasize that grades may get you over when test scores will not. The American society is so entrenched in the myth of meritocracy that we habitually forget that thousands of students are putting in lots of effort without the resources available to them in reaching required goals.

So often we talk about pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, but we forget about those who have no foundation of equitable resources which to succeed. Therefore, the role of student activism is so important because these students have now found a way to articulate what they need and deserve. Students in both neighborhood and selective enrollment high schools speak of the pressure of making sure their grades are top notch and consistent. Regina admits to the tremendous pressure to do well from her parents and within the school:

You want to do your best, and I think that's probably the most pressure you can get because you know there is that other option whereas something else could happen. As students, we feel pressure enough just by going to school and that one thing that the teachers, parents want are good grades ... considering the work ethic.

If I have 'C, D' grades ... that's not going to show anything except I can be lazy.

Tina reflects on her freshman year, depicting how she struggled in her honors algebra class. She had a B average until there was an incident in the class over behavior where the teacher gave everyone an F. She was unable to improve her grade, and this caused her much distress:

I was putting my effort in, and I was getting a 'B,' and it dropped to an 'F,' and I barely got it up to a 'D.' Because of that one 'D,' an honors class, my GPA plummeted. So that really affected me. As a senior, I worried a lot about that when I was applying to colleges because I didn't know if I was actually going to be accepted.

In her work, Farrington (2014) discusses how grade averaging over the course of time can give the illusion that the consistency of a student's academic performance is obscure and can further hinder future opportunities. Farrington cites Meyer and Rowan's (1983) theory on how low grades are a pathway to failure, not only in school but life chances. Failure in the high school arena assists in sorting and verifying those worthy of college and the job market (Farrington, 2014). As Nunn notes from Rosenbaum (2001) colleges are looking to prepare *the best and the brightest* for leadership roles in intellectual and civic venues. For students attending schools in low-income neighborhoods, low grades are frequently an association of alleged undesirable behavior. Charles discusses with me that his poor grades led to his being expelled from high school when he was accused of cutting class. He was suspended for an ordinary discipline infraction that turned into an expulsion:

I was caught cutting a class, so I was taken to the disciplinary office ... at first, they suspended me. It was like ... before Christmas vacation and some lady, I guess she was the principal said, 'let me see his grades ... okay, well drop him,' so I got kicked out of school, and then everybody thought I was a bad kid from there.

Danielle speaks about grades as a part of her school identity. Her familial struggles and the lack of stability make her strive hard to achieve academically, mainly to dispel the negative

perceptions about her character and her intellectual ability from extended family members and foster families.

I think grades are ... important, but I won't say, like, I had the best. I was average, a 'B' student but I felt like that was important because a lot of people look at that too like 'how was she with her grades or how was she in school,' so that was somethin I tried to maintain and keep up, not just for the school, but for myself ... cause I felt like I work hard in class and I wanted my grades to show that, so grades were very important to me.

Quinton maintained good grades due to his relentlessness in seeking out teachers' input, even though some of them demonstrated indifference. He recalls how one teacher became frustrated during instruction with the negative behaviors demonstrated by a few students when they became disengaged from the rest of the class.

My freshman year, I remember in my math class, I used to go by the teacher's desk and get help. We had a teacher and he was irritated by the class, he used to, you know, write everybody up ... it'll always be me ... going back to him or whatever, like, doin the work while everybody else was actin up or whatever ... So that's how I passed his class.

James focuses on the student's responsibility for grades, which validates and reinforces the idea of student behavior influencing deservingness. It also reflects his character, and he addresses the meaning of grades as it pertains to overall work ethic:

That I'm acceptable, that I'm willing to make it, and I'm willing not to give up ... I mean, school is school ... everybody has to be there to learn ... everybody has to be there prepared for their selves.

Albert summarizes the importance of grades as an aspect of identifying who he is:

It's very important because it's like ... cause your grade ... it symbolizes like what you've done in class and what you have accomplished.

Nathan associates grades as another way to get into college:

Mainly because that's another way to get into a good college. I know grades don't mean everything obviously, but I've I'm not gonna say I've been conditioned to think that way, but if I don't do well ... like, I feel as if that limits me a lot.

Allison associates her grades to the future of getting into college and a good job. A lot of her learning, as she puts it, was not meaningful in the beginning, but a shallow experience.

I'm working just to get into college instead of learning to better myself, which is what education is supposed to be about; it's mostly because it's so stressful because I want to be able to learn for myself, but there are times when I feel like if I don't get this grade, then what am I gonna do later in life because I'm constantly thinking about what's gonna happen in the future, and it's so hard to have to accept that every decision I make now, cause I'm so young, but it's going to change my whole life ... like everything after this is based on what I'm doing right now.

Life decisions, Allison feels, are difficult to make and she is wrestling with the pressure of trying to achieve so that she can pursue post-secondary goals. Some students like Norma feel enormous pressure to make their parents proud, especially since they are immigrants and buy into the myth of American meritocracy. When asked about the ACT and SAT preparation in school, the persistent theme among low-income neighborhood school participants is the lack of test preparation and the misalignment of the curriculum with the tests. As I said earlier, some of the

students attested to the importance of test-taking strategies rather than being exposed to test content. The cost of individual test preparation is big business, so we should acknowledge that standardized and high-stakes testing is commercially profitable for test developers. What comes along with test development and publication is the manipulation of parents, school districts, and students eager to employ the services of companies that offer test preparation. Due to the fierce competition for placement in elite and selective secondary and post-secondary settings, tutoring services have increased. Even for students who attend schools where the curriculum is rich and may not need to seek extra preparation to perform well, the extra added advantage is a much sought-after commodity, where mostly the middle-class and wealthy gladly spend upwards of fifteen hundred dollars for eight one-hour sessions. Those students who have the financial means like Audrey will do so. But we all should acknowledge that being in a selective enrollment environment is no guarantee that one is free of worry when it comes to taking the next step to college.

### **Chapter Five Conclusion**

The insights, experiences and convictions articulated by the students in this section reveals their concerns regarding the dominant policies and practices of high-stakes testing and accountability. The issue of testing and grades brings a multitude of concerns that have no easy solutions. The culture of fear in not meeting performance standards is all-encompassing for both neighborhood and selective enrollment students. Additionally, the burden of proving oneself deserving of opportunities is at times overwhelming for all students, but mainly for the African-American student. The hegemony of testing is that it can control, manipulate, separate, and determine the worthiness of individuals based upon the statistical measurement of intellectual talent and the predetermined criteria of effort. Macleod (2009) writes that the sorting of students,

in the guise of meritocracy, uses grades and testing as legitimate vehicles to continue inequality. Credentials become a currency that schools use to buttress reproduction where it remains unrecognizable. Poor academically performing students' lack of success is attributed to their lack of effort and work ethic which compels them to internalize their failure and self-blame. If they accept their responsibility for their failure, then it justifies their low status in society and subordination to the elite and powerful, while they (the elite) go without responsibility or scrutiny (Macleod, 2009, p. 114).

Oakes (1985/2005) articulates what many believe concerning the reliability of linking standardized tests and grades as a predictor of aptitude and intelligence with merit. First, Oakes reiterates that standardized tests are constructed with the idea that specific groups possess a particular knowledge not known to other groups. Moreover, this knowledge is used to differentiate those with a particular knowledge against those who did not possess it. Second, Oakes reminds us that standardized tests have been proven empirically to be racially and culturally biased. Children of the dominant culture do well on standardized tests because they are constructed to be compatible with their language and cultural experiences. Since minority and lower-class students' language and cultural experiences are different, it is a difficult task to ensure fairness (Oakes, 1985/2005). However, are grades reliable as a predictor of postsecondary success? Geiser and Santelices (2007) argue that while testing is seen as a precise and rigorous method in predicting post-secondary success, research studies have provided evidence of grades being the better indicator because they reflect a cumulative performance for a variety of courses over a period of time (Geiser & Santelices, 2007). Students like Danielle, Charles, Quinton, and LeShay especially, should be hopeful that the effort and commitment they have demonstrated to accomplishing their educational goals will not go unnoticed. Haney (1993) has offered a counter

argument as to why grades are not an accurate predictor of post-secondary success. He contends that over a number of years, grades have demonstrated many weaknesses – one being the lack of reliability in teacher grades. He accentuates this rationale by citing that 1) various teachers assess student work differently, 2) standards in grading systems vary across school districts and in disciplines, 3) there are gender differences in grading where females tend to receive higher grades, and 4) teacher expectations of student performance are typically influenced by the student's socio-economic background (Haney, 1993, p. 69). Education reformers promote the idea that standardized and high-stakes testing are legitimate quantifiers of knowledge and learning. The question is if grades reflect what has been learned? When I reflect on Allison's statement concerning her grades "I'm working just to get into college instead of learning to better myself, which is what education is supposed to be about," I wonder.

### **Chapter Five Summary**

This chapter focused on the impact of high-stakes and standardized testing and grades. An explanation was given as to why testing was the first issue addressed in this study. Both groups recognize the statistical significance testing plays in their academic futures and in the reputation of their schools. Additionally, both groups divulged their opinions on the meaning of grades and the importance of them to their identity. This chapter also revealed the racial stigma and fear that both neighborhood and selective enrollment students confront, offering critical insights that surround the difference between neighborhood and selective enrollment students' experiences and expectations of their school environment. Neighborhood students disclosed their apprehensions concerning the way testing is used to determine their futures and its influence on school rankings. A few selective enrollment students admit to confronting their apprehensions concerning the expectations to do well consistently and that testing had become a tool for

control. Some students in both groups equate testing well with better life outcomes. Chapter Six investigates students' opinions of school budget cuts and resource allocation that affect academic achievement.



## **Chapter Six: Funding, Neighborhoods, and Race**

This chapter conveys the perspectives of students regarding budget cuts, charter expansion, and the dismantling of community connections due to the closing of public schools in minority communities. Students in both groups are distressed at what they believe to be financial mismanagement of funding resources along with the callousness of reformers and politicians when addressed about remediating the issues of concern.

### **The Fight Over Public Education**

In the center of controversy concerning public education nationwide, is school choice and the ability to acquiesce alternative educational opportunities outside of the traditional public-school setting. Privatization or Charter is becoming the in-vogue method for educating urban minority populations. This means the dismantling of public schools, and very often, the very communities in which they exist. The rationale for charter schools alleges that 1) charter schools would have autonomy to provide high quality education while being relieved of adhering to bureaucratic guidelines and union contracts that would impede inventive educative strategies, 2) more accountability than traditional public schools in achieving the desired educational results, 3) the ability to experiment with new and varied instructional strategies that can produce desired outcomes, 4) traditional public schools are forced to make needed improvements because of competition, and 5) less money is spent for the same or better educational attainment (Carnoy, et al., 2005, pp. 3-4; see also Fabricant & Fine, 2012).

Students in both neighborhood and selective school settings have addressed this issue of replacing public schools with charter school types. The most ardent critics of the replacement of traditional public schools have been the student members of VOYCE. These students have bombarded the board hearings and aldermanic offices with pleas and admonishments against

closing, not just a school, but dismantling a connection to a community of teachers, businesses, and peers. They have also taken on the local school administrators where academic policies seem unfair or biased. Their selective enrollment counterparts are concerned about the closing of some school closings as well. However, they recognize the privilege they have in attending such prestigious selective schools. While most members of CSU attend selective enrollment schools, some members also attend neighborhood schools. The difference is most CSU members are northside residents who have much more success in pushing back against the placement of charter schools in their communities.

### **Students Not Getting What They Need**

One big issue that concerns students in both groups is the inequity of resources. Budget cuts are the reason for the lack of curriculum materials, assistive technology, science labs, and libraries for many neighborhood schools. The lack of these resources encumbers neighborhood students from competing with their more advantaged selective enrollment peers. When I first met Charles, Danielle, and Quinton, they were preparing to attend a meeting at the neighborhood alderman's office to protest the placement of a charter school in their community. Charles is resolute about not having charters in his neighborhood because, as he puts it

Our public schools are suffering more than any charter school because that's what ... we're dealing with right now here in this neighborhood ... they're takin' the public-school money to build these charter schools instead of giving the public schools money.

Charles elaborates further by stating "instead of helping out, they'll overcrowd a school and it's like ... well if you're overcrowded, then you can just go to the charter school." He believes the strategy for those in control is to make people believe that traditional public schools are over-

crowded, and the alternative is the charter school in the neighborhood. The outcome to closing schools is that the remaining schools left will become overcrowded eventually, and parents and students will think they have no other option but charters. The charter they were protesting has been one rife with conflict for misappropriation of federal funds. In spite of that, the alderman was unwilling to listen to members of VOYCE and other stakeholders in the community and approved the charter school placement. In the meantime, these three and other members of VOYCE made plans to take part in the monthly Chicago Board of Education hearings. Their goal is to challenge the board to halt budget cuts and restore teacher positions and other missing resources, like a full-time librarian.

Charles is critical of the frivolous way the school board spends money. According to Charles, budget cuts have severely affected only black and Latino communities. He states the following emphatically:

Well, from what I've seen, everyone who comes out to talk ... it's always African-Americans or Latino students that are speaking out about their schools and how they're suffering from lack of resources and teachers ... they spend millions of dollars on furniture, but at the same time there's no money to bring back some teachers that you let go.

He believes that these things are not happening to white schools and adds the following observation from the recent board hearing where he participated:

Everyone was complaining about how they're cutting all these programs and putting money into senseless things ... the only thing I know for sure is that our resources lack more than other schools, so that has an effect on how people behave in school ... toward their education.

I asked him to explain what he meant by the previous statement. In his assessment of the allocation of resources and the callousness of the board, black students in schools like his feel betrayed. They do not feel as if anyone cares about their education, so their attitudes and behaviors reflect the disconnection they experience from the school environment. Activism is not just a community wide endeavor, but one localized to the neighborhood school. Quinton, who has a history of activism since grade school, complains how adult members of the LSC were unaware of the financial mismanagement happening in his school, and their failure to support him in addressing these issues. He also complains about the lack of books available to students, and how high-stakes tests pigeon-hole students into negative life trajectories. He believes that black students are being pushed out of school, and the lack of resources helps perpetuate a negative stereotype that blacks do not want to learn:

I feel like there's a lot of injustices in education; there's not a lot of resources given to neighborhood schools, especially in the black and Latino communities ... in the white community you just see ... you see they're full of resources.

Quinton associates whites getting the resources they need with being good in school – it's just natural. He is referring to their natural cognitive talent, and students like him may not be able to prove their worth to society and thus cannot access better opportunities. Tyler (1977) would describe Quinton's perspective as the ruling class strategy to limit opportunities. By not providing students like him a constructive learning experience, they eventually leave school unfulfilled and tagged as uneducable (Tyler, 1977). This perspective, also noted by Lewis and Diamond (2015), underscores that school officials generally have low educational expectations towards black students in terms of academic achievement and that their behavior does not meet the expected norms in comparison to white students (Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

Tyler along with Lewis and Diamond's analysis, also brings forth Bonilla-Silva's (2014) description of 1) cultural racism, in which the minority in question has inherent character flaws, thereby excusing and exonerating the disparate treatment by the dominant culture, and 2) abstract liberalism, where the myth of liberalism makes us believe that opportunities and choices are plentiful through merit or natural talent (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

In a private conversation with former Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis, Mayor Emmanuel allegedly stated that "twenty-five percent of the students in this city are never going to be anything, never going to amount to anything, and he was never going to throw money at them." Nevertheless, his press secretary denied this allegation (Ahern, 2011). The mayor's response is indicative of how we decide who is deserving of opportunities, and this idea of deservingness is a prominent theme in the education of minorities. Those who show readiness for schooling are obviously regarded as more deserving of opportunities and resources, while those who cannot demonstrate the desired behavior norms are considered castoffs and unworthy.

Quinton, on the other hand, involuntarily legitimizes the disparateness in resource allocation based on undesirable behaviors by saying the following:

the people that get in trouble is the black students ... like we are always acting a fool, always want to fight ... and so, they see a large group of black kids and because everything is about data ... so, if they looked at schools' data and see that ... um, most of the nonsense happen in the black community 'Oh, they only in school to act a fool' ... they kind of like back off like ... 'let's not waste any more resources on them.'

Yet, Quinton has experienced some support from the board in the head of safety and security, who seemingly likes a strong youth presence. Both Charles and Quinton state there is not enough

accountability from the school board regarding how money is spent with Quinton phrasing it as such:

They need to do more to find out where this money is going and that there needs to be more accountability from the school board. They're just putting the money elsewhere ... instead of ...well, the school really need more books, more computers up to date.

Danielle says that school resources are dwindling because kids will not come to school. They will not come to school because they are not getting what they need academically and emotionally. It is a vicious cycle that sets black students up for failure. If indeed this is a set up, then students are inadvertently, but systematically redirected to educational settings that may not fit with them racially, socially, and psychologically. Uwah, McMahon, and Furlow (2008) confirm through Finn (1989) and Goodenow (1993) that students must experience school as a hospitable and respectful, setting that values them as members of the overall school community. This is not only essential for their academic success, but their self-esteem (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008).

Harper (2007) suggests that when students like Danielle speak of the direness of their learning environment, we need to examine the many ways education reform efforts contribute to a damaging or positive racial self-image (Harper, 2007). Since the perception that educational resources and respect are lacking in the school environment, perhaps it is easy for students like Danielle to believe that what she and other students like her are experiencing is a purposeful, malicious, and violent assault on their ability to claim education as their property right. Quinton and Danielle both describe the lack of academic resources in their school as dismal. Their main criticism is the lack of books forces the use of work sheets and the lack of course offerings that

engage students beyond math and science. They have very few honors and advance placement courses. Danielle explains in her discussion that some of her teachers were eager to do more academically, but only a small amount of money is provided for the basics. Too often teachers had to dig into their pockets for material that should have been provided in the budget. There were no music, art, and technology classes in the school building. Music was taught in Saturday school online, and the technology in use was outdated. When Danielle talks about things such as homecoming, which is central to the American high school experience, she feels cheated and explains it as not getting the things she experienced at her previous schools. Danielle describes her school facility as depressing and embarrassing when she must explain what is wrong with her school:

We have other kids come to school be like ... 'Dang, y'all don't have laptops, y'all don't have smart boards' or 'your school look like it been up for hundred thousand years' like... just for an outsider to come in and notice it just by lookin' or even being in the school one day it's kind of embarrassing ... for outsiders to come in and open a book and the whole book fly out on your lap – that's embarrassing.

Danielle and Quinton are more critical of their school administration, describing it as indifferent on many issues, not willing to listen to the needs of students, and mismanaging school funds. Danielle and Quinton speak of prom as a major sore point for their senior year in which fees were collected through the school for a yearbook. Even after protesting through the venue of VOYCE, no yearbook was produced, and students felt the loss of not having a memoir of their high school years:

We didn't really get the best of quality of our senior year and ... no homecoming

or none of that ... and our principal sat up and just talked about money ... we won't be able to look back ten years from now ... like 'oh my god, I remember this day' ... we didn't get that.

It should be noted that the principal of this high school was brought up on charges by the inspector general of the Chicago Board of Education later in the year.

Laura also believes strongly that the system is set up to fail and describes the lack of resources in neighborhood schools as a purposeful denial which is racially biased, it encourages stereotyping, and is protective of selective schools in the media:

... like if you ever look at schools like Walter Payton, Whitney Young ... they're majority white ... They tend to have more resources, better things, and they tend to have more money for different stuff, more programs than they need.

She further elaborates on the stereotyping that happens to students in black neighborhood schools:

and they see us, and we ask them what kind of programs can we have and they just say, 'we have no funding' and stuff like that, and then they look at the area of the school and assume that there are no good things happening over here ... They don't give us the opportunity to prove them different.

From Laura's viewpoint, when you hear about neighborhood schools in the black communities from the media, it is usually negative, but schools in white communities do not experience bad press. Yet Laura, like Quinton, seems to legitimize the segregation of some students from others by the following statement regarding her school:

Because not everyone in the school needs to be there, and they should support the people that try to make the school better instead of paying more attention to



students that make the school look worse ... they pay more attention to the people that are negative ... try to praise the people that are positive.

In Laura's assessment, neighborhood schools should be selective as well. Students causing trouble should be placed elsewhere. However, this idea only adds to the problem of selectivity, and who is deserving. Furthermore, this perspective may only serve to intensify the problem of those students, according to Ullucci and Howard (2014), who require more academic attention, and who need the many non-academic resources such as economic stability, medical and mental healthcare access, and decent housing (Ullucci & Howard, 2014). Addressing behavior problems that impede students' ability to meet dominant norms may seem to be a simple solution, but it is also one that brings about many complex consequences that selectivity has exposed. As Laura noted earlier, she only got attention because of the hard work she did for the science fair, and that not enough attention is paid to students who are not troublemakers. I do not know if Laura and Quinton understand the complexity of being black and becoming critical of other black students who do not possess the same values, but what is obvious is that they understand how race is a constant in determining who deserves what and how much.

### **Neighborhood Schools Get The Short End of the Stick**

The members of VOYCE are not alone when observing how race plays a part in the inequity of educational resources. Members of CSU are extremely aware how unequal resources and budget cuts impact the quality of education. In her activism, Amberia has encountered a few students in her school who do not care about any political issues, but mainly she believes that most of her high school peers are a socially conscious community. She depicts her school environment as having an abundance of activities that encourage students to dialogue on a variety of social causes. Amberia expresses fear and disgust about the budget cuts here in

Chicago and acknowledges that selective enrollment schools have an unfair advantage in accessing funding:

What I notice since I do go to a selective enrollment school, is that the selective enrollment schools are getting more money that should be going to low-performing high schools that are getting shut down ... they say 'wow, look, this school is performing better than the neighborhood high school because they have high attendance; their test scores are up – look at that- let's give them more money to keep doing what they're doing and shut down this school that's not doing anything.'

Amberia is astute in her analysis that schools looked upon as failures often are not provided with the resources that would make them competitive with their selective enrollment peers. She feels that selective enrollment schools are getting more money than they need while neighborhood schools are experiencing decreasing budgets for books, teachers, and afterschool programs. The city just built a ten million-dollar addition to her school where there is now a spinning lab and other state of the art exercise equipment. In Amberia's perspective, the mayor and the governor are both negligent and unsympathetic when it comes to assuring educational equity. She also derides how the chief education officer has allegedly used board funds to pay for her grandkids' catholic school education. What she and other student activists want is an elected school board that will be more accountable to the parents and students.

Allison, Amberia's best friend, agrees with her about the unnecessary spending on the new building.

My school didn't need a new building; that was unnecessary and very expensive, and I know that there are schools who have so much less than what they need

besides what they want ... and we're getting all this extra. I don't like how uneven it is when there are kids who needed so much more than us.

Allison addresses the closing of many neighborhood schools and its negative impact on students, citing the increase of students in classrooms, loss of teachers, and the safety for students now migrating to new schools outside their home communities. She believes minority students in neighborhood schools are perceived as not having a voice, and selective enrollment students have the advantage of being heard:

I think that selective enrollment schools have a lot more power in the media because of who goes there, and I think it's because it's not all minority students that people are more willing to listen ... people are more willing to speak up because they feel like they have that voice, they have that power versus the neighborhood schools.

Additionally, Allison views the over emphasis by politicians and the media on selective enrollment schools is merely to make them appear as if they have provided equity in education:

They're more focused on keeping us and the parents of selective enrollment schools happy because they don't want it to look negative on their book, whereas a lot of minority students and minority parents don't feel like they have the power to change anything, so it won't be the same negative effect.

Norma understands that the budget issues are a fragile subject on many levels. In many ways schools are lacking so much; from books and technology to teachers to teach, that to her, it is heartbreaking:

We have to start cramming kids into different classes and start changing up schedules and it's ... I think it's just a lot of hassle so just cutting budgets, I don't

think it's going to help the matter in any way.

Kerry is more straightforward in his critique of budget concerns. He speaks to the uneven distribution of educational resources as a set up to favor white communities:

They're not really looking to give a whole lot of funds to African-American students so, they give it to schools that are in predominantly white communities so to speak - they tend to be more favored than schools that are like on the south side ... on the west side.

Nathan's thoughts on the budget concerns mismanagement of funds in addition to the constant pumping of resources to selective enrollment schools like the one he attends:

For the most part, I think that neighborhood schools, they're neglected ... and, especially if it's a poor performing school, they're really not gonna focus much attention on it because they're thinking about all the schools that are doing well.

Nathan believes there should be a system where there is a neighborhood school and a selective enrollment school in every community. There should be a level that all neighborhood schools are at in terms of how they are funded that would offer students more opportunities for college. He states that the motivation for "pumping" more resources into selective enrollment schools is to separate the "good students" from the "less good." In Nathan's opinion, neighborhood schools are given "the short end of the stick" one hundred percent of the time. Nathan admits that some people think that selective enrollment students are blind to the privilege they have, and they are uncaring toward their less privileged neighborhood peers. From what Nathan has observed, race is a big part of the motivation to separate the "good" students from the "less good" because many of the selective enrollment students are white.

Some students not involved in political activism also show a dissatisfaction with the schools funding. Nevertheless, they tend to not totally lay blame for the lack of funding at the feet of education reformers. Regina believes that most of the allocation of resources received by schools is where students are already succeeding. She believes the loss of opportunities are because the students do not appreciate the resources. Some schools “are problems and resources are given to the students who are going somewhere.” Regina is alert that many of the westside and southside schools in the city are lacking lots of resources, but she legitimizes this as “The kids in the school won’t better themselves” which in turn means they do not merit the opportunities provided to other smart, hardworking students. This thought parallels the mayor’s response that only 25% of these students will ever achieve anything meaningful academically.

Eunice associates the closing of schools to school officials trying to save money on the backs of students in poor neighborhoods. She spoke of the hardships that students face trying to find new schools and venturing into unfriendly and unfamiliar communities:

... they shut all these schools down and gave parents a hard time getting their kids to schools not being close to the community because they have to travel ... and now they kids are always late and what good is that gonna do if they miss half of the session of learning.

Amid school closings to save the budget, there is no understanding shown toward parents and students for potential difficulties in dealing with new school experiences, such as the formation of new interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers, and the hardships and expenses of travelling greater distances outside their home community. Yet, James, like some other students, feels that the distribution of resources is linked to grades, which means that schools are rewarded

resources comparable to the effort that students put forth; “the better the academics, the more money you get in the schools” he states.

Whether we wish to admit it, the student narratives in this study, especially those who are from neighborhood schools, is a demonstration of the direct impact of abstract liberalism and colorblind racism in the education environment. The politicization of schooling becomes a necessary tool because of one's ethnicity, while correspondingly espousing the myth of liberalism to make us believe that opportunities and choices are plentiful through merit, and race is no longer an issue. This ideology allows educational and political reformers to convince themselves that the assumed deficits that characterize minorities are a natural occurrence, having nothing to do with the unfair and biased structure of schooling.

These narratives are also an example of how 1) advantage and position is reproduced through competition for economic resources that the dominant culture views as their property right, and 2) The shaping of social beliefs concerning their intellectual abilities that legitimizes the dominant cultures endeavors to deny resources because of cultural assumptions which are misconstrued. These ideologies further insulate whites from having to address the unequal resources in education and provides justification to continue with old racial practices without being obvious. The experiences these students have within the school environment are the by-product of the minimization of racism, where those subjected to the routine denial of disparate treatment find themselves silenced or dismissed (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, pp. 76-77).

### **Chapter Six Conclusion**

How do we explain the concealed beliefs that influence disparate practices in our educational system? First, the perception of education as a property right by the dominant culture allows them to seize ownership of educational opportunities. Students in both types of school

settings have experienced budget cuts, but while selective enrollment students are losing programs and teachers, their losses do not compare with their neighborhood school peers who start at a disadvantage. Second, Budget cuts are a means to further privatization efforts of education reformers, with the major premise being that money does not influence nor guarantee great academic outcomes (Carnoy, et al., 2005; Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Lipman, 2011). While some may argue that this premise is one of legitimacy, the vast differences of resources afforded to selective enrollment schools, and the constant decreasing of resources in neighborhood schools, especially in majority black and brown communities, need more than a standard explanation embedded with “pulling yourself up by your boot strap” rhetoric.

The interpretation by Schrag (2003) of economist Hanushek’s (1989, 1994, 1996) studies reasons that increased spending does little in demonstrating measurable increases in student performance and achievement. But we must be heedful that Hanushek does argue that students taught by better quality teachers learn more than those students who are taught by teachers near the bottom academically (Schrag, 2003). Does this mean that placing better quality teachers in low-income schools will guarantee improved academic performance? This question is difficult to answer because while placing the burden of student achievement upon the shoulders of teachers may be simplistic in thought, it is intricate in its implementation since students are complex human beings with complex cognitive skills influenced by environmental factors outside of the school’s control, such as poor health, inadequate housing, and economic deficiencies (Rothstein, 2013; Welner & Carter, 2013).

The most critical question that one should ask is if the allocation of money is not salient in academic achievement, then why do we have Walter Payton, Northside Prep, Jones, and other elite public schools? Counter studies to Hanushek’s (1977) work provide empirical evidence that

increased funding for education enables improved academic achievement. African and Latino American families are often over-represented in the working poor population, consequently short-changed consistently by the public education system through resource inequities. On the other hand, As Saltman (2014a) acknowledges, the white and upper-middle-class population enjoys taking ownership of educational opportunities through unchallenged public taxation that only serves their communities (Saltman, 2014a, p. xix). More than anything, the motivation for the escalating push toward privatization is to protect the status of those making policy in the competitive marketplace. Saltman (2014b) makes the case against privatization by stating the following:

Privatization targets the low end of the dual system and pillages the public sector for short-term profits, benefitting mostly the ruling class and professional class ... while doing nothing to transform the dual system of public education into a single system as good as its best parts throughout. (Saltman, 2014b, p. 256)

It is the unstated assumption of those in control that African-Americans must accept half the resources as whites for education, employment, and building their communities to have access to the American dream. It is also the role of colorblind ideologies to allow the dominant culture to ignore racism as a guiding force that prohibits the equal distribution of resources. Lopez (2014) asserts that colorblind ideologies give the dominant culture permission to "believe they are the true racial victims in the United States society today" (Lopez, 2014, p. 102). The 2016 \$650,000,000.00 budget for the construction of new city schools has seen \$475,000,000.00 allocated toward schools where the enrollment of white students was more than 25 % of the total student body (Karp & Vevea, 2016) but leaves a great majority of black and Latino schools in over-crowded and under resourced schools.



The students in this study have witnessed how the politicians and education reformers use the colorblind concept to define and control the terms of equity toward neighborhood schools as a mathematical configuration in which they have no blame. This configuration is a formula largely based on property taxes. Yet this configuration allows selective enrollment schools to benefit, primarily, because of a predominately white student population. The closing of schools in black neighborhoods, and the selective enrollment process continues to ensure white communities of less competition and their continued superiority, ensuring their superiority as racially permanent (Lipman, 2004; Leonardo, 2007).

Through the lens of Liberalism, the distribution of resources, especially opportunities through curriculums, are minimum because of the natural deficiencies that feed the deficit narrative. Those in the dominant culture invested silently and heavily in a system that promotes inequity to maintain their white privilege. The ability to exclude those labeled as less deserving through the shield of meritocracy (test scores, and tracking) have demonstrated the extensiveness of their influence over the schools; it allows educational opportunities to become synonymous with whiteness as property (DeCuir-Gunby & Dixson, 2004). The elite and powerful demonstrate their desire to protect the educational quality for their children, but employing unfair advantages for white and upper middle-class children through the lack of advantages for non-whites. The fear of losing privilege gives rise to policies that seem to honor merit while protecting advantages that accompany privileged status. Ultimately, the budget for resources is just one tool of many to disenfranchise those considered subordinate to those who wish to dominate. Students in this study recognize the ability of the leading class to legitimize their unequal advantages as normal and fair.

### **Chapter Six Summary**

This chapter illuminated students' perceptions of resource inequities that plague neighborhood schools in the city, and how these inequities prohibit their education attainment. Neighborhood students in general believe that most of the resources go to majority white schools and because of this, they do not get what they need to succeed. Selective enrollment students stand in agreement with neighborhood students over the need to better resource schools and that selective enrollment schools are far better resourced. Neighborhood students also believed that the school system was purposefully pushing them out. A few selective enrollment students expressed their beliefs that many neighborhood students see themselves not having a voice in school reform. A critical question in this chapter is whether money is a salient factor in academic achievement because resources are given to schools where students are already succeeding. Both groups of students are opposed to school closings. Additionally, neighborhood students expressed that the lack of resources help to continue the negative misconception that black students are unwilling to learn. Chapter seven examines how students in the two activist groups negotiate their race with their activism.

## **Chapter Seven: Activism and The Fight for Equity**

In this chapter is the discussion of two youth-led activist groups and their fight for equity. Students in both groups articulate how they became involved in their activist work and their struggles to create an identity within the school and in their community. Students discuss their encounter with racial misconceptions concerning their schools, academic ability, and the communities they live in. What is also revealed is the class differences that exist between the two groups in conveying their fears and apprehensions in dealing with misconceptions concerning race.

### **The Beginnings of Political Activism**

Today's minority youth are demonstrating a strong resistance to status-quo political dominance. The new breed of socially conscious youth has perplexed many adults who appear secure in thinking of youth as compliant beings; whose only existence is meant to imply obedience and conformity. Marsh (2016) presents Hill's (2012) three methods in which the public can engage in research and intellectual work. These three ways are cultural criticism, policy shaping, and applied work (Hill, 2012, p. 156). Through each of these methods Marsh suggests that black students are positioning themselves as valued intellectuals who will not accept or adhere to methods to silence them by the dominant culture. They are demanding freedom to inform educational policy by participating in the policy making process and respect for their activism when there is no other viable means for their voices. According to Marsh these youths have demonstrated their ability to distinguish and analyze the traditional dominant political rhetoric in determining the true agenda of those who make educational policy (Marsh, 2016). High school students in Chicago have been ardent in their efforts to be heard by education reformers. They have demanded and, for the most part, have earned a seat at the table where

politicians and top education bureaucrats are taking a second look at the young people who clamor to participate in the democratic process. These students come from various communities, attending both selective enrollment and neighborhood high schools. However, they all share one thing in common – that is, they are fighting for a good education; an education in which resources are equitable, plentiful, allowing them to be competitive in a continually evolving global community of workers. Youth protest activities are nothing new. Black teenagers fighting for equal rights beginning in 1960 were an extremely powerful force, staging sit-ins at whites only lunch counters and driving black voter registration in the south. Danns (2003) and Anderson, (2015) both recall how, in 1963, black students in Chicago staged a city-wide walkout where twenty-thousand students marched to the Chicago Board of Education headquarters demanding equitable resources. Puerto Rican and black students in New York city's public schools followed Chicago's lead in 1964 by protesting the state's defacto segregation (Danns, 2003; Anderson, 2015).

So here we are again, with more social movements gaining momentum to fight inequity and injustice. This momentum has quickly emerged particularly through student-led activism that beseeches everyone to examine critically the relationship between those with power and those demanding to have a voice in their future. Chicago's high school youth are fervently united in their efforts to diminish, if not eliminate, budget cuts, school closings, biased discipline practices, overzealous standardized testing policies, as well as other nonacademic issues that impact the well-being of Chicago's poor and minority communities. To do this, Chicago public high school students have staged walkouts at individual schools in conjunction with collective protest marches in the heart of the city, they have done radio interviews, and written articulate and meaningful research to address the aforementioned issues (Choporis, 2015; Grimm., 2016;

Masterson, 2017). Two major student groups have risen to prominence in the city over the past ten years. One group services minority students attending neighborhood schools from the far south and west sides of Chicago. This group of students are active in an organization called Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE). The other group of students, The Chicago Students Union (CSU) is composed primarily of students from selective enrollment and neighborhood schools on the near north and north-west side of Chicago. Both groups are passionate regarding policies that marginalize minority students. Both groups are quite articulate in expressing what is wrong with the educational system here in Chicago, and both groups have a long list of solutions that will rectify unfair educational policies. The mission of the two groups is to ensure that the voices of all students have representation when policies are created.

The first group, (VOYCE) was founded in 2007 and has chapters in the Logan Square, Albany Park, Kenwood-Oakland, and Chicago Lawn communities. The VOYCE organization believes that those students most affected by the educational inequities are the ones who can best create meaningful and permanent solutions. The organization has been primarily responsible for the drafting and passing of SB100 in the State of Illinois house of representatives, May 2015. This bill addresses severe and excessive disciplinary practices, seeks to provide academic support for students who have behavioral challenges, and insists public and charter schools uphold the same discipline standards. VOYCE has also been instrumental in the crafting of the *Eliminating the Unnecessary Arrest of K-12 Students act*, which directs attention to the high number of arrests for minor offenses. The data that inspired this legislation found that millions of dollars are spent allocating police officers to schools that service students with behavior issues influenced by poverty and emotional trauma. For each white juvenile in a CPS building, thirty black students are arrested, with 96% of all juvenile arrests being Latino or black, and 81% for

misdemeanor offences. This Act seeks to implement appropriate and corrective alternatives to punitive disciplinary action that will still guarantee school safety, yet facilitate academic achievement (VOYCE, 2014-2015).

The second group, CSU, was founded by a student from a selective enrollment school in the downtown area of Chicago. The purpose for the group was to unite all other grassroots student organizations to halt the massive school closings and budget cuts. They have insisted on collective bargaining rights from the Chicago Board of Education and Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). CSU collaborated with CTU and VOYCE in response to the initial closing of forty-nine schools by Mayor Rahm Emmanuel in 2013 (Rezin, 2013). They were also instrumental in two protest marches at the James R. Thomson center November 6 and November 13, 2015 that focused on Laquan Macdonald's death, and the financial policies of Bank of America. Both groups have called for an elected school board and the resignation of Mayor Rahm Emmanuel and Governor Bruce Rauner. In 2015, members of CSU and VOYCE also stood beside Dyett high school parents and students in their hunger strike efforts to keep the school from closing.

I was present for the CSU demonstration that took place on November 6, 2015. I rode the red line downtown and by the time the train arrived at Roosevelt and State, there were hundreds of students coming from all directions on their way to the Thompson center. The students had shut down the surrounding streets: Lake, Randolph, Dearborn, and Clark. I watched as some adults looked bewildered and annoyed at the mob of students walking toward the center. Most of them were grumbling that the students should be in school. I thought of the purpose of teaching civics in school was to not only prepare our adolescent students to be law abiding citizens, but to also encourage them to participate in, and promote all democratic processes. Here were some adults, who probably at one point encouraged adolescent learning about the democratic processes

in this country, complaining about the students' concern over budget cuts, closing schools, and lack of educational resources.

### **Class Differences**

One would think that with both groups fighting against the unfair educational policies that have become wrapped in the political drama of this city, that the two groups would find it easy to reach out to one another. Nonetheless, class differences seem to keep the two groups from fully partnering together. Class differences in social movements are not unusual. Even within the civil rights movement spearheaded by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the early 1960s, there were class differences among the black elite and clergy against the working-class and youth groups represented by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (McDougal, 2017). Gaines (1996) and McDougall (2017) have divulged how the respectability philosophy is responsible for elite black Americans claiming the right to leadership of the movement in achieving integration by trying to correct the traits of poor blacks. Some elite blacks believed in their duty to champion the fight for equality by assisting the less fortunate. Others with elite or middle-class status excluded the working-class blacks and were dismissive of their struggle. Working-class blacks, relegated to the same hierarchal status within the black community by elite blacks as by whites, did not merit the same treatment as the black elite (Gaines, 1996; McDougal, 2017).

Class differences between the two activist groups are not only between what neighborhood and selective enrollment high school students' experience in their educational environment, but how they see their lives after high school. Other than the obvious – the neighborhoods in which they live and attend school, there are stark differences in the way they

articulate their experiences with the educational institution itself. As Brantlinger(1993) noted in her work, “students not only are taught formal academic knowledge and skill base but are also socialized by covert curriculum” that influences their perception of social class hierarchies (Brantlinger, 1993, p. 194). It might appear, as Brantlinger (1993) affirmed, that low-income students have completely accepted the idea that they are less competent than their middle-class counterparts, but this is not what I have witnessed. One of the major differences I took notice of was speech. Leondar-Wright’s (2014) study on activists addresses the speech differences within social classes and denotes their speech tendencies as abstract and concrete. Those who speak in a concrete manner may demonstrate limited vocabulary (Leondar-Wright, 2014). They may speak with short simple sentences, or what Bernstein (1971) defines as restricted. There may be a heavy use of slang. Those who speak in an abstract manner (or an elaborated code) show a predisposition to use complex sentences with an extensive vocabulary (Bernstein, 1971).

Selective enrollment students could express their ideas about education in more complex and abstract ways. They had a vast vocabulary, so they understood what most questions meant. Neighborhood students routinely personalized situations to what is happening to them in the present, and often added metaphors to their narratives. Some of the neighborhood students struggled with the meaning of some questions. Most of the neighborhood school students’ explanations of some school situations were dependent upon the context of the questions asked, where I found myself having to find diverse ways of defining words that I took for granted they understood. As Bernstein (1971) has argued, working-class children have an orientation to constrained verbal codes that are easily understood among themselves (Bernstein, 1971). An example of the difficulty of negotiating their understanding with my questioning is when I asked students about the school curriculum, some did not know what the word curriculum meant, and



associated non-academic things to changing the curriculum. One student mentioned school uniforms. While on the surface uniforms or dress is not a curriculum issue, it is however, part of the hidden curriculum that encourages the surveillance and uniformity in behavior.

What was especially striking is their vision of success and the purpose of education. When VOYCE and other neighborhood students speak of their vision of success and the purpose of schooling, it is to get a career. For them, getting the certificate or the credential is the means to the end. Students like LaShay, Danielle, and Eunice are fearful that their schooling will not be enough for them to sustain an independent life. Although selective enrollment students also expressed fears concerning the future after high school, they seek not only credentials, but look beyond the college degree as a pathway to express their dreams of professions like medicine and law, or their entrepreneurial creativity. Most of the selective enrollment students possess a Deweyan vision for their education in that they wish to be more self-aware to contribute to the greater society. These differences underscore the approaches to various political issues that neighborhood and selective enrollment students employ in fighting for equity. These differences will be discussed again in chapters eight and nine.

I have found in my interviews that one group has developed apprehensions toward the other. Even though both groups understand the magnitude of school closings and budget cuts, the members of VOYCE feel that members of CSU are already privileged and therefore the struggle for equity is not their fight. One group's focus is centered in poor communities where educational resources are basic or non-existent, jobs are scarce, and police presence is heavy. The other group is made up of students who attend schools in diverse middle-class communities, where the resources are plentiful, and the mere mention of the school's name is enough to open the doors for college. Whereas the differences between school types and the communities in

which they are located is important, what is more important is 1) the level of commitment all students exhibit in challenging the power structures that shape education reform, and 2) the elimination of marginalization tactics that prohibit social and economic mobility of those of minority and low-income status. Student agency through political activism is one of the means of bringing attention to the needs of those students that reformers ignore. Better schools seem to employ more means for students to express themselves regarding their school experiences. Low-performing neighborhood schools, in contrast, offer few opportunities for participation in Local School Councils (LSC) and student councils.

### **Identity Through Activism**

After the first round of interviews concluded, I began to question how the student activists frame their identities around school and their political activities. Out of the thirteen student activists, nine were able to articulate their struggles participating in the political process. Four of the activists were new to the concept of advocacy, thus not having much experience in the activities that both VOYCE and CSU are known for. After discussing issues such as testing, grades, and budget concerns with the participants, it became clear that most had overwhelming concerns over the portrayal of black students in the media, by school board officials, and by society in general. Although most have said they had not met overt racial discrimination, they are acutely aware of biases displayed toward certain communities by city and school officials. Let it be stated clearly that one does not have to experience overt racist language to understand the impact of racist policies that hinder advancement. Still, I questioned how these young activists found new identities, both individual and collective, through their political activism, especially those in neighborhood schools. Peller (1995) outlines the importance of being aware of racial identification formation, but more importantly, how understanding race and racial identification

informs the various practices of oppression experienced by some groups (Peller, 1995). Minorities constantly confront the perception of inferior status, and in our current political climate, the significance of race has ballooned into the development of school policies that underscore these perceived inferiorities.

Harper (2007) questions how much the school environment in urban communities facilitate the racial identity of black students. In Harper's discussion on race and schooling, he utilizes the words of Mary Shelley's alienated creation in her work *Frankenstein* (1818) as an analogy applicable to the current conditions surrounding the perceptions of black youth by the dominant culture. The monster Dr. Frankenstein has created speaks to his unjustified abuse by declaring, "he is malicious because he is miserable, because he is hated by all mankind" (Shelley, 1818, pp. 134-135). Harper's use of the monster's speech implores us to understand how the environment in which one exists has a great deal of influence in how persons identify themselves, and with others. The apathy showed by the general society encourages more resistant behaviors that are opposite to preferred societal norms (Harper, 2007).

The apathy displayed is also an example of Bonilla-Sylva's (2014) naturalization and minimization of racism where 1) deficits that characterize minorities by the dominant culture are a natural occurrence that have nothing to do with the unfair and biased structure of schooling, and 2) racism is no longer an issue that hinders non-whites (Bonilla Silva, (2014). Black students are still struggling, since the 1954 Brown ruling, to identify positively with their school environment and make sense of many social inequities they experience. While black students in Chicago and nation-wide are loudly claiming that black lives matter, historical disparities in the judicial system, economics, health care, housing, and education has consistently told them that their lives, their dreams, and aspirations do not matter. My discussions with some participants

illustrate a fear of identifying with one's school and community. Repeatedly, students in low-income neighborhoods are tagged immediately with misnomers like gang bangers or thugs. There are frequent misconceptions about their schools and neighborhoods because of negative media information.

**Neighborhood students deal with misconceptions.** I asked Charles to explain what the biggest misconceptions were about his school and his neighborhood. He explained that his school was not as bad as others thought, mainly other students outside of the school community. Charles mentions an encounter with young activists visiting from New York, where they related stories about the violence in Chicago's black and Latino neighborhoods and schools. He counters their and others' misconceptions with the following statement:

There are a few bad students in schools that, well ... those are the ones that you're seeing in the media ... there are bad things that happen here but ... for the most part, it's so much good that goes on here that people are not hearing about ... all they're hearing about is what's on the news.

Charles has never met overt racist actions from individuals, but he is reluctant to tell anyone that he lives on the south side of the city, in a neighborhood well known for violence. Charles would prefer that his political activism with VOYCE and SWOP shape his identity because he does not want anyone to think less of him. He feels that much of society does not care about minority students, especially black students because "in their perspective, we don't care ... maybe it's because of what they hear about where we live." His opinion on how black youth feel toward educational policies in this city and nationwide, is comparable to Harper's (2007) analogy of Frankenstein's monster speaking of his own maliciousness as resistance - yet the monster finds this resistance in himself disturbing and troubling. Charles adds this next:

Minorities in neighborhood schools are lacking resources and teachers that care ... the vibe the students getting from that is you don't want me here, I'm gonna act like I don't wanna be here ... we are seen as failures not worthy of the things that the kids on the north side get.

Quinton also reflects angrily on how the school and the community gets negative reaction from some of his peers and family members:

They say the school is bad, but it is shootings and things like that makes the school look bad ... people will still think the school is not safe, but it is really safe.

Quinton says that the common narrative describing black students is that "they always destroy the stuff so it's probably why we don't have anything, you know." He is referring to school resources like chrome books and iPads. Quinton says that black students internalize these feelings and it becomes a constant query about what's wrong with them. If indeed, black students are internalizing negative feelings about their academic ability and their collective character, then what Quinton has stated gives evidence to the psychological and prophetic impact that racism has over one's ability to achieve academically (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Most of the negative characteristics centers around the violence often reported in the media. Laura describes it as their perception of a thug mentality. What she wants is for people to see beyond what students look like. In her opinion, the media portrays black students as gang bangers, and that they all live and breathe violence in their communities:

But what they don't understand is in the neighborhood and the school there are plenty of smart people ... there are plenty of people who are gonna have a future and that are not gangbangers ... just because they look the part doesn't mean that that's what they are.

Danielle would like to see more teachers that she can identify with culturally. She explained that her school lost a lot of good black teachers who were caring. This is not only about budget cuts, but also in her words: “they don’t want you to see a representation of yourself in the classroom.” She continues to elaborate with the following statement:

They really don’t wanna see us do good, they feel like what's the point because we have gang bangers and we have young girls getting pregnant, that's all we're good for.

Danielle, who has some family members in the teaching profession, has discussed with them the school to prison pipeline. This is also an ongoing discourse in the VOYCE organization. She finds it ironic that some of the new architectural design for schools remind her of prisons:

Look how the classrooms are being set up now ... like prison cells. They think that our streets are so immune to guns and well ... they're only going down one way: jail or they're dead ... and that's all they're doing and makin' it more easier and more possible for that to be done because they're shuttin' down our schools and puttin' us in jail.

Danielle equates the closing of schools with the increase of incarceration of black youth. Her response about building architecture reflects a Foucaultian analysis, where the school building becomes a panopticon, a style of architecture associated with prison. This is where students and all other school personnel are under constant surveillance. Today, with sophisticated technology within classrooms, hallways, and school entrances, surveillance is used to encourage and maintain discipline, but also to track a large number of students’ every move (Devine, 1996; Hirst, 1993). Violence infiltrates and cripples countless communities, and leaves many with the feeling of futility and vulnerability. How does activism give some of these participants the ability

to claim a new identity that transcends negative stereotypes, yet empowers them to take stands on issues such as school closings and lack of resources? And what of the students not involved in any social political activities; how do they frame their identities from the negative stereotypes?

James similarly complains of the violence that identifies his community like others previously. He reports that there are negative characterizations of his school and the community that surrounds it because of media coverage. However, he has never witnessed the violence that some people question him about:

Basically, the school I'm in, they always say that there be a whole bunch of fights and there be a whole bunch of violence around the school. But majority of the time I've been in school, I've only seen like two fights happen. And they are talking about they be fighting every day.

Through activism, most of these participants find courage to frame new and shared identities grounded in civic, psychological, and academic engagement (HoSang, 2006). Because these participants share a history of marginalization, the values that uphold social justice and assist in changing policies, guide their endeavors to reframe their identities (HoSang, 2006; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Warren, Mira, & Nikundiwe, 2008). A collective identity that connects with community building and solidarity replaces negative stereotypes (Kirshner, 2009), and demonstrates that they are capable of being strategic in developing various methods of interacting with bureaucracies and shaping policy (Larson & Hansen, 2005). They have a sense of belonging and their agency and sense of responsibility will continue into their adult life (Warren, et al., 2008).

Activism allows these students to engage with persons they once viewed as out of reach. They are becoming adept in engaging in a broad range of issues. Young activist like Charles

spoke of meeting with state senators and other officials with awe and confidence:

There's this white SWOP person ... He's the reason that I've been able to meet different people that I never thought I'd be meeting ... legislators, senators ... and I've been in Springfield for all those different bill passages, and it just opened up my eyes to see how much ... how much is going on in my community and people that are struggling that I don't know about.

Charles is also involved in immigration reform. He has been active in this because the mother of his children is Hispanic, and he worries about them having to do without her. His mentor in VOYCE and SWOP is Hispanic and has introduced him to literature about the Dream Act. He participates in activities that involve halting the deportation of immigrants.

Ginwright (2006) notes the difficulty of African-American students aligning themselves with past civil rights movements, only because older generation viewpoints are comparable to white establishment ideology of “pulling yourself up by your boot strap.” Ginwright concurs with Kitwana’s (2002) and Sullivan’s (1996) observations that disconnections between the new generation of African-American youth and past civil rights organization exists because they do not address the issues of the black urban youth of today (Ginwright, 2006, p. 2). According to Ginwright, we must recognize that current African-American students, who have endeavored in political activism, are resistant to the victimization of social neglect; meaning they have and will continue to find ways to disrupt this status quo to enhance their lives. They are more aware on a variety of social issues than some adults in power would like to credit them. At the time of Ginwright’s (2006) writing, he stated there was not enough research that investigated how African-American youth have demonstrated political resistance against unacceptable public policies. On the other hand, as Gregory (1998) warns, we should not think of African-American



youth as “socially isolated and institutionally disabled by joblessness and the exodus of the middle-class” (p. 10), but to be conscious that movements like Blacklivesmatter have enabled African-American youth to redefine and reshape their collective identity in addressing racial injustices (Gregory, 1998).

**The academic versus the political activist.** The previous section discussed the few neighborhood students who frequently encounter biased opinions and policies. However, even those participants who have a particular social capital – those that can meet dominant norms, have difficulty getting acceptance for their cognitive talents and their cultural differences by family, their communities, and their schools. For the selective enrollment students, their academic abilities, such as grades and test scores, and for some their zip code, accentuate their identities. The selective enrollment student activists at times face an uphill battle in their political endeavors to gain the trust of their neighborhood activist counterparts. Their motives are questionable because some believe that the fight for equitable school funding, halting school closings, elimination of charter schools, restorative justice policies, and the demand for an elected school board is not their fight. They already have privilege, and most are aware of the privileges they have and admit they enjoy them. But I asked them as well, what does being black mean for them in school, and what does it mean for those who are political activists?

People assume that only the poor and racially marginalized have the right to protest with righteous indignation over the inequities they endure. It is my observation first, that some of our greatest movements would not have been as powerful had those who possessed privilege, and recognized the unfairness of it, had not joined the collective effort to confront inequity. This is not to suggest that those who are poor and marginalized cannot effect change on their own. The previous participant narratives have established that they can. What I am saying first, is that for

the privileged to grasp the depth of the inequities experienced by those who are profoundly marginalized, they must as Frère (1998) advises, become uncomfortable with a neutrality that encourages them to avoid making a choice to denounce injustice (Frère, 1998, p. 101). Second, every significant uprising in this country could not have come to fruition if young people had not expressed their resistance and decided to be agents of change (Jakes, 2018). This was exhibited by Martin Luther King, Jr. who led an estimated crowd of 250, 000 participants, black and white, in the March on Washington in August 1963. This march was also fueled by a group of young African-American students who engaged in a “quiet and always dangerous work in the deep south” where the idea of racial equality was fiercely countered with white hostility (Bass, 2002, p. 38).

Whereas neighborhood students experienced negative stereotypical assumptions of violence, gang banging, and thuggish-ness, selective enrollment students, according to some narratives, had to suffer micro-aggressions about their grades and academic abilities. While they are privileged enough to attend highly selective schools, they not only struggle to prove that their academic ability makes them deserving of attending such prestigious schools, but to identify their political activism positively with their race. This is a sore point for Ariana, for her school is located on the near west side of the city where the construction of new dwellings and businesses seem to flourish. She, along with her sister Tina, believe that they do not have enough teachers in her school that relate to them culturally. She has observed that a lot of the teachers who were culturally sensitive are now gone from the school. In her perspective, her school is not always sensitive to the issues that surround race. The school administration has shown callousness regarding black history month by scheduling and then canceling various activities. Ariana has dealt with assumptions that she does not belong in her school because of other black students’

academic performance and behavior:

Some people would think that since I'm an African-American female that I'm not really that smart, and don't have a good work ethic, but when they see that I do, then I guess I become more acceptable.

Even though her mom works for the police department, she and her sister Tina have witnessed their older brother and his Hispanic friend harassed by police for sitting in his car outside their home:

Two white police officers opened my brother's car door, completely throwing him and his friend off guard. They shined a bright light in their faces and yanked them out of their seats and started searching them asking them if they had any knives or guns.

As she continues with the story she is visibly angry and states that she cannot understand how anyone who sworn to protect and serve would say something so prejudice and ignorant! What's so suspicious about two men of color sitting outside of their parents' home talking in their car? Ariana and her older sister Tina live in a neighborhood that is known for a history of racism during the sixties. This neighborhood is where Dr. King marched fifty years ago, to protest unfair housing policies in the city. She views the educational system as offering more opportunities to whites than to minorities. Her activism, along with her sister Tina, have her writing for poetry slams that address recent incidents of police brutality. Through her poetry, she expresses her disappointment, not only in her school, but the resurgence of racism that she thought had declined. She says race plays a major role in school policy from what she has experienced at her own school, not only from the loss of many African-American teachers, but also the way the school celebrates various ethnic holidays. Ariana has started a Black Student Union in her school

with the help of a teacher, to address cultural insensitivity and to open a dialogue for all students to bring issues concerning diversity to a safe place for discussion.

Tina, Ariana's sister is the editor in chief of their school's journalism program, and she is the first black student at her school to hold that position. Tina's battles have been exposing some of the things that have gone on in the school, and to alert students to activities of CSU. She and her CSU peers have told stories about how they received threats of grade lowering and phone calls to alert parents of their activities if they do not reduce their activities with CSU. Even her faculty sponsors received threats with the loss of employment if students did not pull back from writing about issues in the school concerning funding and budget cuts:

One student wrote an op-ed for the school newspaper concerning the proposed cuts in the school budget and got severe criticism from the principal and the Local School Council. Teachers and everybody that worked in the school were now reluctant to speak on various issues with us ... it was hard ... to get people to talk ... to get students to voice their opinions again. I felt like a lot of people were against it just because our school is on a high standard and for people to see something wrong with the school makes them have second thoughts.

Yet, Tina sees other things that leave her disturbed about her school environment – the perception of black students academically, even though they have jumped through the necessary hoops as she describes it, to attend her selective enrollment school. She has observed some of her black peers struggle a little in a class only to be ignored:

I mean I've seen like the smallest things ... like teachers paying more attention to whites or Hispanics more so than African-American kids just because they think that they pay attention more than the African-American kid ... but they never give

the African-American kid more support ... They'll go up to the Hispanic kid and be like 'ok let's do this and this' ... and then they'll just look over at the African-American kid and even though he is struggling, and he'll ask for help, they'll still, you know ... ignore him.

Tina explains in a similar way as Charles does, that the lack of academic support and ethnic stereotyping sometimes forces a lot of African-American kids out and could explain a lot of their misbehavior. She has addressed that issue in her many conversations with her faculty, especially concerning the lack of scholarships available to black students.

On the far south-east side of the city, Katie, like James, Danielle, Quinton, and Charles, is also beleaguered by the reputation of her community. There is a fierce police presence on the school's campus because of numerous shootings. This does not make her feel safe traveling back and forth to school, even though she attends a selective enrollment school in the same community in which she lives. She has observed that because of school closings, the increase in violence has made it harder for students to get to school because they must travel through neighborhoods they do not know well. In spite of this, Katie's political activism finds her participating in two activist groups, plus she writes for a magazine geared toward teens called *True Star*. She is proud of the work she does with the Peace Hub as well as with CSU. When talking with her after a Peace Hub summit, I asked her how she felt seeing most of the participants were students of color at the event:

I feel ... rejoiced that they're actually trying to change, put forth efforts to do something instead of just being careless on the streets or just being careless period about their education, their future ... the Peace Hub had a lot to offer students, and it was great to see a majority of African-Americans trying to take control of that basically.

Katie goes to several events to talk about the magazine. She also recruits students to work for the magazine and participate in some sort of activism. Her participation in the protest against testing is just one of the causes she has taken up in her activities. I watched as she has made passionate speeches at the Chicago Board of Education hearings, and in news interviews regarding school closings: “They keep telling us they are doing what is best for us students, but they don’t take the time to get to know us.” At the time of her impassioned speech, over two-thousand teachers and support staff were relieved of their job duties. Although she attends a selective enrollment school, she gets negative reactions from other selective enrollment students throughout the city because of her school’s location. Some selective enrollment schools have better reputations and get better resources because of the communities in which they are located. Her school just became selective after years of being a traditional neighborhood school. The city invested a significant amount of money to build a new infrastructure. When Katie tells people that she attends the new school, some white students she recently encountered immediately associated her with having a ghetto mentality. Through all this, she has started a crisis group in her school, with assistance from the Peace Hub, to help students who feel overwhelmed in their daily lives with academic and family issues. She understands how some students feel the pressure of trying to meet academic standards and not become failures. Her activism gives her a sense of pride about being black because she is helping to empower other black students like herself.

Amberia’s political activism has made her more aware how being the right color brings privileges. She speaks about the unfairness of various legal and school policies that affect minorities where whites have privilege and unfair advantage. She was critical of the way her school handled two incidents that happened the year before my interview with her. One was well

publicized in various media outlets (it made the newspapers), but both caused hostility in the school among the student body. She tells the story of a much more serious incident of a bike beating and theft where three young men, two white and one black, were in an altercation over a stolen bike. The white students attended a selective enrollment school near hers and the black student attends her school. The bike was stolen from the black male and his two white friends observed the bike being stolen. The two white students proceeded to beat the person they thought was stealing the bike with pipes and crowbars, with the victim nearly dying. All three went to jail, but the black student, who took no part in the assault, was still charged with a felony, and this incident is forever on his record:

He was the only one who didn't participate in the act, but since he was black, you know, nothing happened ... and the thing is, they were all rich, including the black guy, his dad is a very well-known lawyer ... he's never lost a case in his entire career, but he lost his son's case ... he tried his hardest, but he lost it.

It became clear to Amberia that color predominated this situation – not just class status. Legal policies are often more severe for minorities than whites. Here class and status made no difference for the young black man, whose father had social and legal influence and expertise. Blacks may have a certain amount of social status, but in comparison to whites with the same credentials, white privilege is triumphant. Amberia states that her school often ignores issues concerning discipline policies that target black students. She and others in CSU are looking forward to addressing discipline policies that target minorities. She also admitted there are misconceptions about black students who live in predominately black neighborhoods. Some of the people she has encountered believe that if you are black and live in certain parts of the city, you automatically assume an identity of a violent gangbanger. Her hair style and dress also make

her a cultural target for whites to assume that she is not academically fit to be in the school she attends. She describes one encounter in the following passage:

this one kid was walking past me, and I was talking to my friends ... I was with my white friends and I guess he knew one of them and he was like 'oh hi', he was talking rather slowly and I just kind of looked at him, kinda confused as to why he was talking like that and I said, 'what are you doing' ... he was like 'I wasn't sure that you could understand me or whatever,' I was pretty sure he was a racist and I was like 'I speak English, I've spoken English since birth' and he was like 'oh that's cool, nice' and he asked me where I went to school, and I told him where and he was surprised and expressed that he didn't know that the school was so diverse ... stuff like that ... so I get it all the time ... just because I'm black and I go to a good school ... and a lot of African-Americans who go to my school get that ... 'oh, you speak really well.'

Her experience with this student is an example of micro-racial-aggression where racial insults can be subtle, difficult, and confusing to determine the meanings or motivation behind them. But Amberia's experience with racism is not limited to whites. There have been her black peers and family members that allege she is not *black enough* [*emphasis added*]. Most people who find out she is an avid tennis player want to compare her to the Williams sisters, and claim that tennis is a sport for whites. Through all this, Amberia is very proud of her work and participation with CSU. When I interviewed her, it was a week after a big rally at the Thompson center where she talked about the success of the rally. She was grateful for the support the rally garnered from various politicians. Still, even she recognizes that some people who join the rallies are doing so with illegitimate motives:



Like, there were charter schools there at the last rally, and we were wondering what they were doing there, whether they were advocating with us or against us because you could clearly tell ... I heard a couple of them chanting things opposed to us ... I was just very confused as to why they were there, what they were doing, and what their intentions were.

It was evident that not all the student protesters were on the same page as the CSU participants. Charter school students and their parents are begging for more funding, while empirical evidence does not confirm that charters are doing better than traditional public schools in academic achievement. Thus far, Amberia feels the rally sent a clear message to the mayor, the governor, and other political education heavy weights that these students are keeping the impetus going. She also knows that members of VOYCE do not trust members of CSU. It is a division between the two groups because “some selective enrollment school students and teachers look down upon neighborhood students and a lot of neighborhood students know they are looked down upon.” She explains that neighborhood students do not feel that their concerns were acknowledged during a previous rally:

They think they couldn't voice their opinions ... they feel like we're too privileged to have problems with the budget cuts and I don't think that's fair. They feel that we shouldn't really be complaining about it because it's not going to affect us the way it's going to affect them.

Amberia's best friend, Allison, likes the diversity at their school, but is disturbed often by the misconception concerning where she lives. She too lives in the same community as Amberia, which is a very upscale neighborhood on the south-east side of the city. This neighborhood is home to a former President of the United States:

When I talk to people and they ask where I'm from-north side – south side, I say south side and they'll of course have this picture in their mind of what the south side of Chicago is like. They assume that I come from a rough neighborhood, and I live in the ghetto ... that's not true.

She describes how some people do not think she is black or black enough because of where she lives. It bothers her that for her to be *authentically* [ *emphasis added* ] black, she is expected by both black and whites to exhibit a “hood” persona. She also complains that her school has now become less diverse than when she first started with more whites enrolled, and more black girls than boys. In her opinion, her school is a great place for now, but she does not think that her school values or understands the social aspect of what kids are going through very much: “We had some incidents with ... racial bumbins in the environment, where it used to be very open ... It used to be very accepting; it's shifted.” She began speaking of the incidents of Missouri University after the Ferguson incident as an eye opener to her thoughts on race and racism:

In this age, everyone is always 'there is no racism,' 'it's just not a problem anymore,' but it's worse than it has been in some years, and it's scary to think that that's going to be happening in my life time, where I feel like I should be able to do everything that anyone else should, but am I going to be able to?

Allison's observations reflect the current fears of most African-American students in the United States. Since the election of a new president in November 2016, racial, gender, and xenophobic attacks on blacks and other minorities have surged to record numbers (Younes, 2016). This mantra of “there is no racism” is yet another example of colorblind racism that allows policy makers to be blatant regarding their dismissiveness and callousness concerning racial injustices (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). She has not responded with restraint to racist remarks in the past before

joining CSU and does not feel that she should have to hold back out of fear of being “one of those kinds of blacks,” the kind that are irrational, but her activities in CSU have helped to ground her with more strategic and thoughtful responses to what she describes as ignorance. She speaks of an incident where this approach was challenged by one of her white friends. They were on a summer trip to the friends’ home in Indiana. During a bon fire, a group of white men drove by them a few times displaying a confederate flag:

I felt so ... uncomfortable ... I said, ‘I need to go inside, I like to go inside right now,’ and she didn't understand it, she’s a white girl and she didn’t understand what my problem was, and she said it wasn’t a symbol of racism – it’s a symbol of the south.

She was not just upset about the incident, but also about her friend’s reaction and lack of sensitivity to the racial culture that encouraged such display:

She didn't try to understand where I was coming from ... and it hurt me to think that she was my friend and my life could have been in danger in that moment, cause I don’t know what her intentions were ... and it's alright for her to take that risk, but it's not ok for me, especially with everything that's been going on with Ferguson, so many people are getting shot down because of being black ... It was upsetting that she didn’t care.

Her friend does not understand her political activism because of where she lives, and the privilege of attending a selective enrollment school. What Allison experienced in her relationship with her white friend was her friend’s minimization of such racist acts (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Since racism allegedly no longer exists, then blacks and other minorities have nothing to fear. It then becomes justifiable to encourage and participate in disparate treatment, in which this treatment is addressed

through silence or dismissed (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, pp. 76-77).

Kerry's political activism took shape before he joined CSU. He is a member of Jack and Jill. The goal of Jack and Jill "is just to enhance society for African-Americans." The youth in this group perform a multitude educational and community service activities that help African-Americans become more well-rounded people. The objective was to fit into white society, but during the civil rights era, Jack and Jill lost its attractiveness to many members of the black community. It was perceived as elitist and frivolous by blacks who began the mantra of black pride (Poe, 1992). Kerry states with pride that there have been many times when there have been social issues, relating to African-Americans like the Treyvon Martin and Laquan McDonald shootings that he has mobilized the black male youth in his church. He tries to devise ways for his male peers to articulate their feelings over political issues with the help of his minister. He feels that people often think of selective enrollment students as geniuses, who are always on top of everything when that's not really the case for the most part. Kerry has not encountered the racism that others have discussed but has observed what happens to some black students in his school. He remembers a peer who was experiencing some emotional difficulties because of a turbulent home life which prompted involvement in restorative justice activities. He recalls how the school administration tried on several occasions to remove his peer without contacting his parents or trying to counsel him. He elaborates that past practices at his school seem to zero in on where perspective students live before they can even complete the application process:

Some schools (I believe) select students based on their zip code for example and that's what my school used to do for a while. So, a lot of people who may live in Englewood, for example, probably weren't going to be accepted in there.

Kerry's primary focus now as a senior is a voter's registration drive at his church and his school.

## Chapter Seven Conclusion

What does political activism mean for these students challenging the status quo? As Gillen (2014) affirms, it means bringing to light the voices of those who, until now, have been unheard. It means that the current generation of young people are resisting many educational environments that force them to embrace a second-class citizenship (Gillen, 2014). These young activists are vying for their education as a property right; where they will not be hindered by roadblocks that denote them as unworthy to take ownership of their educational future. All the participants have, in many ways, addressed how education reformers and politicians are simplistic in framing issues surrounding testing mandates, budget cuts, and school closings. Students know fundamentally that decisions concerning these issues mentioned are but only a small part of broader landscape that politicizes who is deserving of a quality education. Their knowledge of the issues and their political activism assist in addressing the other inequities in society surrounding health care, economic development, gentrification, and the judicial system. The student activists I interviewed have confronted education reformers with their knowledge that most school closings are in minority communities and that budget cuts severely impact these communities.

As Cited in Nevraakis (2015), Giroux explained that those in power do not want a well-informed society of young people who can think critically, but those who will conform to dominant ideology. Giroux posits that under abstract liberalism, students and their parents are led to believe they have the choice in the schools they attend, and the manner in which the curriculum is implemented (Nevraakis, 2015). The student activists are vigilant resisters to budget cuts that support a capitalist agenda. This message comes wrapped around rhetoric that advocates freedom yet privatizes and commercializes choice. Their stories enlighten us on their

shared struggles, and their unique experiences on what is like to identify positively with their race, and to endeavor to change society for the better. Through students' experiences, there is the probability of gaining new evidence that legitimizes the demand for better methods to implement school reform. It appries reformers and politicians that these students are fully invested in their future and will not be silent because, in the words of Frère (1970/2000), they cannot passively wait for others to allow them to speak (Frère, 1970/2000).

The students have become competent in framing and defining their issues of concern and in providing solutions. When Danielle speaks authoritatively about the influence politics has over education, it is because she has observed how power is exerted (by the mayor and the school board) when decisions are made on school closings and the disbursement of resources that schools get in middle-class neighborhoods. She sums it up in the following statement:

They have the power to give us things, like money to help our schools ... I'm not really a big politics person, but I think that's where everything revolves ... around politics – what's goin on with numbers and money. I think, at the end of the day, politicians have the most say so of who gets what and why.

For Charles, his activism is important on many levels. He is disturbed by what he describes as the senseless things that happen in his neighborhood and even that “nobody seems to care.” He tries to contend with the idea that people in his community have normalized the violence and the dysfunction that occurs often. His own experiences of not having his father around full time, and that he is a father now of two little boys makes what he is doing for his school and community imperative and urgent:

I believe that I'm supposed to, you know, be here and show them right from wrong and try to make this community, and these schools, and this neighborhood

better for my children, so that they don't have to go through the things that I've had to go through.

### **Chapter Seven Summary**

The discussion in this chapter focused on students' political activities, and how these activities helped to frame their identities through their individual efforts to confront racial policies. Major points for both the neighborhood and selective enrollment students was the misconceptions about their race and the communities in which they lived. Neighborhood students emphasized the media reporting of violence as a depiction that misrepresents their communities and thus reinforces the false perceptions held by those outside of their community. Selective enrollment students reported on the micro racial aggressive language they have endured along with complaints from others that they are not authentically black. Students in both activist groups were steadfast that cultural misconceptions and stereotypes impacted their view of school and society in general. All student narratives indicate their commitment to continuing their political activities. Chapter eight examines the first research question about how students in both types of school environments view each other and if selective enrollment students have better chances for success after high school.

## **Chapter Eight: The Struggle For Advantage**

In this chapter, the first research question I address is if neighborhood and selective enrollment high school students view each other with apprehension because of their school type. Accentuating this question is if they believe that selective enrollment schools offer more opportunities for success after high school. Additionally, I embark on uncovering more class differences within the African-American community that mimic the differences between African-Americans and whites; differences within the African-American community that might make them view one another with misgiving.

### **Getting a Better Chance**

Many might question if selective enrollment students view themselves as intellectually superior to their neighborhood peers. In contrast to the first question, we can ask if neighborhood high school students view themselves as not as smart as their selective enrollment peers. It is evident that the assessment of intellect is acutely tied to the concept of meritocracy and effort. Carbonaro (2005), citing Barr and Dreeben (1983), Gamoran and Mare (1989), Hoffer (1992), Oakes (1985/2005), and Page (1991), related findings from his own research on effort and tracking that suggest 1) students in higher tracks learn more than their lower track peers and 2) were more likely to employ significantly more effort in academic achievement. Carbonaro also attests to how the quality of instruction and available learning opportunities is crucial to the learning environment and the belief systems that students have in place about their abilities. Carbonaro illuminates how the social structure of tracking differentiates the various opportunities offered to students and employs restrictions on what students study (Carbonaro, 2005, pp. 27,43). In the interviews, some students in both types of educative settings tie academic achievements to palpable traits, such as an eagerness to work hard, high grades, or non-disruptive behaviors.



Some students for example, LaShay, James, Danielle, Kendra, and Quinton did not associate being inherently smart with the effort they exerted to excel academically. This does not refute that neighborhood high school students are looking for the same opportunities for success that selective enrollment students experience. Most struggle to make the best out of their situations, knowing there exist some odds against them. Neighborhood students wonder why they cannot have the advanced placement and honors classes. They are frustrated by not having classes in the fine arts, or libraries, along with the lack of textbooks that have been replaced by work sheets. To sum it up, it is all the resources that selective enrollment students have access to, that highlight the difficulties most neighborhood students confront looking for better life outcomes.

Neighborhood students were asked first, if they believed that students in selective school environments would look down on their academic ability. Second, they were asked if they thought that students who attended selective enrollment schools had better life chances. To the first question, some answers from neighborhood students were conditional; that is, it depended upon the situation they were in. I later posed the same questions to selective enrollment students, who were more empathetic of neighborhood students, acknowledging that neighborhood students face numerous obstacles because of where they live, and the lack of school resources. Danielle (a neighborhood student) emphatically answered with a no to the first question:

No! I know smart kids, very smart kids in my school ... I know smart kids at other schools, so to be honest I don't ever think it's where you're placed, it's what you do with whatever situation you're in, like you can make the best out of anything to me.

Charles' opinion focused on the individual student and the school, but he did not leave out the option of leaving the neighborhood for better opportunities:

I think it depends on that student and that school because at the same time it's them (*selective enrollment students*) getting more resources and maybe, you know, better opportunities ... they want to have a ... a better chance at receiving ... more opportunities, so they need to go out of the neighborhood to get that.

Laura believes that the expectations to do well is greater for selective enrollment students than for neighborhood students:

In schools like Gwendolyn Brooks, Whitney Young ... selective enrollment schools—not all of them are as smart as some of the kids in the neighborhood schools ... people count on them more ... they wouldn't say somebody from a neighborhood school would go anywhere because they wouldn't expect them to ... because they had to go to a neighborhood school ... cause they're not smart.

Laura thinks that her selective enrollment counterparts would think that her attending a neighborhood school means she is not smart enough to get into a selective school.

When Kendra was asked about chances and opportunities she responded that it makes no difference in her opinion:

I think that we're all the same, no matter what school you go to, you're getting an education to go to college, to help you with your life ... I don't think it really matters what school you go to.

Yet Kendra felt that selective enrollment students would put her down because she attends a neighborhood school:

I feel that they'll think that I'm not smart, as smart as them and I feel that they'll

put me down because of that ... I think selective enrollment schools is just picking people, like saying one is smarter than the other ... I don't really think we need selective enrollment schools.

Quinton believes that selective enrollment students think that neighborhood students are all dumb: "I think we both have an equal chance of getting the same grade and getting into college."

LaShay associates the ability to get high grades as a marker for selective enrollment success. She emphasized students who are getting all 'As' and Bs' are going to selective enrollment schools and addresses what she thinks colleges are looking for:

Colleges do not want anyone who will cause them to regret their decision to enroll you. Selective enrollment schools are for really smart kids, that's my opinion, like you know if you not getting all 'As' and Bs', you not going to selective enrollment schools. What colleges mainly look at first, like 'you can select this person cause, you know this person gonna be on point, they grade, and they scores is off the charts and you know they smart automatically.

Nunn (2014) confirms what Lashay has stated about what the elite college admission officers are looking for in potential students, Nunn refers to this as *sparkle* or desirable qualities of talent and high levels of energy. The students they will select are highly motivated as well as competitive. Nunn references author Peter Van Buskirk (2007), who describes other qualities that colleges look for as being "bright" with "the capacity to learn at advanced levels of instruction" (p. 112). Colleges, according to Buskirk, are constantly looking for those students with a passion for learning. Buskirk asserts that most college admission officers immediately know by students transcripts if they are competitive. The downside to looking for desirable qualities is that most colleges do not believe that all students are capable of the intellectual

demands that they will confront (Nunn, 2014). While Nunn's affirmation of Lashay's statement about college should not go unnoticed, we must still be mindful of the curriculum track that students are placed in and the influence it has on future educational aspirations.

Legette's (2017) investigation on school tracking, black student identity, and their lack of access to honors track, confirms that black students may believe that honors classes, or better yet, enrollment into highly selective schools may be based on the myth that they (black students) are unable to learn. The fact that black students are over-represented in non-honors tracks and failing schools and underrepresented in schools where there is nothing but honors and advanced placement classes, can mean the possibility of associating race with intellectual ability and merit. Additionally, LaShay's belief that selective enrollment school students have to be really smart, and that those students have a better chance of success, helps to solidify the thought that black students learn differently from whites or from their black middle-class peers (Legette, 2017).

For Albert, students going to selective schools is just a matter of going to a better school but feels that selective enrollment students are prepped better for college. On the other hand, Eunice believes that selective enrollment students have a better chance for success because

They have someone else telling them that they are better than other students ...  
sometimes they make us feel that we retarded, or we don't have no type of help,  
or our teachers don't help us.

What Eunice said is affirmed by Allison later in this chapter about how teachers build up selective enrollment students psychologically through praise and a nurturing atmosphere. When it comes to describing their own cognitive abilities, some neighborhood students thought of themselves as more willing to work hard than being smart. James, Charles, LaShay, Danielle, and Eunice have not taken any honors or advanced placement classes and all but one of them

have struggled to get “Bs’ and Cs.” Quinton, Laura, Kendra, and Albert are the only neighborhood students who have taken honors, with Laura taking advance placement in world studies. Albert was number eight in his class at the time of our interview and he has taken honors biology, world studies, and English.

Danielle explains that some things are difficult for her to grasp at first. A lot of people, she says, “don’t know what I’ve been through.” Because of being shifted from class to class frequently to make up credits in her junior and senior year, she could never quite catch up. She ended up in classes with freshmen and sophomores who thought she was “dumb.” “It was kinda hard on me in class because it was like I was supposed been learned this and I’m trying to catch up now.” Danielle, in her viewpoint, says it’s not easy for neighborhood students like her to be around selective enrollment students.

Like, they have more advantage, which is ... a thing ... little bit of a jealousy I have cause it's like, they have a lot of things that we'll never have ... they have a lot of things that we never even heard of ... we really at a disadvantage when it comes to schools like that, like there is no comparison on any type of competition you could be in with them because they have the higher ... upper hand of education.

Charles thinks that selective enrollment schools do not enroll too many black students because of the school’s expectation of behavior problems. He thinks that selected enrollment students would perceive his academic ability as deficient, but they have not had his lived experiences:

They're not accustomed to this ... to our total environment, if you don't understand, you know, what happens here ... if you're not from here, you haven't been here, then of course you're gonna look at us a certain kind of way.

It certainly seems to Charles that selective enrollment students have a better chance of success over neighborhood students. In his mind, neighborhood students are fighting to get their fair share of resources and get access to more opportunities.

### **The Upper Hand in Education**

Selective enrollment students know fully the advantage their respective elite schools provide them, yet they also know that this may not be enough to help them succeed after high school. It is expected they succeed because as Allison stated

We were selected because of the status of the school and we tested well. We are viewed as the next leaders of society, so many of our teachers tell us that ... we are not supposed to live mediocre lives with mediocre jobs. We're put here because we're supposed to be above average.

The statements of Eunice also support this when she talked of her experiences in the alternative school. If what she said she was told is true, then she has affirmed that schools play a major role in separating and categorizing in accordance with economic positions, and the divisions of labor (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p.49). But, as stated in chapter five of this study, selective enrollment students feel the pressure to consistently do well, whether the pressure comes from their parents and teachers, or as Nathan and Allison describe, self-inflicted because one thinks they will not live up to the expectations of others.

I asked selective enrollment students if they thought that attending selective enrollment schools created better life chances, and if they believed that students in selective enrollment schools view neighborhood students' academic ability with ridicule. Tina expressed while she sees no difference in her neighborhood counterparts, she has witnessed her selective enrollment peers making disparaging remarks about neighborhood schools and the students that attend them.

There is constant comparison regarding course offerings to school facilities that she thinks is insensitive. She does not think that students attending selective enrollment schools have better options for success:

I mean ... there's people who graduate as valedictorians from Whitney Young, and they can't get a job verses someone who graduates from a neighborhood high school and goes to community college, and you know ... becomes a teacher or something like that.

Kerry has admitted to having low opinions of neighborhood students at one time:

I remember at times I've been guilty of this before. I always thought since I was at this school, that I was just ... better than them to an extent ... that they couldn't really match me ... in my intellectual thinking and I just thought that maybe I was just basically the best compared to them.

Kerry recognizes that he has been afforded more opportunities by his attendance to a selective enrollment school:

I definitely think that I have more advantage than others. I think that I've just been provided more resources than they have. I don't think that certain schools that are closer to my neighborhood would have like ... all the writing centers and math labs and different departments for each subject in the school.

Nathan acknowledges that there may be some selective enrollment students who look upon their neighborhood peers disparagingly.

I believe so, I think that may be a common thought mainly because it may be a superiority complex, like 'oh, I was able to get into the school, I'm inherently better than you, so as a result, not only am I gonna like succeed, like I have access

to this' ... and it may be a thought that students have. I personally don't have that, I don't agree with that superior way of thinking ... but, with how some things are, I can kinda understand it to a certain degree, but yeah, ... I think it is definitely a thought that some students have.

Allison reported having a negative perception of neighborhood schools at first:

I think it was because I was like 'Oh, those people, they don't care about their education, they don't care about doing well, they don't care about being successful, I don't want to be with them,' I view it differently now, just because I've had the time to see more.

Allison is alluding to her political advocacy that has helped shaped her opinions on school and other political issues. But she, like Kerry, is aware of the advantages she has in attending a prestigious selective enrollment high school:

I don't think I would be able to continue to go to a neighborhood school ... because they don't get as good of quality of education as I want ... and of course it sounds horrible ... I feel bad saying it, but it's true. I do want a good education and I do want all the resources that I have ... and I know if I had gone somewhere else, I would not get what I have now.

Allison continues by stating that she has noticed the division between neighborhood and selective enrollment students. Many times, she states, selective enrollment students look down on neighborhood students. She added that she knows a lot of neighborhood students feel looked down upon by selective enrollment students, "but of course, that's not the case all the time." But it has been the case, as Legette's (2017) study confirms. Legette's study found that students in non-honors and honors have differing perceptions of themselves and of students in the other



academic setting. Students' ideas concerning tracking ensued besmirchment on those in non-honors, and esteem for those in honors. Legette's study also revealed two more salient points about students' beliefs regarding tracking: 1) that intelligence is perceived as static rather than flexible by non-honors students and 2) honor students believed hard work earned them the placement, and non-honors students perceived track placements as a reflection of what they believed to be their innate inaptitude (Legette, 2017, p.13; Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Dweck, 1986).

As Danielle recounted, students in non-honors were viewed as intellectually slow and behavior problems, while those in honors were viewed as highly motivated and smart, thus reinforcing the idea of merit. Teachers enabled these perceptions by the lack of high expectations for non-honors students, the curriculums they implemented, and their unwillingness to interrelate with students as Legette's (2017) study confirmed through the work of Borman and Dowling (2010), Kelly and Carbonaro (2012), Van Houtte, Demanet, and Stevens (2013). Even Allison admits that teachers play a big role in the perception of the school and its students by the constant glorification that she and her selective enrollment peers experience. She and her schoolmates often received compliments on their in-class behavior by substitutes and visitors to her school. The general perceptions of society are that because of their school status, they are expected to succeed. Norma has a different, maybe hopeful vision of how neighborhood students may see her and her academic ability.

I think that they might see us as different even though we're the same as them ...  
 'oh you go to a good school ... you don't go to the same school as me ... you probably think you're better than me ... you don't want to talk to me,' but I don't think it's that at all.

Audrey does not see the difference between neighborhood and selective enrollment schools, and aside from the entrance exams for these schools, all schools according to Audrey, are the same:

Well the fact that we're a college prep, which sets us aside in everything, other than that, I think we're a regular school. We're all the same to be honest ... it's just we all go to a school basically ... just some schools may have more resources than others, may be on the same level ... but, we're all the same ... very intelligent people come out of one of those schools. So, I'm not gonna label them just because they come from a certain school because they can be more intelligent than I am and come from a Morgan Park or Julian.

I found it ironic that Audrey could say that there is no difference in schools yet is cognizant of the entrance exams and the extra curriculum, human, and financial resources that are given to schools like hers. The idea that Audrey says that all schools are the same is another way in which those in control would want to portray the education students receive as equitable.

Katie, who lives in what she calls “a bad neighborhood,” has experienced negative interactions with her neighborhood peers and is distrustful of them. Experiencing a friend killed through gang violence and robbed at gunpoint, colors her perspective of her neighborhood peers despite being actively politically involved. She does not interact with anyone in her neighborhood:

All the kids in the neighborhood, they're either on the streets not doing anything, or they're just all negative ... the neighborhood school students most likely aren't well behaved, and that makes it harder for other students to focus in class ... cause the teacher has to quiet down these students while other students are trying to learn.

But, in her view, selective enrollment students, are in many ways just like the neighborhood school students, “they don’t know, we’re all chasing ourselves.”

Regina sees all selective schools as status symbols, but thinks that students who attend them, including herself, have worked hard to get into and stay in these schools, and are smart. She also espouses that everyone has potential. It was not easy for her to get accepted into the school she attends because she says, “the competition was fierce.” Even so, Regina believes that selective enrollment schools serve a purpose:

So, I think it helps decide the students that want to do great and are willing to put forth the effort than the students that say they want to put forth the effort and don’t ... It shows who they are and their work ethic.

Regina states that certain neighborhood schools have reputations which are negative, so their students are considered low achieving. She is referring to various types of media outlets that focus on violence in low-income communities. The question now becomes why some high achieving black students would look on their low achieving peers as not working hard enough, as slow, lazy, or not wanting to learn. Those students in selective high schools, who are politically active, demonstrated a more sympathetic view of their neighborhood high school peers. Their activism noted in chapter seven has allowed them to critically address the disparities within the educational system without having to sacrifice their ownership of education. But the paradox is that some students in both types of schools abide by the myth of meritocracy. Students like Regina and Audrey uphold what Bowles & Gintis (1976) describe as the legitimization of a hierarchical structure by unconsciously accepting these structures as normal.

### **What Does Being Black Have to Do with It?**

Legette (2017) reiterates Tyson's (2011, 2013) and Oakes (1985/2005) argument that black and low-income students are more frequently placed in non-honor classes, which helps facilitate the racial disparities between white and black students (Tyson, 2011, 2013; Oakes, 1985/2005). Legette also notes that most studies place keen emphasis on tracking results, neglecting the influence they have on student self-perceptions. Students' perception of who they are and will become is often compromised through tracking, which influences how they view their racial identity, thus negatively impacting their psychological well-being (Legette, 2017). Black students may believe that the denial of honors classes, or better yet, admission denial into highly selective enrollment schools, may be based on the idea that they are unable to learn due to their race (Crosby & Owens, 1993; Oakes, 1985/2005; Sellers, Linder, Martin & Lewis, 2006).

It also has been shown through numerous studies that students and teachers alike respond in a negative manner to low tracking environments (Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012). Often, lower track students are found to be unfocused, remote, and troublesome with the lowest possible connection to school (Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012; Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2012). There is little educational incentive for some low track students to perform comparably to their upper track counterparts. The Metz (1978, 2003) studies reported that labeling students as low-performing fosters disengagement from school. Teachers may find it problematic to encourage effort because of the labeling that these students experience (Metz, 1978, 2003). There may also be an adverse interaction between teachers and students due to low track teaching placements because 1) the curriculum is less demanding and engaging for students and 2) such educational placements are less gratifying for teachers (Oakes, 1985/2005; Metz, 1978, 2003; Riehl & Sipple, 1996). The adverse responses to low track placement by teachers and students is attributed to status

designation of low track students and is “fundamentally institutional” (Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012, p. 274). As stated in chapter four, there is a large quantity of studies that address the differences in academic achievement between whites and blacks and other minorities. Thus far, it is difficult to explain within-class differences between low income working-class black and middle/upper middle-income black students.

Chavous et al. (2003) cites Adams and Singh’s (1998) belief that examining structural inequity by itself does not adequately answer why within-group differences in achievement outcomes exist; neither does it offer a thorough explanation on the perspectives that influence the academic behaviors and belief systems of black students (Chavous, et al., 2003, p. 1076). We cannot assume that theories like Ogbu’s oppositional theory are sufficient explanations as to why there is an achievement gap between black and white students, or within the black community. Yet we are looking constantly for absolute or *concrete* explanations that would explain why some low-income blacks achieve academically, even through adversity, and others do not.

Some would attribute academic success to parenting. Audrey is quick to point out the importance of parents, although she is subliminally coming from a cultural deficit perspective that has long been attributed to African-Americans:

I think our generation is being raised by people who are still, you know, in a childlike mindset themselves, so they can't really necessarily be a parent ... for me, my parents are in their forties, close to their fifties, so they have that mature adult way.

Audrey’s viewpoint about parents is shared by many middle-class and working-class blacks, as well as the dominant culture. Her viewpoint on parenting may stem from what some call respectability politics. The main idea is that blacks must take responsibility in correcting the

conditions in which they live, or in other words, *pulling yourself up by your bootstraps* [emphasis added]. Audrey elaborates more on this by explaining that students should assume responsibility for learning and achieving:

It comes down to the students, whether they want to learn or not ... so if they don't want to learn, they're not gonna apply themselves ... if you don't come to school to get educated, you're not gonna learn anything, and I feel like we have a lot of those types of students in schools in general.

What Audrey has, that some neighborhood students do not have, are two grandparents willing to take over the custodial responsibility from her parents in providing her with encouragement within a stable home environment, reinforcing how important parent involvement is in the lives of adolescents. Legette (2017), by calling on the works of DuBois (1903), Frazier (1997), and Harris (2014), illuminates how correcting perceived cultural deficiencies in individuals is the primary focus of many black political leaders who wish to prove to the white population that blacks are entitled to enjoy the benefits of full citizenship. Subsequently, in their quest to change the narrative of oppression in the black community, those black political leaders who hold this perspective, often neglect to critically analyze the structural or institutional forces that thwart financial and social advancement (Legette, 2017, p. 14). Even Bill Cosby's comments at the NAACP symposium in 2004 were filled with reprimands for blacks to "get their acts together." Cosby chastised the African-American community for inadequately parenting their children (Lee, 2004). This condemnation is habitually thrust upon minorities and the economically disadvantaged. Legette illustrated that some black students, in the desire to set themselves apart from others, sought respectability from teachers by ignoring their racism and would admonish their academically low-performing peers to change their behaviors (Legette, 2017)

Howard (2003) citing from Giroux (1988) and Hopkins (1997), acknowledges that conventional philosophy has promoted schools as the embryo for an autonomous and equitable society. However, those in minority groups have been so marginalized that it is difficult for them to align themselves with this perspective (Howard, 2003). Howard, additionally citing research by Fine (1987), Ford and Harris (1999), and Nieto (1992), emphasizes how blacks and other minority students of color, have begun to see the school as a place of confrontation, hostility, suppression, and decisive failure. These may be the students who cannot activate the capital of respectability. This challenge of suppression, confrontation, and estrangement aside, these students who cannot achieve respectability are struggling against what Lewis (2010) describes as an educational extermination that brings forth emotional, psychological, and political exclusion. It is an aggression that allows these students to observe how those with power abandon them (Lewis, 2010).

### **Chapter Eight Conclusion: Getting What You Deserve.**

In concluding this section, we should ask why the students' perceptions of one another in their respective school settings are important. How will discovering this importance inform us in our attempt to remediate the impediments that stand in the way of academic achievement of all African-American students? When we look to answer why the two questions are important, we must consider the concept of deservingness. This concept suggests that those who work hard, are intellectually and academically gifted, will receive opportunities because they have proven their merit. Psychologist Norman Feathers (1999) developed the concept of deservingness after his exploration of society's ideas on people getting what they deserve, be it a positive or negative outcome. According to Feathers, people can be assigned responsibility for outcomes for which they are not accountable, as well as those who are held responsible for their purposeful actions

(Feathers, 1999, p. 5). Here is the conundrum for low-income and minority students fighting to get what they deserve. Selective enrollment students deserve a seat in an elite school because they have taken responsibility for their outcomes in achievement. Furthermore, they deserve the extra resources and opportunities that are associated with that type of schooling. In American society, we associate merit with getting what you deserve. But what do students who do not attend the elite selective enrollment schools deserve?

Political and education reformers, who make policy regarding testing, school closures, and the type of curriculum implemented, believe they can legitimately determine what resources neighborhood schools serving low-income and minority students receive. Their perceptions of low-income and minority students' intellectual talent means these students will not receive the same resources and opportunities as their selective enrollment peers. Additionally, these students are assigned blame for not being accountable for their lack of achievement; consequently, they are getting what they deserve. Low-income and minority students attending under-resourced schools see the deservingness of their selective enrollment peers, and the apprehension they feel is based upon this observation. Selective enrollment students may feel the pressure of always maintaining their status, which is validated through grades and high standardized test scores, while students in neighborhood schools struggle to access opportunities and confront failure.

Students in both type of educational settings attribute their success to the amount of effort they were willing to demonstrate. They are also intensely aware that schools serve a purpose; that purpose is to sort or pick students, as Kendra and Regina have observed. Students like Charles know that better opportunities lie in other neighborhoods. Charles understands that selective enrollment schools do not admit many black students because of stereotypical misrepresentations that include violence and aggressive behaviors. In essence, African-



Americans have been depicted by the dominant culture as having deficits that justify the exclusion and denial of opportunities.

Nunn (2014) suggest that we come to the realization that the differences surrounding each type of school lies in their conceptualization of effort, and in the determination of acceptable levels of success (Nunn, 2014). The participants in this study support that the status of the school gives the school power over selection. Rather than democratically distributing opportunities with equity, the selective enrollment school mission is to separate the *wheat from the chaff* [emphasis added] or separate the valuable from the worthless. Selective enrollment and neighborhood students are fulfilling their destiny, as defined by their school setting. As Allison stated, selective enrollment students are expected to demonstrate leadership, and students attending neighborhood schools have to confront the prospect of being in subordinate positions. I close this section with Bowles & Gintis' (1976) statement that the essential assumption of how we determine who is entitled to better educational opportunity is called merit. Merit may be a subjective concept to those who are dispersing opportunities. Its implementation is primarily symbolic in that those who have power and influence use it as a smokescreen to hide their circumventing more equitable alternatives (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 123). Most of the students in this study see through the smoke screen, and this smoke screen is deservingness.

### **Chapter Eight Summary.**

Chapter eight illuminated differences between neighborhood and selective enrollment students' perception of each other's academic abilities and chances for success. This chapter revealed how some neighborhood students believed that selective enrollment students would look on them disparagingly because of the school they attend. It also revealed that neighborhood students associated academic ability of selective enrollment students as hard work or effort.

Selective enrollment students were seen as better prepared for college. In contrast, some selective enrollment students acknowledged the privilege of attending elite public schools but also the burden of expectations to do well consistently. However a few selective enrollment students initially held negative beliefs about neighborhood students that eventually changed, while other selective enrollment students believed that students should take more responsibility for their achievement. Chapter nine examines the second research question which focuses on their post-secondary aspirations and their definition of success.

## **Chapter Nine: Defining Success**

In this Chapter, I address the second research question, which is to what extent expectations of success differ among African-American students who attend both selective enrollment and neighborhood schools. This question places emphasis on the expectations of career and quality of life that African-American students hold for after high school completion, and their definition of success. In this chapter, I focus on the question by framing it around their views on the purpose of education. The rationale for framing it around the purpose of education is to 1) bring to light the class differences in the two groups' post-secondary aspirations, 2) how their ideas on success is tied to their educational attainment, and 3) because of the varying ideological beliefs that have influenced our educational system.

### **The Real Purpose of Education**

The ideological inquiry for the purpose of education has been a thought-provoking endeavor, numerous times, by most scholars and average persons alike. From ancient philosophers like Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato, to Dewey (1938), Counts (1978), Noddings (1995), and other current educational scholars and political reformers – all have helped to shape the discourse on what education should be and do for society. Most importantly, all of us have a set of beliefs that coincide with our educational experiences. All the participants demonstrate a firm belief that education is the vehicle for a better life and success. Yet, there are class differences in the two groups ideas of the purpose of education and the definition of success, and how their present experiences are preparing them for the future. When I discussed the two activist groups in chapter seven, I addressed their class differences moderately. But in this chapter, you may see the differences more acutely in all students (selective enrollment and neighborhood) by how they define and explain their aspirations for after high school and college.

Ullucci and Howard (2015) note that Anyon (1980) emphasizes the type of education students receive reflects their social class standing, as was stated on page 46 and 147 of this manuscript. The various aspects of schooling work in conjunction with each other to ensure that students fit their determined class background (Anyon, 1980). Ullucci and Howard reveal to us that students are able to discern the structure of schools in the way in which they meet or do not meet their needs (Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Haberman asserts that the intensifying of inadequate feelings is often done by assigning less than engaging work due to the low expectations of the students with which schools must interact (Haberman, 1991). Haberman's observation is confirmed by Anyon (1980), who cites Bowles & Gintis (1976), Apple (1979/2009), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), and Bernstein (1977a,b), who all agree that school curriculums are differentiated according to social class. Anyon's work illustrates that the hidden curriculum, which ultimately emphasizes who is deserving in accessing types of knowledge, has "profound implications for the theory and consequence of everyday activity in education" (Anyon, 1980, p. 68).

### **High Hopes**

I asked the participants their views on the purpose of education and their definitions of success late into the interviews. Neighborhood students like Albert, Eunice, and James responded simplistically, while Charles and others (Danielle, Lashay, Laura, Quinton, and Kendra) attempted to be more thoughtful. Albert, Eunice, and James have a social efficiency view of the purpose for schooling:

James: being able to prepare for the outside world ... basically getting prepared to have a job, go to college.

Eunice: to come to your career and get somethin out of it.

Albert: prepare you for a career - the whole point of education is trying to get a career, a job ... to try to support yourself, family.

In contrast to the previous three, Charles possesses an altruistic view of education rather than a social efficiency view. His idea of success is helping to transform the community he lives in with more political activism:

I believe the real purpose of education is to be able to better yourself because the more you know, the more you can do, such as, you know, basically, making the world a better place. I think the reason for a lot of bad things going on is a lack of education, lack of knowledge.

Kendra espouses a social efficiency view of education:

We go to school to help us with the outside world. I think it helps us with what we need to know when we actually become adults ... what we're gonna expect after school which is like paying bills and all that and going on job interviews.

Danielle equates a good future and success with education. Success for Danielle is not having to live paycheck to paycheck or work at a minimum wage job all of her life:

I think school is something like a necessity that you need because you just want to have a good future, getting a degree, and not as far as like being rich, but I want to be able to live comfortably.

Laura believes that schooling will provide the tools for success:

To be successful really, and to know you're going somewhere in life ... to know that ignorance is never an option ... and pretty much to be successful and happy at whatever job I have and not just be stuck at a job I don't like.

LaShay knows that race is a factor in how society will interact with her. She did not consider

herself a great student, but she worked hard, and to her, the eagerness to work hard should count:

Because Blacks are talked down to and all type of stuff, you know ... and like to me it is a race issue. I don't want to be like, you know, a statistic ... and education is everywhere, it's like you're nothing without it.

LaShay just wants to graduate from high school and has expressed fear that she will not acquire the necessary credentials to go to college. She has described how difficult the exam for community college had been. Her ACT scores were low, and the thought of not getting admitted into a community college was nerve wrecking. The idea of credentials or "*paper*" [emphasis added] is important to her and gives a person standing for jobs they would not ordinarily have access to:

You have to have something behind your name these days ... you have to have some type of degree, certificate, whatever, behind your name because if you don't then your nothing ... education is the key for everything to unlock so many doors.

Like LaShay, Audrey is acutely aware of the benefits of credentials and espouses that education is necessary to better and further her life, but she wants to do something she is passionate about:

I think the purpose of education is being aware of all the knowledge that we've gained and obtained and learned over the past, ... like hundreds of years, thousands of years even.

Audrey equates living comfortably as a marker of success. Audrey has observed the change in society in which jobs are not as plentiful as they once were, and that changing credentialing patterns have become more demanding:

And for me education is just necessary to better and further my life because now days, with just even a GED, you can't even get certain jobs ... so you have to

educate yourself even further and actually go into a career.

Education historically has been a much-valued commodity for African-Americans, even though public schooling was not universally available to them for more than one-hundred years after the end of slavery (Mickelson, 1990). Lewis and Diamond (2015) emphasize that black students possess the same aspirations and pro-school attitudes as their white counterparts (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). In the discussion on student academic success, Phelan, Davidson, and Cao (1992) stress that all students, regardless of achievement level, cultural, and class background, desire success and a learning environment in which achievement is probable (Phelan Davidson, & Cao, 1992, p. 696).

Ullucci and Howard (2014) describes how Haberman (1991) explains the ways that a pedagogy of poverty legitimizes the idea that poor and minority students cannot learn. The experiences poor and minority students receive through the curriculum encourages and condones established hierarchies that force them to accept an identity of inadequacy. Because of these established hierarchies, African-American youths may make negative race-related assertions concerning opportunities due to limited economic prospects in their communities. Additionally, these assertions may mean barriers must be overcome with more effort and persistence (Ullucci & Howard, 2014; Haberman, 1991). Newton and Sandoval (2015) cite Campbell (1983) and Nichols, Kotchick, Barry, and Haskins, (2009) that the immediate enrollment to college after high school is salient to degree attainment. The expectations of students for degree completion is understood as a student's commitment to future goals of pursuing more education (Newton & Sandoval, 2015). It has been established by scholars such as Mickelson (1990) and Ogbu (1978) that African-American students desire for degree attainment is often manifested through their aspirations. Nevertheless, Ogbu (1978) claims their high ambition should not be taken at face

value because of the history concerning the lack of employment advancement (Mickelson 1990; Ogbu, 1978).

The important question is if education is valued so highly and opportunities exist to learn, why are some black students' academic performance contradictory to the value of education they express? Carter has asked this question in her (2005) study. Other scholars as well, have tried to explain the discrepancy between stated goals, and beliefs about the importance of education through the oppositional theories mentioned earlier in this study. One explanation offered by Ogbu (1978) and addressed by Mickelson, (1990) is that black students fundamentally recognize that educational opportunities provided for whites far outweigh what is offered to them. This revelation points out to them that their educational efforts are not rewarded with equity (Mickelson,1990; Ogbu, 1978).

Like the *brothers* in Macleod's (2009) work, outwardly, some neighborhood students I interviewed are relatively hopeful concerning the future and did not seem as disgruntled by the inequities that confront them in the same way as MacLeod's *hallway hangers*. The grades that some neighborhood students earn are not competitive with their selective enrollment peers. Even so, the study participants attending neighborhood schools are not willing to dismiss the need for education, or its value for upward mobility. They are concerned with being able, as earlier stated, to sustain themselves. Aside from their own experiences with discrimination and disparate treatment within the school context, the observed experiences of their parents and other family members, as reported by Mickelson (1990), may certainly color their view of school and the role that merit or individual effort plays. For Charles, Quinton, and Eunice especially, vocational education is an acceptable option to college, where cost and test scores are not impediments to educational attainment or employment.



Charles and Quinton spoke of having vocational programs that offer apprenticeships. Both believe that schools do not do enough to address student interests that they can use in real life because college is not for everyone. Charles and Quinton are on point about college not being for everyone and Charles is in awe of a high school graduation he attended for one of his friends. He was astounded at the various licenses and certificates that students received in electrical and technical career education programs. These programs will no longer be available (at this school) in the future because budget restrictions have forced the school to cut the two programs. For example, there was once a flourishing free vocational curriculum in the Chicago school system, but privatization has been a vehicle to push a for-profit educational model. Through neoliberalism and capitalistic tactics, what used to be part of a thriving vocational high school curriculum, now enhances the bottom line of many for-profit education entities. Promises for a bright financial future ultimately play on the aspirations of those youth desperately seeking to better themselves. Courses that were once free, like auto mechanics, electrical shop, and plumbing, are now taught with a hefty price tag in places where the school credentials are questionable.

According to Saltman (2000), neoliberals see students as consumers and restrained audiences where their access to knowledge is controlled by capitalists who validate the pursuit of profit through education. Saltman adamantly explicates that minorities have been subjected to biased distribution policies that concern public resources through means that depict progress, but in reality, show no substantive advantage for the public schooling that it is replacing (Saltman, 2000). The push for college access is motivated by numerous issues. Mainly more money funneled into an educational system that may prey on the needs and fears of students like these, who have not had many opportunities to progress academically. Rosenbaum, Stephan, and Rosenbaum (2010) caution that the drive toward a college degree may erroneously give the

impression that jobs will be guaranteed and plentiful, and money will be sufficient not to struggle (Rosenbaum, Stephan, & Rosenbaum, 2010).

We can see currently that education cost has encouraged more debt with very few comfortable means to repay and with some lenders and schools becoming absolute financial predators. The previous statements are not meant to infer that there is no need for post-secondary education. As Myers-Asch (2010) has carefully assessed, a four-year college certificate is desired by many students, but the best option for post-secondary educational attainment may not always be a college degree, especially for students who are trapped in the belief that their value is dependent upon the expectations of others. Myers-Asch confirms nonetheless that there is a definite need for skilled tradesman, like the students Charles witnessed getting licenses and certificates (Myers-Asch, 2010).

Eunice's views regarding the purpose of education are negatively influenced by the stigma of jail and probation. She has struggled with trust issues concerning school policies and has been deeply wounded psychologically within both the educational and the judicial system. Furthermore, having a child has not been easy for Eunice, and she is concerned about being able to care for him. Presently, she benefits from a support system that includes her mom and grandmother, but she is acutely aware that this will not last forever. Her mother frequently reminds her of the consequences of not completing school:

You will never get nowhere without at least a high school diploma and you wouldn't even be able to get in college cause you didn't graduate, or you don't have a GED, so what are you gonna do ... you just gonna sit around?

This message that her mother reinforces is disheartening for her to hear. Eunice has a lot of career goals which include being a chef, opening a beauty salon, and truck driving. In the near

future (after graduation), she is hoping to obtain her commercial license to drive a bus for the city. Eunice has noted that at times she is fearful of the future. Since she and others in her situation did not fit into the traditional high school environment due to past transgressions, she has experienced condescending attitudes from faculty in her school environment that perpetuates the theories of deficiency. She recalls faculty saying things like "you should feel lucky that you got a second chance though, still graduating." Her biggest ambition is to be an executive chef, yet her culinary skills are limited to date. The realization is that she had no worthwhile access to a culinary arts curriculum where she may have experienced internships and acquired a variety of certificates.

James, like Eunice, has had some run-ins with the law which he would not divulge. He seems more scattered in his aspirations for after high school completion. His career ambitions fluctuate between the NFL, being a writer, and a career in law. Currently, He is putting more emphasis on a professional football career. It may be easier in James' mind to choose sports as a career because there have been no male role models in his life with legitimate professions for him to emulate. Most have been or are currently in the penal system. Edwards (1983) and Hubbard (1999) apprise us that media representation of successful African-American males routinely extols their physical prowess as athletes or their ability to entertain, rather than professional pursuits such as medicine, law, finance and investment, or entrepreneurship (Edwards, 1983; Hubbard, 1999). Edwards (1983) emphasized statistically the probability of making it to professional sports is very slim. Even when provided with full scholarships, between 25 % and 35% of African-American male athletes are denied entrance to college because of poor prior academic performance (Edwards, 1983). All the same, James believes that school teaches the basic work skill of being on time. He elaborates on the previous statement with the following

assessment: “Think about it, you go to your job on time, it'll show your boss or who you work for, ‘oh, this person has skills, they come in prepared, and now no foolish stuff.” The irony of James’ statement is that he believes that being on time is a demonstration of having a particular skill set.

This mindset is suggestive, according to Anyon (1980/2006), of the control exerted toward working-class students in that they are trained to be obedient to rules, not only in the classroom, but in their future workplaces. Education is important to James in that he can prepare for the outside world: “Basically, getting prepared to have a job, go to college, and not to end up like my dad, who fell victim to the street and has done time in prison.” The street, as James puts it, influences many of his peers to do the wrong things, such as gang activity for which they become targeted by the police. But he says many do not want that way of life. He, along with his peers just want to grow up to be somebody.

LaShay and Regina have expressed a more materialistic viewpoint about how they perceive success and this viewpoint may also be gender influenced. LaShay looks at her older sisters who did not graduate from high school but manage to get their GED certificates. She also has observed her mother struggle to make ends meet with no husband, nine children, and no specific job skills. Her mother started her family early and did not complete high school. Her mom and her sisters are her motivation to do well. What is constantly in her mind is being able to take care of herself. LaShay’s observation of her sisters’ and mother’s lack of educational attainment is, according to Dill (1983) and Higginbotham (1981), substantiated by empirical evidence that many African-American females worry about their preparedness to sustain their economic independence, especially in communities where they must confront poverty and lack of employment opportunities (Dill, 1983; Higginbotham, 1981). Dill’s (1983) work especially establishes how many African-American mothers from working-class backgrounds emphasize

getting an education for the reason stated above. Moreover, many of them do not view marriage as a reliable means to secure economic mobility, and are painfully aware that “being black, poor, and female have placed them at the bottom of the social structure” (Dill, 1983, p. 145).

To Regina, success is again dependent on how hard she is willing to work; a message that she says is repeatedly stressed by her parents and is grounded in the meritocratic ideology. Regina is a participant who admits that she does not think about class or status. I wondered if her aspirations reflect what her parents want for her more than what she really wants for herself. She, like Danielle and LaShay, want to be comfortable and not worry about how their bills will be paid. Regina’s mother is a university administrator who relates countless stories about minority students’ difficulty in navigating through the post-secondary environment. Yet I find her explanation of the purpose of schooling somewhat contradictory with what she said earlier in the interview about making money being a major incentive for doing well in school:

We go to school ... I think ... to learn about ourselves and discover who we are as people. We go to school because we know there is something better for us out there because if we didn’t we would probably stay in a little box not knowing what can happen and what will happen.

Kerry, who does not think that school prepares one for life entirely, states the following:

I just wish school would just relate to whatever we’re learning to life ... a lot of the times we just get too concerned with book work, just trying to pass the test ... we don’t ever see the value in the material that we’re learning.

Kerry expresses that success for him is knowing what he has done in school has finally paid off:

Whatever goal you’re trying to reach, if you’re finally able to reach it no matter what the time spent was ... then that’s definitely like a definition of success. I’m

very hopeful about my future even though I'm not like ... 100% sure what I want to do in the future.

Tina expresses a more humane ideology about the purpose of education, and her ideas on success. She does not think education is about getting a job and living large. It's about how one expands his or her mind:

If we had more people that were educated, we would have a more influential way of getting things done. I think ... well for me, my definition of success is doing something that I love to do, and I think that explains the reason why I want to go for political science and journalism.

Allison thinks the real purpose of education is to give one the tools to analyze things or to problem solve: "It's giving you those skills so that you can use them, you can apply them to the real world." Allison has observed her mom struggle after the divorce from her father and does not want to live the way her mother must. Allison is familiar with people who have enough money but are not happy, and she wants to have a balance between success and happiness. She is also conflicted between making money and following her dreams because she is not quite sure yet what she wants to do. She does not want to fight so hard to be comfortable. In her describing success, she notes the societal values in the United States which are consumerist and where everyone works hard to chase money:

I know that no matter how successful I end up; I won't be as successful as I could be if I wasn't a black woman. That's hard to have to take on but it's true. If I were a white guy and I was successful, I'd have a lot more money than a black woman in the same position.

In Quinton's mind, schools do not prepare you enough because what they are teaching is not relevant to students' aspirations:

They just don't cover what they teach - it's not really helping people out for what they want to do when they grow up. Some of the stuff in school that they teach us, it's like not gonna help me get a job.

There is the concern that the curriculum does not meet the needs of students trying to gain employment, let alone gain admission into college. From earlier in the interview, Quinton especially, has in many ways, internalized this as a fault he and many of his peers may possess. It is an awareness that is aligned with the racially negative portrayal of blacks in the media that emphasizes violent behavior, slow intellect, and low academic performance. Arroyo and Zigler (1995) cite the work of numerous scholars that verify the psychological distress that affects minorities trying to adapt to dominant culture norms due to racial and ethnic stereotypes (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995). According to Blackmon and Thomas (2014), it is conceivable that many African-American youth will shoulder racial stereotypes associated with their ethnic background that may hinder educational and career development (Blackmon & Thomas, 2014). What Quinton may be experiencing, as Speight (2007) acknowledges, is the idea that he (and others like him) will never be good enough or worthy enough, to access education or employment on a level playing field (Speight, 2007, p. 131). It is, as Akbar (1984) suggest, a "psychological slavery" that mimics a prison designed to impede the motivation, self-esteem, and ambitions of African-Americans (1984, p. 47).

To Amberia, the purpose of education is about getting people ahead in life; to bring people equity on the playing field against those who are privileged. Amberia's social circle consist mainly of students who attend her selective enrollment school. Amberia acknowledges

that social and cultural capital are the assets one acquires if one is educated, even if you are poor. She has learned how to make connections due to her participation in several school programs. She does not think that she would have been able to make these connections had she not been attending her present school. She describes her idea of success in the following passage:

Success is just doing your personal best; not what someone else says you can do but doing what you feel you can do to your highest extent ... being happy while doing that ... whatever you can do and just going for it.

Norma reflects that school is to ensure the future for herself, and other students like her, but she also acknowledges what her parents want for her.

I think education is really just an important thing in life to do bigger and better things ... parents always want us to have like a better future than they had, so my parents ... they went to school, but they want me to go to better schools and have a better future, so I think, I can insure that.

Norma thinks success is just defining “who you are and finding your strengths and just using that to utilize in the future and just move up in life.” By Norma’s parents being voluntary immigrants to this country from Nigeria, she understands fully the value of education. In fact, Smith (2015) notes the census data has proclaimed the Nigerian immigrant population the most educated of all immigrants in the United States (Smith, 2015). Her parents frequently remind her that they left Nigeria so that she could have a better education.

Nathan’s opinion is that education provides broader knowledge of the world and assists one in becoming an informed citizen. He appreciates that he attends a school that is culturally diverse. This, he says, has allowed him to take into consideration other people's opinions and how they think, versus him saying his is right and theirs is wrong. He also notes that without



schools, America would start to deteriorate “because a lot of people don’t have skills that you would normally associate with being career ready.” Nathan wants to be an entrepreneur in the hospitality industry and to open his own chain of resorts. He views success as being able to give back to the community by reaching out to the less fortunate. One person, Katie, who has had opportunities to act, write, dance, and model is not sure what she wants to do after high school:

I act, I model, I tap dance - I was raised ‘you should be a lawyer or doctor’ ...

‘You should be this, that, or this’ ... and then I feel that I wasn’t too comfortable or happy in that way so... I don’t know exactly what I want to do when I do leave high school.

### **I Got to Believe –The Internal Struggle with Belief and Reality**

Downey, Ainsworth, and Qian (2009), contend that there is an expectation in the scholarly community that African-Americans would be more pessimistic toward schooling, especially in the current economic landscape, combined with the innumerable negative historical factors (Downey, Ainsworth, & Qian, 2009). Still, the participants remain steadfast in their beliefs about the purpose of education and their desire for educational attainment. Some students exhibit what Mickelson (1990) terms as abstract and concrete belief systems. Abstract belief system attitudes on the value and purpose of education are influenced by the premise that education solves most social problems, such as poverty and unemployment. The process of credentialing is one way of awarding merit to one’s efforts for demonstrating adherence to the premise that education is the great equalizer (Mickelson, 1990).

Frequently students, as did LaShay, hold the conviction that education is the key to everything. But while this may be a common thought among all social classes, we must come to the realization, as Mickelson suggests, that one’s concrete belief system about achievement and

social mobility can also be race and class specific due to the various experiences individuals in subordinate classes encounter. We should, as Mickelson advises, regularly acknowledge the importance of the influence of family background as well in understanding concrete beliefs (Mickelson, 1990, p. 59). As LaShay and James relate the backgrounds of their families, there is almost a prophetic indication of what their lives might be if they do not embrace a meritocratic ideology. In addition, when African-Americans and other minority students observe valuable resources disbursed to predominantly white school populations, there exist, as Mickelson has noted through Crichlow, (1986) Giroux (1983) and Willis (1977) “social conflict over the value of education for people from minority and working-class backgrounds” (p. 58), meaning the system ideologies and values may not be trusted, bringing on confrontation, resistance, and insurgence (Mickelson,1990).

Carters’ (2005, 2006) research addresses the concrete and abstract belief systems by studying three groups of students which she denotes as 1) non-compliant believers, 2) cultural straddlers, and 3) cultural mainstreamers. The argument that Carter makes concerning the lack of academic achievement among African-American students is more focused on their ability to establish a cultural identity and a sense of group belonging, rather than the idea that they are resisting "acting white" being tied to academic performance. Noncompliant believers do not readily accept dominant values, despite the fact they frequently advocate the value of schooling. Cultural mainstreamers adopt established dominant culture norms in order to assimilate into the system. Cultural straddlers are able to negotiate their academic identity successfully while maintaining a positive racial and ethnic identity (Carter, 2005, 2006).

Let us look at the students I would call non-compliant believers. Non-compliant believers are the students who reveal the widespread disparity between their school engagement, academic

achievement, and their educational beliefs. Whereas they seem in agreement with dominant norms centered around academic achievement, they are not dismissive of their own ethnicity and cultural norms and may also fail to fully conform to the dictates of white society. Despite espousing the value of education, they are not consistently academically successful; most have average or poor grades. Systematic inequities within the school are judged with severity by non-compliant believers, yet this judgement is not enveloped in anti-school or anti-achievement ideas (Carter, 2006, p. 308).

First, like Carter, I believe it is not the intent of noncompliant believers to ignore school rules or to be unaccommodating in their academic environment. Life circumstances have dealt some of them a hand that most of us would find difficult to overcome. One could say it is remarkable that Charles, who was thrown out of school for cutting class and poor grades, continued to persist in his efforts to graduate when the actions of the school administration would encourage most to drop out. Let us not forget Charles became a father twice before completing high school. Perhaps if the school had better counseling resources and better instructional engagement strategies, he could have avoided such a severe punishment which could have resulted in him graduating at seventeen rather than twenty. Eunice, being in the penal system with a felony hanging over her head, always thought that she did not fit in school. Teachers she encountered frequently validated her thoughts on not fitting in. The burden of a small child, combined with low grades and poor test scores, has her struggling to survive by throwing her hat in as many boxes as she can for the promise of economic stability.

Danielle, because of her familial issues, is desperate to prove to herself and others, that she can get a degree followed by a decent job. At times, it has been difficult for her to navigate through her senior year because of contradictory academic policies that stand in the way of

college matriculation. The effort she puts in has not always paid off, with her having to attend Saturday school just to sit in front of a computer for three to four hours a session. With her shifting from one class to another to fulfill academic requirements, she is more than frustrated with the illogic of it all. In addition, she feels abandoned by both her biological and foster families. Systematic and structural policies within the institution of school have made it difficult for these students to assimilate to norms that the dominant culture sanctions as appropriate.

In the middle of the spectrum, cultural main streamers embrace assimilation to dominant norms, yet remain cognizant of racial, ethnic, and political issues (Carter, 2005, 2006). Perhaps Laura, James, LaShay, Katie, Albert, Regina, Audrey, Kendra, and sometimes Quinton can be the cultural mainstreamers, in that they espouse the mantra of hard work and responsibility for one's own achievement. These students have embraced in many ways the dominant norms as the accepted requirements for academic and economic success. Even though Quinton's grades are above average, his ability to feel the blame his peers experience for their' academic failure is a subliminal tool that can make students like him acquiesce to norms that are not comfortable for them.

The last group of students, cultural straddlers, abide by school rules, but not necessarily passively. They can be critical of the school exclusivity in ways that enable them to honor their ethnicity. However, they are able to acquire within the dominant ideology numerous resources for success. Most of the selective enrollment students I interviewed are cultural straddlers. They have the social capital to negotiate their connections for greater opportunities after high school. Yet, for some selective enrollment students, their desire to criticize their environment with a strong political analysis demonstrates a greater understanding of various issues surrounding educational inequity. Most importantly, they do not want to choose between their ethnicity and

their academic success, and they do not apologize for their acquisition of skills and knowledge (Carter, 2005, 2006). Even as I have tried to make Carter's work applicable to the students in this study, I want the reader to be especially sensitive to how Carter's (2005, 2006) work implores us to acknowledge how non-compliant believers struggle to resolve the breach which exist between their aspirations for educational achievement, and the integration of their political and social realities (Carter, 2005, 2006).

Since their realities are not always congruent with their expectations and aspirations, this breach is hard to reconcile within their schools and communities. Carter advises us to realize that we cannot, as a society, punish them for their criticism and questioning of the institution of school that perpetuates their failure, and then expect them to fully embrace, with devout faithfulness, the dominant ideology of meritocracy. Carter has pointed out, "schools do little to adapt and adjust to how racial, ethnic, and class issues play out in the classroom, in the curriculum, and in society at large" (Carter, 2005, p. 46). Carter (2006) additionally asserts that most schools propagate an ideology that encourages an assumed assimilation and offers a warning influenced by the studies of Rist (1974) and Sagar and Schofield (1984) that education will have served its purpose when minorities adopt white standards for academic, economic, and social success. It is this assumption that when the above happens, minorities will no longer have to concern themselves with the differentiation between them and whites (Carter, 2006, p. 307).

All students mentioned in this chapter demonstrate abstract ideology regarding the purpose and value of education initially. All of them want to believe that their lives have meaning, value, and purpose. Arbona (2000) points out that early in a student's academic career, educational aspirations start to develop which influences their academic achievement (Arbona, 2000). Students ability to feel connected to the school environment can positively influence

academic success and enhances their self-perception (Finn,1989; Goodenow,1993; Uwah, et al., 2008; Ogbu, 1988). Newton and Sandoval (2015), Mizell (1999), and Wilson (1987, 1996) have documented studies which validate that social economic status of the community can be linked with the educational aspiration and expectations of students. The empirical evidence shows that there is the propensity for African-American youth to live in low-income communities where educational opportunities are insufficient, along with the existence of unemployed or under employed adults. The under-employed / unemployed adults in the community may serve as a reminder of the lack of opportunities for educational attainment and upward mobility, which further widens the breach between academic achievement and political realities (Newton & Sandoval, 2015; Mizell,1999; Wilson,1987, 1996).

### **Chapter Nine Conclusion: What Is Success?**

All of us possess a definition and expectation for success, and the concept of success is often attached to how hard you are willing to work. However, we must also recognize how the concept of merit is also attached to the definition of success. Nunn (2014) reminds us that if we examine how students perceive themselves as successful, it is important to note that their perception of success is associated with the type of school environment he or she is attending. Additionally, we must recognize that each type of school setting "is associated with a particular tier in higher education" (Nunn, 2014, p. 3). In the words of Mickelson (1990), we must accept that working-class and poor neighborhood students' aspirations and definitions of success are at times the reflection of cultural experiences that have been negatively shaped throughout the history of the United States (Mickelson, 1990).

The work of several scholars referenced by Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, and Gallagher (2003) discloses the harsh hindrances African-American and other minority youth

confront in the pursuit of their educational goals (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, p. 142). The probability of urban youth obtaining a post-secondary degree is less than non-urban youth (Olson & Jerald, 1998). A limited amount of career choices have been available to minorities where low wages and low status are the norm (Carter & Cook, 1992).

Minorities have been denied exposure to role models in varied professional careers (Constantine et al., 1998). The lack of preparedness for college or the workforce places urban minority youth at risk of not attaining meaningful work (Wilson, 1987, 1996). It has been suggested by scholars Blustein, Phillips, Davis, Finkelberg, and Roarke (1997), Ogbu (1989), Worthington and Juntunen, (1997), and perhaps confirmed by Quinton and Kerry in this study, that the disengagement from school and post-secondary career planning is because many high school students hold the viewpoint that the experiences they have had related to school is not applicable to their future career mobility (Blustein, Phillips, Davis, Finkelberg, & Roarke, 1997; Ogbu, 1989; Worthington & Juntunen, 1997). This is especially relevant for minority students who believe career attainment is not comparable with equity to their non-minority peers (Carter & Cook, 1992).

In my interviews with the participants, it seemed the neighborhood high school students view education as a tool of survival. Being able to feed and clothe themselves, keep a roof over their heads, and able to qualify for better employment is paramount to their self-esteem and is a measure of success. They are also hopeful about entry into a higher-class social stratum. Some of them want desperately to avoid the circumstances of their families and friends – the lifetime of poverty, imprisonment, gangs, drugs, and early parenthood. Most, excluding three exceptions, are more inclined to seek careers in the service industry. What was evident in the interviews with selected enrollment students is that they seem to exhibit more confidence in succeeding in life

than their peers attending neighborhood schools. Their use of language is much more declarative and demonstrates an inherent confidence that they will achieve their desired goals. This allows them to consider more abstract concepts such as quality and fulfillment in choosing a profession, rather than merely seeking to position themselves as better candidates for employment. For them, education serves to improve the human condition, to achieve happiness in life and their growth as an individual, both intellectually and spiritually.

They look for professions such as medicine, law, business entrepreneurships, and the arts as career paths. Despite their individual experiences with racism, students in selective enrollment schools feel more like insiders than those of the previous group. They speak the same language and share the same interests of those in the upward social classes, and their parents are more likely to be middle-class and better educated. As I conclude this section, I am especially attentive to the plight of four participants: Danielle, Quinton, Laura, and Charles. The last time I met with Danielle, there was a sadness in her voice and face regarding her future for college. By her being a ward of the state, she was guaranteed tuition to a state college, but due to the political chaos in the Illinois State legislature over finances, her funding was rescinded. Quinton is working two jobs while attending community college. He was awarded a scholarship for his first year but must still work to help his elderly mom with the finances at home. Charles remains more hopeful. For the reason that he sees education as more than a survival tool, he is able to see his future as a prophetic calling:

I'm somewhat close to an understanding of my calling as a career because I've had a lot of jobs and no job has touched me the way this job (VOYCE) has. I really enjoy being in the community and trying to make a difference and I've got to believe it will happen for me.



Last, even though Laura attends a neighborhood school, she is a stellar student with state and national science awards under her belt. I remembered a profound statement made by Laura about the value and purpose of education: “ignorance is never an option.”

### **Chapter Nine Summary**

This chapter discussed participants view on success and their post-secondary aspirations. The second research question was framed around their opinions about the purpose of education. Five neighborhood students expressed a social efficiency perspective concerning their definition of success and their post-secondary endeavors. Success was defined as being able to sustain themselves. The other four expressed a more altruistic definition of success in tryin to fulfill their post-secondary aspirations. This chapter revealed that most Neighborhood students generally viewed education as a tool for survival. Conversely, selective enrollment students easily saw themselves succeeding. They equated success with entrepreneurship combined with philanthropic activities. The following chapter has students giving their advice on increasing the academic achievement rate for African-American students.

## **Chapter Ten: Increasing Success**

This chapter examines the study participants' beliefs on how to increase the academic achievement rate for black students. The rationale for having students provide their opinions on how to increase academic achievement is that first, it allows students to offer their perceptions of the learning environment. The failure of various interventions and erroneous educational strategies are a license for students to provide suggestions that can offer the best opportunities for them to succeed academically (Howard, 2001). Second, it allows researchers and reformers the ability to understand how teacher instruction influences achievement, and third, it reaffirms how student voice in school reform is pertinent to making positive change (Mirón & Lauria, 1998). I reiterate that nearly all students reinforce the concept of merit or individual effort, but some go further in detailing what schools should do. While some students struggle for the middle-class ideology of respectability, they are all painfully cognizant that the obligation of increasing academic achievement is not entirely their burden.

### **The Value of Mindset**

A lot of what the participants believe concerning academic success rates among African-Americans is conceptualized through their academic mindset. Farrington (2014), who references the work of psychologist Carol Dweck (1986, 2006), advises that we look at the concept of academic mindset when endeavoring to answer why some African-American students do well academically, and some do not. The academic mindset is guided by a set of beliefs that students hold about school in relation to the self. Most of these beliefs originate from the students lived experiences within their families and communities, but also with their experiences with the school environment. Farrington discusses four concepts which I use to analyze how some black students perceived their academic abilities:

- I can succeed at this
- My ability and competence will grow.
- I belong to this academic community
- This work has value for me

### **I Can Succeed at This**

Farrington utilizes Pajares' (1996) explication of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which suggest that the beliefs that individuals hold about their ability and the potential outcome of the tasks they perform have a direct impact on the way they approach a task and how they behave while performing the task. An individual's interpretation of performance results influences what they believe about themselves and their performance on future tasks (Pajares, 1996). Most of the selective enrollment students demonstrate a positive mindset because they have various emotional support mechanisms in place that encourage the belief that they can succeed, along with structural and institutional school policies that affirm their intellectual ability (e.g. standardized test scores, advanced placement, and honors curriculum). While selective enrollment students have a mindset to succeed, this mindset does not come without burdensome expectations for success from others as well (Farrington, 2014).

Farrington has expressed that, unlike their upper middle-class student peers who receive affirmations of success from teachers and parents, the hidden messages delivered to low-income African-American students are expectations of failure. Since federal policies that promote accountability see their schools and communities as failures, apprehension underscores their educational lives. The inability to meet standard norms for academic achievement may mean for many low-income African-American students that academic success is exceedingly unlikely (Farrington, 2014). In addition, African-American adolescents in low-income communities

experience the economic disinvestment of their communities as one of the many other messages that convey an expectation of failure.

### **My Ability and Competence Will Grow with My Effort**

Farrington (2014) stresses that some students embrace the idea that their academic ability can increase with hard work and effort, as confirmed by most of the participants. There is also the idea that intelligence is static. The idea that intelligence is static may not be easy to change in some low-income students who are having difficulty in school. Their ideas about their academic performance are also associated with the type of school they attend. From now on the students in this section are noted as SE (Selective Enrollment) and NBH (Neighborhood). The views of the following students strongly emphasize hard work and effort.

Ariana (SE): if you're not hardworking ... then I mean it's your fault if you don't have a work ethic ... because you have to want it in order to be successful.

Regina (SE): I think it's probably based upon how hard you are willing to work.

Albert (NBH): Take it ... your education upon yourself.

Nathan (SE): Keep learning, never give in ... I think it's like constantly learning

LaShay (NBH): if you try ... they see you trying, they're not gonna fail you ... I had one of my teachers like that ... especially my math teacher ... I had a 'C' but I was planning on graduating with a 'B' but, you know I tried my hardest ... was tryin and tryin pushin in my math class and you know ... she gave me a 'B' to graduate with.

Those who embrace the *ability and competence will grow with my effort* mindset believe that hard work will make them smarter, thus resulting in better academic performance. LaShay is a perfect example of using her effort in navigating academic rewards. Although she has tried her

best, that may not equate with her doing the work that merits a “B” grade. She seemed to regard her work as “C” quality, and that her instructor *gave* [emphasis added] her a “B” grade for higher ranking at graduation. Her lack of confidence in her ability does not allow her to think that she deserved the higher grade. The grade is a gift from the teacher rather than what she earned. In contrast, Albert has put forth much effort in maintaining his grades. Even though he attends a neighborhood school, he identifies positively through his academic accomplishments by attending college classes on Saturdays, by ranking eighth in his class, and by honors classes in his school. The other three students attend selective enrollment high schools and identify positively with their school, first by the type of school it is, and because their academic mindset allows for a belief in effort. But more importantly, the type of school they attend meets their intrinsic needs by providing and rewarding them with the resources needed to perform at their best.

Danielle addressed this idea earlier, that students who get poor grades are more likely to believe they are not smart enough. She is also struggling against a fixed mindset that can frame her perception of her intelligence. This fixed mindset can make struggling students believe that no amount of effort will change the outcome of their academic performance assessments. As Farrington (2014) noted, the belief that intelligence can grow or is a fixed state, is more prophetic of academic success than measured intelligence (Farrington (2014). Nathan is positive that all it takes is perseverance while Ariana and the other two selective enrollment students are espousing self-responsibility for academic achievement, within a respectability context. It seems they are surreptitiously assigning blame to students who they believe do not try hard enough. But I must recall the struggle that Danielle, Eunice, and a few other neighborhood students have endured to meet performance standards. It is not intellectual ability or lack of effort, which keeps

them from meeting school standards, but inadequate resources, and inappropriate school policies that do not meet the needs of the students they have been charged to serve.

### **I Belong to This Academic Community**

The next group of students are concerned with cultural stereotype representations of African-Americans. Although they may embrace any of the four mindsets that Farrington describes, their primary method for addressing decreasing poor academic performance is through an internalized racial oppression lens, which points to cultural deficits within the black community. Yet, internalized racial oppression may be fed by the need to belong in the academic community by those who perform well along with those who do not. Poor performing students want to believe they can achieve academic success. Farrington (2014) asserts that students who do perform well do so with confidence that they have the intellectual ability and the work effort. Mindset perspectives may have some students believing that they do not belong in their schools because of the negative stereotypes they must consistently confront. This difficulty is additional to not believing they are full members of the school community. In contrast, students with a sense of belonging are more motivated to engage in academic activities (Farrington, 2014).

Allison (SE) talks of not embracing stereotype identities. Her political activism has heightened her awareness on the use of stereotypes in the discrimination of African-Americans:

Stop trying to fit the glove that was put on you. I know too many people who are incredibly smart, who just don't want to do school work because they don't want to be viewed as lame, or they don't want to be seen as not really black, or not genuine cause ... I've gone through that with some relatives. Because that isn't your identity ... you don't have to accept that. The black identity isn't always a total black identity... it's a false concept.

Allison's statements are suggestive of Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) theory of black students fear of acting white in her reflection of some black students' behaviors toward school. Her own experiences have given her insight in analyzing how trying to negotiate having an identity is not a one-dimensional endeavor. Farrington's study gives validity to Allison's statements that race, and ethnicity are not the only ways for black students to frame their identities; students can gain multiple identities through their engagement in school. Farrington reminds us through the works of Markus and Kunda (1986) and Oyserman (2001) that we are all multi-dimensional beings and our identities are shaped by the context in which we exist. Allison believes that our identities as people do not begin and end with a racial construct. Allison not only identifies as black, but also as someone who is athletic, and someone who is interested in theater and music. Each one of these contexts informs her about her identity as a student, as a young woman, and as an African-American.

Miles and Brown (1999) and Omi and Winant (1986) have counseled us that embracing the identity of a racial group means embracing the history associated with the group and the stereotypes that characterize them (Miles & Brown, 1999; Omi & Winant, 1986). Allison addresses this by stating there is so much negativity in the media associated with black youth and black communities, that black youth in general are forced to view themselves in a certain way "so they start to take that on as their identity." Oyserman, Terry, and Bybee (2002) make clear that for low-income adolescent African-American students, it can be challenging to create constructive and authentic identities when the school is a critical route to adulthood. The norms students must adhere to for success should be created in an atmosphere where school relevance and being African-American are synonymous with achievement (Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). It is not simply refuting stereotypes for Tina, Norma, and Audrey. They advocate students

change how they portray themselves, but Audrey is more resolute about changing negative behaviors:

Tina (SE): I think in order to be looked at in a different view we have to be able to present ourselves in a different view ... stop accepting the drug or gang mentality.

Norma (SE): I think change the image that has been put on them like 'Oh, I'm black, all I have is like jail, my dad is not here, my parents are not here for me', all the negative sayings and stereotypes out there ... I think that if we could imagine like a brighter image on us ... show ourselves differently, compose ourselves differently, not put ourselves down, we can.

Audrey (SE): I think once we get together and actually try to better ourselves as a whole and actually ... when we come together and stop going against each other like killing each other, fighting each other ... We need to start helping ourselves first before we can even take help from other people ... so once we start getting ourselves together and actually getting out there and seeking our education ... that's when they're gonna help us further ourselves even more because we've already started helping ourselves.

Tina, Norma, and Audrey place the obligation on the student to avoid accepting negative representations of themselves. Audrey, especially manifesting respectability politics, demonstrates how internalized racial oppression can encourage fragmentation within an ethnic group, leading victims shouldering the blame and removing the focus from racist institutional policies that give the dominant culture advantages (Pyke & Dang, 2003). This also causes some group members to disconnect from one another in conflict and discriminate against one another (Gainor, 1992; Kanuha, 1990). For this type of oppression to endure, it needs a compelling psychological factor



that those experiencing oppression accept (Frère,1970). Woodson (1933, as cited in Huber, Johnson, and Kohl, 2006) is adamant that schools reinforce the social-racial hierarchy which teaches black students to think of themselves as less, ultimately allowing whites to maintain their control, and additionally encouraging blacks to view each other with contempt (Huber, Johnson, & Kohl, 2006, p.187).

Pyke (2010) further explains that the negative stereotypes that dominant groups assign to racially subordinate group members serve as a means for those in the groups, who exhibit acceptable social norms, to detach from those considered inferior in their group. Schools exploit the otherness of African-American students in what they portray as their inability to meet societal norms for schooling. It is in the interest of those who are dominant that marginalized groups adapt their ideological perspective, thus keeping them subordinate because they cannot demonstrate the appropriate social norms (Pyke, 2010). Toldson and Owens (2010) and Wakefield and Hudley (2007) relate through their research that black children, who do not associate positively with their black identity, do not achieve in school. Conversely, those black students who develop a positive racial identity are successful academically (Toldson & Owens, 2010; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). The sense of belonging is extremely crucial to how students see themselves through their academic performance. Osterman (2000) cited in Farrington (2014), stresses that the sense of belonging is associated with psychological wellbeing. This sense of wellbeing influences their interactions with teachers and peers alike and stimulates motivation towards school and class work (Osterman, 2000). Osterman has noted the other side as well, that students may feel excluded or estranged which is demonstrated as disengagement from learning or even aggressive behavior within the classroom (Osterman, 2000, p. 343) because of school reform policies that now surround the closing of several schools in the city.

### **What Schools Should Do.**

The student participants also added their views on what schools must do to facilitate academic success. The themes for what schools must do are 1) having empathetic and encouraging environments, 2) improve instructional strategies, and 3) restructure discipline policies.

**Empathetic environments.** Students need to feel that teachers have an emotional investment in their educational lives. Some neighborhood student narratives on student-teacher relationships reveal that teachers who connected with students were frequently terminated from their schools. Those teachers who were distant would make insensitive remarks to students in the way Danielle describes:

I've come across some teachers just in the school because they gettin' their check regardless, like ... they got their education, so the fact that you get it or not in their class, they don't care. I've had teachers like that ... or I've had teachers ... that will go toe to toe with you like they're not adults.

In contrast, nearly all selective enrollment students reported having nurturing relationships with their teachers. Laura (NBH) stated that teachers should be more encouraging and pay more attention to all students:

Push the students that are more challenged ... just push them to do better cause some teachers actually do ignore the fact that some of your students just are not where they should be when it comes to education, so just push them to do better.

Charles (NBH) who has experienced expulsion, reflected on the importance of having nurturing teachers in school who were willing to spend extra time with students.

Some of the teachers that got let go were all the teachers that cared about the students and classes and stuff ... like, that worked with them ... they left teachers

there that never speak, or they will just write on the board and give you a handout to finish by the end of class.

Danielle (NBH) is also concerned about having a nurturing environment and teachers improving their instructional strategies, but in addition to that, overcrowded classrooms, she feels, takes away from learning.

I want teachers that love to teach ... that ... have teachin' methods that you actually learn from ... that suit up and plan schedules for the next day all night and know you're gonna enjoy this lesson that you're being taught or really put time and thought into things ... like, I don't want classrooms with thirty kids in them and expect them all to get a quality education, and the classrooms are packed.

Milner (2012) explains that his (2010) research revealed that many educators view their success and the success of those close to them as earned, and failure is a choice that one makes. This viewpoint carries over into how they interact with students, while overlooking structural inequities that are prohibitive to success. Teachers who display deficit mindsets and no expectations of minority students have difficulty providing a curriculum that is challenging and engaging. The deficit mindset of some educators shows through the mediocre performance standards they may set for students (Milner, 2012). As Charles and Danielle both described, their experience uncovered that some teachers do not put much effort into creating an engaging classroom, thus setting low standards and expectations for students. Students will meet low expectations and standards with the viewpoint that the work they are doing is of no value to them. Ford and Harris (1996) assert that not all teachers are reflective enough to examine their own academic or racial biases directed at black and other minority students. The environment of

the classroom is correlated to the academic outcomes and disengagement that black students experience (Ford & Harris, 1996). Payne (2008) calls attention to the fact that most neighborhood schools that black students attend are on the bottom tier for meeting academic goals, with low expectations for student achievement becoming part of the school culture (Payne, 2008). Danielle also explains that it is important for teachers and administrators to understand the struggle outside the classroom in which students must confront. There are many students struggling to achieve academically through some adverse or extra ordinary circumstances:

It's more than academics that kids struggle with ... its personal, its friends, it's everything ... be more engaging, like, I think that is the main thing, like when you have support of teachers, and teachers that really wanna teach, you gonna want to be in the classroom.

Danielle, Charles, and Laura are reaffirming that there is a need for more empathetic teaching personnel that can change the school culture. What students are looking for is the relational trust – trust in which students believe that teachers have an investment in the lives of their students beyond the school. Irvine (1991), Phelan, Davidson, and Cao (1992), and Phelan, Yu, and Davidson (1994) have noted in their research that classroom environments have significant influence on the academic disengagement and educational outcomes of black students. Irvine (1991) notes that teacher behaviors and attitudes toward students is especially salient in transmitting both the hidden and the stated curriculum (Irvine, 1991). When teachers are considerate, respectful, and tolerant of students, the relationship between them makes for more positive interactions, which will lead to increased teacher expectation and student motivation. Students want teachers who recognize their academic efforts and respect their individual personalities (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992; Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994).

One way to address this issue is to look at class size. Moss (2007) has shed light on how instructional strategies may be determined by the size of the classroom, and thus influence the way students learn material, frequently with less than positive results. According to Moss, large class sizes often result in direct instruction where lecturing and note taking are the primary methods used. Lecturing and note taking cannot be discounted as a method of appropriate strategies, but it cannot be the only method in which instruction is delivered, especially where students, with varying learning styles, must be considered. Instituting smaller class sizes may provide teachers with greater license to produce assignments that would encourage creativity, and where students can demonstrate extraordinary aptitude.

We should take note as well from Moss' observations, that although most teachers want to utilize creativity in designing challenging instruction, most must execute instruction with what Moss termed as a survival mode mindset when trying to assess large numbers of students within a class (Moss, 2007). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2014) extols the research findings of Brühwiler and Blatchford (2011) and Chingos (2013) that the academic performance of elementary school students in smaller classes is better across all subject matters in comparison to peers in larger classes. These benefits carry over into the secondary level even if they experience larger class sizes in a secondary educational environment. Students in smaller classes demonstrated higher scores on standardized test and are at least eight weeks ahead of their peers in content knowledge. Minority students, students considered at risk, and English Language learners benefit more because of their ability to receive more diagnostic feedback (Brühwiler, & Blatchford, 2011; Chingos, 2013). In terms of engagement, findings by the following researchers Dee and West (2008), and Fleming, Toutant, and Raptis (2002) confirmed that students in smaller classes participated more in class, displayed less troublesome behaviors,

adapted to intellectually challenging work, had greater access to technology, and were more willing to interrelate constructively with teachers. Teachers were able to track and provide diagnostic assessment of student performance which helped them differentiate the instructional needs of their students (Dee & West, 2008; Fleming, Toutant, & Raptis, 2002).

**Instructional strategies.** The method of presenting instructional material is crucial to student achievement and teachers must have at their disposal a variety of strategies available to engage students (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). McLeod, Fisher, and Hoover (2003) point out that for teachers to decide the best learning strategies for students, they must be aware of students' prior knowledge and academic levels. Teachers must be accountable in their decisions on the best ways to utilize resources and must choose learning strategies for students that will enable their academic progress (McLeod, Hoover, & Fisher, 2003). This happens to be an important narrative for some students having trouble grasping the material. Eunice (NBH) explained what it was like for her when teachers did not address the varying ways students learn:

The way they teach ... and the way the students adapt to the learning environment ... some kids learn by talk ... some kids can learn by people writing on the board and they have to see ... I need visual help like that and I need them to talk to me, explain and break it down, but the teachers, they just gave me the paper like 'look over it' and I'm like what is this supposed to help me with if I'm not getting it explained.

Danielle's (NBH) critique is that teachers should not lump students together and that differences in students' ability should be a consideration when presenting instructional material:

Everybody's not a quick learner ... or everybody's not ... the type of person who can read it in a book and understand or see it one time and get it. So, I've come

across teachers who had students like that and prepared their whole day off of students who are quick ... catch on to something or put workbook pages on the board ... and sit at the desk for the next fifty minutes that you're in that class and not say a word to you.

Kerry (SE) and Nathan (SE) seem to echo what Danielle said, emphasizing that teachers should be more aware of the various ways that students learn.

Kerry: Every kid is not always the same. They may like to learn in a different way, they may like to understand certain topics a different way than others do whether it be verbally or the board or through ear.

Nathan: like to be more adaptive to the children that you have because not all kids learn the same way, and I feel as if like, in general, schools teach in a very linear fashion ... and they don't really — not saying it's their fault, but they don't give much thought to how, like ... different students learn in different ways.

Even though Quinton (NBH) has taken AP classes in United States history, the instructional delivery he describes may make one question the ability of the teacher:

Okay so he would assign us, a week assignment would be open the book and do like, definitions and stuff ... and in AP US history, it's like fifty definitions we would do that the first day. The second day, we wouldn't even go over the words ... the third day we would wrap up ... the next day start somethin totally new ... I had to do a lot of make-up work because I wasn't doing a lot of the work ... because I didn't get it, but I was able to keep a 'B' in the class.

Rote learning in the instructional delivery is common in low-income schools where resources are low, morale is non-existent, and the school environment portrays students as unable or

unwilling to learn. The issues Quinton revealed in his narrative highlight concerns as to 1) whether the teacher had adequate training, 2) what were his actual expectations of students, especially if the teaching assignment is in an under resourced school, and 3) what was the instructor's overall perception of minority students' cognitive abilities. There is another issue – the issue of sorting students. This teacher recruited Quinton to take AP US history. Frequently, teachers' criteria for selection of the students they want for AP classes create hierarchies within the student body. This cherry-picking method draws attention by

1. choosing those students perceived as the easiest to teach and therefore, do not present the discipline issues of other students.
2. to generate positive performance results that will ensure that their teaching positions are not in danger of elimination.
3. results in students being unconvinced that they produced work of the quality that merits attainment of advanced placement.

The previous points can give rise to examining the value of implementing teaching strategies that focus on learning styles of students. In order for educators to do this, they must be aware that learning is both a cultural and style undertaking. The discussion on culture and learning styles by Guild (1994) highlights how knowing each student's culture is important for facilitating successful learning. Guild provides 3 questions that all educators must ask:

1. If students of the same culture have common learning style patterns and characteristics,
2. If they do, how would we know it, and
3. What are the implications for educators? (Guild, 1994, p.16)

Guild asserts that these three questions call for educators to examine their beliefs, prejudices, and expectations of diverse students. Generalizations about groups of people lead to inferences that



are ill-informed, resulting in inappropriately linking learning styles and culture (Guild, 1994). Boykin (1982) has described African-American students as preferring high stimulation, and they disparage routine or monotonous tasks (Boykin, 1982). This is an indication, as argued by Chimezie (1988), that those who educate African-American students must have a flexible personality that exhibits energy and enthusiasm. But this does not disavow that students have their preferences for the way that instruction is presented. Educators must have the ability to devise a variety of learning activities and instructional strategies that reach across a broad range of diverse classrooms that can garner academic success (Chimezie, 1988, p. 82).

**Restructuring discipline policies.** Quinton (NBH) believes that discipline policies are among the main reasons that black students are not achieving as much as they could. The research of Sartain, Allensworth, and Porter (2015) confirms his observation. Their study found that the high rate of exclusionary discipline practices in schools tend to create poor learning climates. Disciplinary practices used extensively in schools are primarily in low-income and minority communities (Sartain, Allensworth, & Porter, 2015). Quinton describes his observations of discipline practices in his school environment as pushing kids out. He states that students eventually become less enthusiastic about school. His work in VOYCE has helped to create legislation that encourages restorative justice in schools:

The one thing is too many suspensions ... keep kids in school ... that's something that my organization has been doing, restorative justice and ... the way stuff is taught ... that's another thing ... so kids probably don't get it. The teachers need to like ... like really be involved and really believe in what you're teaching ... getting us ready for careers ... taking it to the heart ... and stop petty stuff.

LaShay (NBH): I use to get suspended at another high school for ... like stupid stuff, you know like chewing on gum, even though I know I'm not supposed to be chewing, but I'm not chewing it hard, so you can see ... or like my shirt outside my pants, or if my ID flipped the wrong way and ... like I use to get suspended for really petty stuff like my sole fell out my pocket one day, and they thought I was on my phone ... I got three days for that, so my mom was like I'm just gonna transfer you cause you keep getting suspended for like really crazy heavy stuff and you not getting no education cause every week you come home, it's for different things, so she just transferred me to the school I'm in now.

Danielle (NBH): I feel like sometimes schools just wanna get rid of those kids ... like they never really try to get to the bottom of what's goin' on with that kid, it's just like 'I don't wanna deal with you, I just want to get rid of you ... I just want you gone out of my school' like that, because I've seen kids that had discipline problems but were not extremely bad, disappear... not because they chose to ... but because ... they had no choice.

Noguera (2003a) addresses this issue by citing the research of Johnson, Boyden, and Pitz (2000) which highlights how schools do what is best for the institution by employing intemperate punishing measures upon students who have the most severe emotional, socioeconomic, and educational needs (2003a, p. 342). As Noguera asserts, and LaShay and Danielle confirm, educators sometimes discipline students of color for tiny offenses that do not require disciplinary intervention (Noguera, 2003a). Baker et al. (2001) and Arcia (2006) also warn that low academic achievement is associated with the suspension of students and that suspended students tend to drop out of school and enter the juvenile justice system (Baker et al., 2001; Arcia, 2006).

The amount of discipline referrals Black students receive is not equal, in comparison, to their enrollment in schools (Gregory & Moseley, 2004; Skiba & Raush, 2006). Diem (1988) along with Morrison and Skiba (2001) highlight that in responding to minor offenses, it is common to employ in-and-out of school suspensions as a disciplinary measure to address behaviors such as disrespect and disobedience to class and schools (Diem, 1988; Morrison & Skiba, 2001). Johnson, Boyden, and Pittz (2000) report how zero tolerance policies have encouraged high rates of suspensions and expulsions for African-American students, thus escalating racial inequities. Additionally, black students receive more severe punishment for less serious infraction of rules than their white peers. Due to extreme zero tolerance policies, a great number of minority students often fall behind academically which results in their dropping out of school entirely (Johnson, Boyden, & Pittz, 2000).

Gregory and Ripski (2008) attest to research that affirms teachers can differ in the ways they demonstrate their authority within the classroom (Gregory & Ripski, 2008). Laupa, Turi, and Cowan (1995) state that the way students respond to authority and discipline is associated with the type of relationship they may have with the teacher (Laupa, Turi & Cowan, 1995). Several scholars suggest that the use of a relational approach in behavior management facilitates the ability for teachers to connect with students concerning their personal and emotional lives. This approach may encourage students to trust in the teacher's ability to care. The findings of Gregory and Ripski (2008) establish that when teachers employed a relational approach, combined with discipline measures, students were less defiant in complying with rules than students disciplined by teachers who did not use the relational approach. Teachers who believed in the saliency of relationship building had more students report trusting the teacher's authority (Gregory & Ripski, 2008).

### **This Work Has Value for Me**

Pang (1992) acknowledges Firestone and Rosenbaum's (1988) caution that students, as demonstrated by the participants, must see the connection between what the curriculum offers, and what is important to them beyond the school experience. High school students frequently look for curriculum connections that consider their life situations (Pang, 1992, p. 67). Those students who consider their education as germane to their preparation for their post-secondary aspirations demonstrate an enhanced propensity to graduate (Perry, 2008). Their academic performance is dependent on how much they believe their focus on education will provide the necessary dividends in their current and future environments (Orthner, Akos, Jones, & Rose, 2013). Many School reform efforts have included teaching strategies that expand the relevance of the curriculum so that there will be a connection between what they learn and their future aspirations (Orthner, 2007; Orthner, Akos, Jones, & Rose, 2013). Full engagement with the school curriculum decreases the likelihood of risk outcomes that promote life experiences of poor quality (Balfanz, Fox, Bridgeland & McNaught, 2009) and increases the probability of college matriculation or the successful transition into a career (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

Not offering classes that can facilitate employment, such as what Charles and Quinton spoke of in chapter nine, increases the probability of disengagement from school. It further demonstrates the disadvantages low-income and minority students have compared to those who have more privilege in schools that connect the curriculum with students' future aspirations. I reiterate to the reader that some students in both settings (Kerry, a selective enrollment student for example) need to see the relevancy of what they are learning to be fully engaged. The curriculum must allow for students to see a "sense of purpose" or the curriculum's intrinsic

worth (Firestone & Rosenblum, 1988, p. 290), and should not allow students to perceive themselves as having no place in school or in the workplace. Neither should it relate to students as if they were bare receptacles in place on an assembly line in preparation for the distribution of knowledge (Devaney & Sykes, 1988).

Noguera, in an interview (Rea, 2015) addressed how the availability of courses correlates to opportunities to learn. Students in poverty should experience the same learning opportunities as those students attending schools in affluent communities. Education reformers, who are committed to improving low-performing schools, must be willing to offer poor students a quality education that is not rooted in rote or low-level skills (Rea, 2015). Rote learning and workbook sheets that Danielle and Quinton speak of do not satisfy the demand for quality instruction. Teachers ignoring that students do not understand assignments, does not encourage academic engagement nor pave the way for trusting relationships with students. It may be difficult for students who struggle academically to believe the work assigned has value when teachers, like the ones Danielle, Eunice, and Quinton describe, demonstrate no thought or time to make learning meaningful.

### **Chapter Ten Conclusion**

The students from both groups have offered their insights on how to improve the learning environment. They recognize that there are a multitude of factors that prohibit full engagement for optimal learning. Most importantly is that the learning environments should be filled with teachers and administrators who demonstrate empathy for the emotional needs of students. Bandura (1986) has emphasized that the act of learning and academic performance influences what a student believes about her/himself in the learning environment (Bandura, 1986). A student's mindset can be a powerful tool in helping them achieve success, or in deterring their

progress. Teacher actions, according to Dweck and Bempechat (1983) are one aspect on how students construe smartness, thereby shaping their academic mindset (Dweck & Bempechat, 1983). Swann and Snyder (1980) cite a few studies which imply that beliefs teachers hold concerning student ability influences instructional strategies. Less support was given to students who were thought to have fixed intelligence and increased support given to those students when teachers believed their intelligence was malleable (Swann & Snyder, 1980).

Farrington's (2014) admonishment is that we frequently tell students they can succeed, but we are selective in our support of some students while we undermine the efforts of others (Farrington, 2014, p. 144). Confidence seems to be prominent among most selective enrollment students, thus encouraging the positive identity with school. Selective Enrollment students in this study are in environments that meet their social and academic needs. Uncertainty for some neighborhood students colors how they view their future, making it difficult to identify with school in a positive manner. Moreover, they may find their schools cannot address their social and academic needs appropriately. As educators, we should consider the ways in which we interact with students in the school context, be it in the classrooms with our instructional approaches, or just in passing in the hallways. That being said, the question I ask is if resources in place at selective enrollment schools were equitably distributed to all schools, would non-selective enrollment students achieve comparable results of success as their selective enrollment peers?

### **Chapter Ten Summary**

In this chapter, participants in both groups offer their suggestions on how to increase their academic achievement. The work of psychologist Carol Dweck was used to provide an analysis on the mindset of students toward achievement. Some students in both groups advised against

embracing negative stereotypes as part of their identity. There were several students in both groups who reiterated that students should take responsibility for their education. Neighborhood students conveyed that there is a need for a more caring environment within schools. Issues such as class size, learning strategies, discipline policies, and curriculum options were concerns for students in both groups who implored school administrators and teachers not to lump all students together, but to consider their individual abilities and the way material is presented.

## Chapter Eleven – Discussion and Epilogue

In this investigation, I have illuminated the disparities in educational resources and the difficulties that some black students experience. Given that comparisons between races reveal a multitude of inequities, the comparison between classes within an ethnic population can be more revealing. Answering the research questions may seem simplistic, but what emerged from the data gave this study a new direction and purpose with even more complexity. I questioned at the end of chapter ten that if resources in place at selective enrollment schools were equitably distributed to all schools, would non-selective enrollment students achieve similar results of success as their selective enrollment peers? Why did neighborhood students like Albert, James, Laura, Kendra, and Quinton excel academically while LaShay, Danielle, Charles, and Eunice consistently experienced difficulty? Albert, Laura, Kendra, James, and Quinton have maintained good grades because of effort and hard work, combined with intellectual talent, and they will attend college. All of these things in combination were still not sufficient to earn them a seat in a selective enrollment school. So, then what is the problem?

Indeed, the disparity between the two groups of students (neighborhood and selective enrollment) in general is more conspicuous because of the type of school setting. Nevertheless, there are positive outcomes for four of the nine neighborhood students interviewed. As stated previously in this manuscript, there exist numerous rationales that attempt to pinpoint how African-American students fall behind their white counterparts and their ethnic peers in academic achievement. Barrow, Sartain, and de la Torre (2016) investigated if students admitted into selective enrollment high schools would close the achievement gap between high achieving students from both low-income and affluent neighborhoods. The study shows no evidence that attending a selective enrollment high school will close the achievement gap between low and



high-SES students. Also, there was no evidence that low-SES neighborhood students realized better results in their overall high school experience. Furthermore, the study could not determine whether low SES students would have experienced a high level of academic achievement, even if not attending a selective enrollment school where quality instructions and higher expectations are provided to improve academic outcomes. The findings of the Barrow et al. study infer that any advantages of attending the selective enrollment high schools has to do with the selection of the school and not the value of attending these schools (Barrow, Sartain, & de la Torre, 2016).

The narratives in this study reveal unique perspectives of African-American students, stemming from the negative portrayals in the media as experienced by students, such as Quinton, who feels embarrassment and shame for assumed cultural deficiencies. The negative perceptions also account for Regina and Ariana's admonishment of their peers for not wanting success bad enough, as well as Audrey's laying the blame at the feet of parents and Katie's contemptuous feelings towards her peers in her neighborhood. Charles is left with feelings of shame for where he lives and that he, along with his peers are unlikely to attend a selective enrollment school due to cultural narratives that depict black students as aggressive, thereby stealing their opportunities. Eunice's fear of not having an independent sustaining life after high school have her tackling various means to access certificates. James, who *wants to be somebody*, is desperately seeking to create a life path that is different from what he has witnessed of his father and uncles. Danielle, knowing that she was not getting what she deserved in the school setting, saw her dreams of college disappear because state-elected officials could not engage in a bi-partisan dialogue concerning the budget. Negative feelings that Tina, Amberia, and Allison experienced may give further validation to Ogbu's theory that black academically talented students fear that others in their community see them as *acting white*. We know that low-income black students do not enjoy

the same educational opportunities as do middle-class and upper-income black students, and yet, the narratives of some neighborhood low-income black students demonstrate that they should not be judged in monolithic terms when assessing their academic abilities. Black students are no different from children in the dominant society in that they come with idiosyncrasies that make them just as unique in how they learn when trying to understand academic achievement. Noguera (2015) cautions the research community to avoid generalizing that children in poverty cannot learn as much or do not possess the same cognitive abilities as children with abundant economic resources (Noguera-Rea, 2015).

Duke (2017) advises that the answers to questions pinpointing the lack of academic achievement of African-American and other minority students must be done through examining specific and nuanced differences within a group. Duke theorizes that research which persistently focuses on the average achievement of African-Americans, prevents the understanding of how some African-Americans achieve academically and others do not. Duke does provide alternative methods concerning how we should confront the disparities that exist within the community of African-American students. Duke's examination of within-group achievement gaps for African-American students has pointed to how between race differences encourages the erroneous conclusion that all African-American students are low achievers. He suggests that the explanation for why there exist achievement gaps within the African-American community can be better understood by how this inquiry is problem-framed. His first point is that how a problem is framed offers the opportunity to focus on the specific reasons why a problem exists. His second point is that problem framing makes an issue of concern more noticeable or meaningful (Duke, 2017, pp.100-101).

## **Study Limitations**

There are several important limitations to this study that might have otherwise provided (the scholarly community) a more complete understanding of what marginalized students confront. First, the difficulty in the methodology itself, for it was initially problematic finding participants who were willing to be part of the study without some incentive. Trusting that students would pass the word around regarding the study was extremely time consuming in that I would have to contact them numerous times for other recruitment recommendations. Some selective enrollment students, whose parents initially agreed to their participation, later backed out because of employment with Chicago Public Schools. Second, there was uneven gender participation. I struggled to recruit more male participation from both neighborhood and selective enrollment schools and students who were diverse learners, homeless, or physically impaired. Most of the males students I tried to recruit seemed unwilling to talk about their school experiences. More male students, diverse learners, homeless students, and those with physical challenges could have given a depiction of their school setting that would better inform policy as to how they learn, the direness of their personal plight in housing, and their struggle to navigate physically in a building not adequately designed for those with physical impairments. Third, getting access to students through gatekeepers eventually became difficult because they wanted information on what each participant said. This would have compromised the agreement of anonymity and federal human subject protection guidelines. More importantly, I was limited in that I was unable to observe students in their natural school environments. This observation would have allowed me to witness first-hand their interactions with school faculty and administration, as well as their peers that could further validate their narratives.

### **Study Implications: Emancipation Through Education**

Current educational practices covertly police the knowledge that is accessed and measured and the means by which emancipatory pedagogies can collectively empower students and teachers in school communities. Boyd's (2007) revelation has disclosed how conservatives have strategized to attack public education in favor of school choice. Furthermore, school standardization in American education has been granted enormous support from a wide variety of interconnected and affluent intellectual powerhouses. These powerhouses are adept at swaying the beliefs of the American public and do so to preserve their privileged positions in the competitive arena of education (Boyd, 2007). Rancière (1991) would argue that in our current pedagogies, the assumption exists that not all intelligences are equal; the inferior ones must be made separate from the superior ones. Here lies the underlying political agenda of school policy which promotes educational hierarchies within the public domain. This is how selective enrollment schools have flourished. Various school choice options like college prep, magnet, military academies, and charters are pitted against the traditional public school.

Biesta (2009) calls upon us to first define what a good education is and to continue to make this question central to developing educational practice and policy. The selective enrollment experience has provided students with tools that define what comprises a good education. In contrast, low-income neighborhood students know what they do not have, thus defining their education by their experiences as well. Second, Biesta recommends that to accurately define the purpose of education, we must "approach all dimensions of education" (p. 36); these dimensions are qualification, socialization, and subjectification. Because of this recommendation, I framed the second research question through seeking students opinions about the purpose of education. Biesta argues that the major function of education is the qualifying of

students, providing them with “knowledge, skills, and understanding” (p.39) along with the particular temperaments that will help them to fit specific vocations. The qualifying function of organized education is salient in providing human capital for the workforce, but more importantly for the role that citizenship plays in life. In addition, education has a socialization component in which cultural, social, and political values are adopted through the *hidden curriculum*. Finally, education contributes to subjectification or the facilitation of being autonomous within existing social orders. In terms of the hidden agenda, it is employed as a means of control for those who belong to the dominant culture as they can consistently perpetuate the gap between equality and inequality. Schooling is the most efficient means of accomplishing this task (Biesta, 2009). Biesta (2010) also argues that contemporary educational theories have as their foundation an emancipatory ideology where students become independent. Students need to understand how power is attained and how to address its influence (Biesta, 2010).

We must become aware of the many ways that the paradigms of dominance influence our lives daily to successfully employ various methods of individual and communal resistance. We can no longer allow ourselves to acquiesce to the beliefs of education reformers and politicians that we are compliant and uninformed communities who will not resist policies that promote inequities. We need to find more ways that encourage students to succeed, to build up their self-esteem so that they identify positively with school, and to make resources equitable so that they can be comfortable competing in a fast-paced global world. Parents and students also need to continue to make education reformers aware of the power of their voices, especially from the voting booth.

## **Promoting Activism**

Horton and Frère (1990) argued that education is a political question aimed at determining the level of participation students demonstrate toward the curriculum and within society (Horton & Frère 1990). Frère believed that “one of the most tragic illnesses of societies is the bureaucratization of the mind” (p. 37). In the dialogue between Horton and Frère, Frère explains that education is a super-structure that consistently reproduces dominant ideologies. Because of massive bureaucratization, there are two fronts to the educational system which encourages people to give up on participating in the system (Horton & Frère, 1990, pp. 202-203). To succeed in an established system requires establishing coherent relationships both within and outside of the existing school system. Outside relationships provide valuable resources to perform the work required. Establishing assets within the system’s bureaucracy increases the ability to improve agency of the direction of processes that influence and direct policy. An added benefit to a dual pronged system is that the protagonist of such strategy achieves a more complete viewpoint of the environment serving as the field of battle.

Marginalized groups see the workings of the educational systems as outsiders, as something that is done either to them or for them, but never by them. My hope is that students in this study, regardless of whether they were politically active, can redefine themselves as stakeholders (no longer outsiders) possessing true agency in discussions of education policy and practice. I believe that for this to happen, we must question how we can help students not attending selective enrollment schools to negotiate their self-worth. What do we tell them about their futures? Not every student attending a selective enrollment school will become a doctor or lawyer. We must acknowledge as well, that not every student attending a neighborhood school in a poverty area will miss opportunities to succeed. We have an obligation to create a new

paradigm of success in our educational policy in which all can be proud of their achievements, regardless of academic tracks.

Ginwright's (2007, 2010) case study on community activism in Oakland, CA. may help us to appreciate the process of how identity is formulated for black students who are politically engaged. Ginwright reasons that the identity of blackness is so entrenched in negativity that developing a healthy identity is constantly threatened in the American society (Ginwright, 2007, 2010). Students in both groups (CSU and VOYCE) realize how they are perceived in the media and marginalized through institutional policies that are cloaked as education reform. Their activism enables them in building and sustaining a new narrative and identity that facilitates broad and overwhelming socio-political change. As Ginwright (2010) noted, black youth who are cognizant of how race has the power to influence how they are perceived, can resist negative perceptions and obtain new powerful images of themselves. Like the students in Oakland, who Ginwright described as developing politicized racial identities that connects them to charged issues, the students I have interviewed have acquired collected identities that have been reshaped because they have been able to articulate their shared interests, needs, and commitment to resisting dominance (Ginwright, 2010; Gregory, 1998, p. 18).

The commitment to participate in the political process demonstrates that these students have critical social capital and critical consciousness. Mustakova-Possardt (2003, 2004) through the work of Frère, (1973/2005) instructs us that critical consciousness has as its foundation an ethical purpose that empowers those who are justice and equity oriented (Mustakova-Possardt, 2003, 2004). Frère, (1973/2005) instructs us that to embrace and comprehend the individual and political aspects of life, critical consciousness and critical social capital must be aroused to confront racism and dominance (Frère, 1973/2005).

Ginwright (2007) asserts that through their critical consciousness and critical social capital, these student activists have a wide-ranging grasp of the political absurdities that exist in our society. By being aware of these absurdities, these students have acted against unfair policies and institutional practices. They now have an official voice and a continued development of their individual and collective agency. This newfound voice has facilitated changing the negative assumptions of marginalized students. Their critical social capital is not confined to the traditional definition of social capital; it is focused on changing the community where racial identity and political awareness are featured resources for youth. To employ various methods of individual and communal resistance, we must recognize the many ways that the paradigms of dominance function in our lives daily (Ginwright, 2007).

Just as the students in Ginwright's (2007, 2010) work demonstrate their passion for justice and equity, Black youth in Chicago are approaching the decision-making table with high levels of passion and originality. They are eager as Gunther's (2016) research revealed to make commitments that ensure improvements in their schools and communities, as well as their own personal lives when their perspectives are treated with respect. They establish that partnering with youth improves the conditions of everyone concerned (Gunther, 2016). These student activists have formed a community, and through their critical social capital, black students can now disavow the negative ideas concerning them as youths by building a collective and individual racial identity. These students are prepared to fight against the many forms of dominance and oppression, not just in their schools, but across neighborhoods, encompassing many issues. Their identity is strengthened by their ability, as Ginwright describes, to address inequities in policies that do not consider their needs (Ginwright, 2007, 2010). The students in this study are the examples from which we should learn.



## Implications for Future Research

Kirshner (2015) discusses how urban public schools have now become intensely blemished and frequently venomous to the hopes and dreams of minority students. But he also articulates that they are increasingly becoming the driving force in seeking equity and justice. This can only continue if schools consistently cultivate student voices and democratic values by creating opportunities for participation in critical thought as well as individual and collective agency. Students must be seen as partners in affecting change, rather than subjects in need of remediation. For this to happen, everyone must acknowledge the value of sharing power. Here is where recognizing that students possess the ability, expertise, and understanding that can be brought to the learning process. It also means seeking their insight on what is and is not working in class instruction and giving them more options in curriculum choice. Students must feel secure to discuss topics such as race, politics, and power. Through these discussions, students realize “that current features of the social order are not natural or inevitable, but instead are socially produced” (Kirshner, 2015, p. 139). Kirshner cites the argument of Meira Levinson’s *No Citizen Left Behind* that young people should be provided opportunities to address the origins of contemporary societal interactions and to think about possible alternatives. Public schools should be the place that fosters strategies and the motivation that encourage student voice and participatory action research. Schools should also encourage students to assist in the governance of schools.

Kirshner also solicits us to recognize that young people are political beings who can refute ideas about cultural deficit positions that tend to depict them as inferior. It will show what marginalized people can achieve, rather than highlighting what they cannot. Young people engaging in a social critique will halt the normalization of inequality and call into question the

many ways character attributes are used to lay failure to individuals. The narrative concerning the cognitive ability and self-esteem will change for students of color as they create more multifaceted and accommodating clarifications and responses to their circumstances. Realizing youth as political beings does not only encompass their individual development but serves as a catalyst for changes in society at a much broader level. There are numerous interventions designed that continue to target students of color without seeking their input and these interventions seem to focus on what these students lack (Kirshner, 2015).

I defer to Counts' (1932) *Dare the School Build a new Social Order*, where he explicates that for schools to be effective, they should be looked to regarding building our civilization through giving students opportunities (Counts, 1932, p. 34). Counts builds on this declaration by stating first that it is imperative that in any educational movement, direction and purpose be defined. It has become evident that we should examine and redefine the purpose of schooling and become committed to providing diverse opportunities to fit the needs of individual students. In this way, they may become able to contribute more to society. This is the only way democracy can survive. The fundamental changes that Counts has suggested schools make are to ignore the influence of class, be courageous when addressing the multitude of social issues, create a genuine, all-inclusive theory of welfare, and create a compelling and thought-provoking visualization of human destiny.

Second, Counts advises us to acknowledge that schools are not detached from politics and therefore the states of impartiality and neutrality are a contradiction. Counts believes that schools do indeed shape attitudes and taste which coincides with particular belief systems and values (Counts, 1932, pp. 15-16). Counts cautions us to become alert to well-meaning liberal persons who embrace rhetoric regarding their shame and disgust over the social ills of the day.

These persons are comfortable in the end to do little or nothing to demonstrate their conviction and commitment to changing the social order – one that has perpetuated many of the atrocities that hinder democratic practices (Counts, 1932, pp. 4-5). Neoliberals, who advocate educational choice, but promote marketization of choice through charter and selective enrollment, have a combined hidden agenda of profit and separatism which only serve the elite. This is where the political activism of some of the students I interviewed has manifested.

The ultimate goal of school should be to create an environment where everyone recognizes what is moral and ethical and become a catalyst in stimulating intellectual growth. It should produce engaged thinkers, intelligent problem solvers, and innovators who challenge the status quo and can move humanity to greatness. Frequently schools inadvertently neglect to consider social implications of race, economic, culture, and social class of the students in the school environment and how these factors influence students believing that they belong. Schools must be sensitive to the needs and concerns of those who are culturally different and who face unique social and economic challenges to foster the desired democratic educational outcomes. From Ikeda's (2010) perspectives, we should teach children to critically analyze how social and institutional structures can encourage environmental devastation, and in addition, "understand the realities of those who suffer, embracing their pain as our own, and become conscious of our interconnectedness" (Ikeda, 2010, p. 39).

As I close, I stand in admiration of all the students I interviewed. First, because of their ability to give a critical analysis of the issues they confront, and second, their courage in confronting these issues. Hopefully, this work will compel adults to assist young people in their activism to see themselves as change agents. Through them, we should not only expect to change the world but also maneuver within it when endeavoring upon change. We must as Au, Bigelow,

and Karp (2007) declare, allow them the freedom to see themselves as “truth tellers and change makers.” We must learn to care for and trust them and each other in this process (Au, Bigelow, & Karp, 2007, pp. x-xi).

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **Home and Family**

Tell me about your family and community.

#### **School Experience**

1. How would you describe your relationship with your teachers?
2. Tell me about your favorite teacher.
3. What has been your most positive school experience?
4. What has been your most negative school experience?

#### **Social Relationships - Friends/ Community**

1. Describe what your relationships are like with other students in your school.
2. Describe what your relationships are like with other students in your community that do not attend your school.
3. How important to you is acceptance from your peers.?
4. Explain why earning good grades is important to you.

#### **Curriculum Concerns**

1. What classes have been your most challenging?
2. If you could change one aspect of your school's curriculum, what would it be and why?
3. Have you taken any advanced placement or honors courses? If you have not, explain why?
4. What types of extra-curricular activities are offered at your school?
5. Do you participate in any extra-curricular activities? If yes, why did you pick these? If no, why not?



**High-Stakes / Standardized Testing**

In light of the national emphasis that has been placed on testing and accountability, talk about high-stakes testing in your school.

1. Is it important to you that you do well on high-stakes tests? Why or why not?
2. Do you think the teachers in your school see you in terms of your test scores? If yes, why and in what ways? If no, why not?
3. What kinds of pressure have you experienced concerning high-stakes tests from
  - A. Your parents ?
  - B. Teachers ?
  - C. Friends ? (Please give an example for each)
4. How do your classes prepare you for high-stakes tests?
5. What kinds of extra preparation has your school provided for you?
6. Is there anything outside of school that is helpful?
7. Are there things that are supposed to help but do not?

**Academic Achievement**

1. What are the reasons you believe that students are not succeeding academically?
2. What do you think your school can do to increase the success rate of students?
3. What do you think the goals of schooling should be?
4. What roles do your parent(s), other significant adults in your life, and teachers' expectations of you play in your academic achievement?
5. What are your goals and aspirations after high school?
6. How well do you think your high school experience will help you to achieve your goals?

**School Policies / Politics**

1. What are your views on the educational opportunities in our current system?
2. What concerns you the most regarding your school's current policies?
3. What realistic changes to your school system do you feel should take place?
4. How would you explain the lack of resources for your school?
5. What kinds of opportunities exist for you to express your opinions about your school?
6. What do you believe are the greatest misconceptions about your school and your neighborhood?
7. What biases or assumptions have you experienced concerning your race, economic status, academic ability, and neighborhood from your
  - A. Peers?
  - B. Teachers?
  - C. People in your community?
  - D. Students from other schools?
8. If you could choose a different school to attend, what would that school be and why?